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Between Class War on All  
Fronts and Anti-Political  
Autonomy: The Contested  
Place of Politics in the  
Working-Class Movements of  
Leipzig and Lyon during the  
Inter-War Years

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**Abstract**

*This article investigates the contested boundaries of the political within the working-class movements in Leipzig and Lyon at the end of the Weimar Republic and during the Popular Front. What the appropriate issues and places of politics should be was a question that was highly contested among the organisations of the local working-class movements in both cities. The article argues that an over-politicisation of the left-proletarian milieu in Leipzig contributed to the working-class movement's failure successfully to mobilise against the Nazis, while the dynamics of politicisation in Lyon helped the formation of the Popular Front in Lyon, but then contributed to its rapid collapse.*

During the hot summer of 1932, when the political mobilisation and violent clashes between national socialists, communists, and sometimes social democrats that raged in Germany's streets reached a peak,<sup>1</sup> public open-air swimming pools seemed like

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I would like to thank Susan Gaunt Stearns, Jennifer Amos, Ke-chin Hsia, Sean Dunwoody, Barry Haneberg and Daniel Brückenhaus, as well as the three anonymous reviewers, for helpful comments on various drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Between 17 June and 30 July 1932, the day of Reichstag elections, 361 formal complaints for political violence or harassment were made to the police in Leipzig alone, see Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Leipzig

a refuge where one could escape from the omnipresent violence and relax for a little while. Yet, even here it was impossible to avoid politics. On 19 August 1932, for example, the social democratic daily *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (LVZ) reported that a ‘gang of communist thugs’ (*kommunistische Schlägerkolonnen*) had appeared in a public swimming pool and attempted to spread propaganda, so that the pool’s staff had to intervene and to expel the communists.<sup>2</sup> This was not the only time the LVZ reported about such incidents. On 2 September, the paper lamented again that it was ‘extremely regrettable that even in the air- and sun baths [*Luft- und Sonnenbädern*] meant for recreation, the visitor could not be sure that he wouldn’t be molested [*belästigt*]’, which was especially problematic on days when the swimming pools were so over-crowded that the staff was too busy to intervene.<sup>3</sup> Even swimming pools were, unfortunately from the social democratic perspective, not a refuge from politics.

Communists of course reacted to these allegations. A few days after the first article had appeared in the LVZ, the communist *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* (SAZ) replied by printing an *Arbeiterkorrespondenz*, a text allegedly written by an ‘ordinary’ worker who had witnessed the incident. For eighteen years, the author claimed, he had been a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) before he disappointedly turned his back on his old comrades. ‘In contrast to the well-fed SPD Comrade’, he and his friends appreciated the short speech the communist gave as a welcome distraction. Feeling somewhat sorry for his former comrades, he noted that ‘today I even had to witness young workers talking to old ones, using Marx and Engels to simply and plainly reject the treacherous policies of social democracy. It was a tragedy to see how the SPD man did not know how to help himself other than by looking for help from the bath attendant.’<sup>4</sup>

How are these apparently minor incidents relevant? They point to a conflict between communists and social democrats in Leipzig: where should politics take place? But also, what issues and conflicts could legitimately be regarded as political? These were highly contested questions. While communists attempted to use any possible location as a place for political agitation and saw a political dimension in all kinds of conflicts, social democrats both tried to limit the political space in a literal sense, and refused to politicise all aspects of social interactions in everyday life. These conflicts regarding the boundaries of the political were by no means a marginal problem during the final years of the Weimar Republic.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, this essay argues, analysing them helps answer a question Alf Lüdtke raised more than twenty

(SSStAL), PP-V 4927, Bl. 152ff. On political violence during the Weimar Republic, see in general Dirk Schumann, *Politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933: Kampf um die Straße und Furcht vor dem Bürgerkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (LVZ), 19 Aug. 1932.

<sup>3</sup> LVZ, 2 Sept. 1932.

<sup>4</sup> *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* (SAZ), 25 Aug. 1932.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘contesting the boundaries of the political’ is taken from Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Sabine Marquardt, *Polis contra Polemos: Politik als Kampfbegriff in der Weimarer Republik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997).

years ago: ‘What happened to the “Fiery Red Glow”?’<sup>6</sup> In other words, why did the numerically and organisationally strong German working-class movement – the Communist Party (KPD) alone had some 320,000 members in 1932 – ‘surrender without putting up a fight’, as Manfred Scharrer put it polemically,<sup>7</sup> to the rise of National Socialism?

This is neither a new nor a simple question. One way to address it is by comparing Germany with its neighbours, usually to the West, as many historians have already done, and as this essay will also do.<sup>8</sup> France offers a particularly interesting case for a comparison. Here, too, the radical Right was on the rise in the early 1930s, and when a demonstration in Paris on 6 February 1934 resulted in bloody riots, many on the Left considered it a failed fascist coup d’état.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the French Left reacted utterly differently from its German counterpart. Despite its numerical weakness (the French Communist Party (PCF) had a mere 28,000 members in 1933),<sup>10</sup> the working-class movement organised a general strike and mass demonstrations throughout the country that united both communists and socialists.<sup>11</sup> In the months after the February events, the Communist and Socialist Parties (SFIO) formed an alliance that would later also include the bourgeois Radical Party, even though tensions continued to exist between the different factions.<sup>12</sup> What became known as the Popular Front constituted a veritable ‘red firestorm’, to use a similar metaphor, that culminated in the stunning victory of the Left in the May 1936 elections and the subsequent summer strikes. From a comparative perspective, the question thus emerges why the numerically and organisationally weak French working-class movement succeeded where the strong German movement had failed.

It would go beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of the important arguments made by historians to explain this difference, not the least since it is not my intention here to dismiss them. Suffice it to note that one important element of an explanation concerns the ability of the French socialist and communist parties to overcome their differences, something the German parties never achieved. Explaining the deep hostilities that existed between the SPD and KPD, historians found it easy to point to the bloody crushing of communist uprisings by troops

<sup>6</sup> Alf Lüdtke, ‘What Happened to the “Fiery Red Glow”? Workers’ Experiences and German Fascism’, in Alf Lüdtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 198–251.

<sup>7</sup> Manfred Scharrer, *Kampflose Kapitulation: Arbeiterbewegung 1933* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Claudia Kaiser, *Gewerkschaften, Arbeitslosigkeit und Politische Stabilität: Deutschland und Großbritannien in der Weltwirtschaftskrise seit 1929* (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> On the radical Right in France see Brian Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995), 106.

<sup>11</sup> On the February events and the Popular Front in general, see Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Antoine Prost, *Autour du Front populaire: Aspects du mouvement social au XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil 2006).

<sup>12</sup> While the Popular Front did include the pro-Republican, bourgeois Parti Radical, its driving force were the parties and activists of the working-class movement, on which this article will focus.

under social democratic governments in the wake of the 1918/19 revolution as well as the Communist International's (Comintern) infamous 'social fascism' policy that designated social democrats as the main enemy. Yet, even though conflicts between communists and socialists never turned as bloody as in Germany, French communists, too, depicted their socialist opponents as 'social fascists' until the Comintern leadership in Moscow ordered them to pursue a different strategy. But even before these orders from Moscow came, rank-and-file members of the French working-class movement had expressed a strong desire for unity. The formation of the Popular Front began, as this article also will show, on the ground.

From a comparative perspective, this raises the question whether a similar desire for unity and action existed among the German rank and file, as Klaus-Michael Mallmann, historian of the KPD, has argued,<sup>13</sup> or not, as this article will argue, and how this difference can be explained. One argument historians have made in this context concerns the deep-seated republicanism that existed, the argument runs, among French workers, but not in Germany, where the Weimar Republic never attracted any genuine support. The emergence of the Popular Front in France is thus interpreted as a manifestation of a 'republican reflex' that made formerly hostile socialists and communists overcome their differences in a situation when the Republic itself was in danger. However, French communists hated the bourgeois state as much as their German comrades did, while German social democrats were among the strongest supporters of the Weimar Republic.<sup>14</sup> The 'republican reflex' argument would thus appear to be insufficient. In addition, recent research has stressed that the German working-class movement, above all trade unions, was in fact better integrated than its counterpart in France, where unions remained alienated from the state.<sup>15</sup> So arguably, we therefore need fewer arguments about general (anti-)republican cultures, but rather studies that address conflict and co-operation and thus the dynamics of mobilisation and collapse at the rank-and-file level.

With regard to the Weimar Republic, this issue has been addressed by several historians, most recently by Pamela Swett. In her study on radicalism in Berlin's proletarian neighbourhoods, Swett argues that radical workers displayed a desire to (re)establish local autonomy vis-à-vis both the state and national political parties, which contributed to the collapse of national political structures. In line with scholars such as David Crew, whose study of *Germans on Welfare* highlights the 'politics outside

<sup>13</sup> See Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 262, 377.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Benjamin Ziemann, 'Republikanische Kriegererinnerung in einer polarisierten Öffentlichkeit: Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold als Veteranenverband der sozialistischen Arbeiterschaft', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 267 (1998), 357–98; Karl Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Struktur der politischen Kampfverbände zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> Petra Weber, *Gescheiterte Sozialpartnerschaft – Gefährdete Republik? Industrielle Beziehungen, Arbeitskämpfe und der Sozialstaat: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich (1918–1933/39)* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 17, Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2010).

of politics', Swett thus de-emphasises the role of political parties.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to these authors, this article stresses that, in order to understand the success and failure of the Left in France and Germany respectively, we need to understand the role the organisations of the working-class movement and in particular political parties played within the local milieu.

The comparative approach this article pursues requires two carefully chosen case studies. Leipzig and Lyon offer two particularly well-suited examples. Both Leipzig and the *Agglomération Lyonnaise* were among the biggest and most heavily industrialised urban centres of their respective countries. They were roughly the same size (some 717,000 inhabitants in Leipzig, 630,000 in the Lyonnais Region),<sup>17</sup> and had a diversified industrial structure.<sup>18</sup> In the early 1930s, both cities were confronted with the repercussions of the Great Depression, most notably in terms of unemployment, which peaked in Leipzig in July 1932, when 102,357 people were looking for a job.<sup>19</sup> Lyon was hit later and not as severely by the crisis. Officially, only between 5,477 people in Lyon itself, and 12,411 people in the entire Rhône area, were without a job. However, official statistics, which are not as reliable as in Germany, probably underestimate the extent of unemployment in Lyon, since partial unemployment was not taken into account and foreign workers who lost their jobs were regularly expelled.<sup>20</sup> Crucially, for the purposes of this essay, both Leipzig and Lyon were, as major industrial cities, the site of important and strong working-class movements. In addition, Leipzig offers a particularly interesting case in the German context, since it belonged to the state of Saxony that had seen the only coalition government between social democrats and communists in the early Republic, under Erich Zeigner, before an intervention of the national government led by social democrat Friedrich Ebert brought this experiment to an end in October 1923. There was, in other words, a

<sup>16</sup> Pamela E. Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 294 et passim; David F. Crew, *Germans on Welfare: From Weimar to Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 207. See in this context also, focusing on political violence, Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), in particular 208f.

<sup>17</sup> Statistisches Amt Leipzig, ed., *Statistische Monatsberichte der Stadt Leipzig* (Leipzig: 1932); Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French province, 1928–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>18</sup> On Leipzig, see Hartmut Zwahr, *Zur Konstituierung des Proletariats als Klasse: Strukturuntersuchung über das Leipziger Proletariat während der industriellen Revolution* (Munich: Beck, 1981). For Lyon, see Maurice Moissonnier, *Le mouvement ouvrier rhodanien dans la tourmente, 1934–1945*, vol. 1: *Le Front Populaire* (Lyon: Aléas, 2004), 21–58. For France in general, see Gérard Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford: Berg, 1990), 119–23.

<sup>19</sup> Leipzig, ed., *Statistische Monatsberichte*.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc de Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales et luttes sociales dans l'industrie du bâtiment, Lyon 1926–1939: Une identité ouvrière assiégée?', *Mémoire de Maîtrise*, Université Lumière Lyon II, 1995/96, 134; Arnaud Fauvet-Messat, 'Extrême droite et antifascisme à Lyon: Autour du 6 Février 1934', *Mémoire de Maîtrise*, Université Lumière Lyon II, 1996, 61. For the effects of unemployment on migrant workers, see Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

tradition of collaboration between social democrats and communists in Saxony as well as in Leipzig.<sup>21</sup>

However, one crucial difference existed between the two cities' working-class movements: whereas political parties, namely the KPD and SPD, were the most important organisations in Leipzig, an independent trade union, the *Cartel Autonome du Bâtiment*, that remained within the traditions of French anarcho-syndicalism, dominated the scene in Lyon.<sup>22</sup> This difference reflected the distinct traditions of the working-class movements in Germany and France as well as in the specific situation of the early 1930s. From the very beginning, political parties had played a more important role within the German working-class movement than in France. The anti-political ideas of anarcho-syndicalism that were prominent within the French movement never gained significant attraction in Germany. In addition, Germany had gone through a number of political crises since the revolution of 1918–19, itself a deeply political transformation. France, in contrast, had seen no comparable political turmoil in the wake of World War I. Both the German working-class movement and Weimar society more generally were, in short, more politicised than France.

This article will explore the consequences of this difference. In both cities, the role of politics within the working-class movement remained deeply contested, yet in different ways. An understanding of the dynamics of these conflicts contributes, the article thus argues, to an explanation of both the collapse of Leipzig's movement and the emergence of the Popular Front in Lyon.<sup>23</sup> In Leipzig, communists consciously and explicitly tried to fight the 'class war' on all fronts, as an article in the *SAZ* emphasised in December 1930: in proletarian associations, on the shop floor, or in welfare offices, communists would never cease struggling against their class enemies.<sup>24</sup> Social democrats, in contrast, bitterly complained about the omnipresence of (communist) politics. Not the sidewalks, but the 'rooms of the organisations' were the appropriate place for political discussions, as a letter to the *LVZ* put it.<sup>25</sup> The resulting conflicts in Leipzig proved to be detrimental for any 'fiery red glow' in three ways. First, party politics, and in particular conflicts between SPD and KPD, became a matter of everyday life for many workers, in particular for those who were actively involved in the working-class movement. This (re)production of party-political conflicts on the ground, so to speak, made a powerful desire for unity among rank-and-file activists, as it existed in France, much less likely. Second, communist agitation in places such as swimming pools or in sports associations became a nuisance for numerous workers, even members of the KPD, who simply longed for spaces that would remain free

<sup>21</sup> See Jesko Vogel, *Der sozialdemokratische Parteibeizirk Leipzig in der Weimarer Republik: Sachsens demokratische Tradition* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2006), Ch. IV, 1–3, 6, 309, 323–5.

<sup>22</sup> On the tradition of anarcho-syndicalism in France, see Michel Dreyfus, *Histoire de la CGT: Cent ans de syndicalisme en France* (Paris: 1995), 44–57.

<sup>23</sup> Obviously, a full explanation would have to consider more aspects. See for example, Joachim C. Häberlen, "'Meint Ihr's auch ehrlich?" Vertrauen und Misstrauen in der linken Arbeiterbewegung in Leipzig und Lyon zu Beginn der 1930er Jahre', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 36 (2010), 377–407.

<sup>24</sup> *SAZ*, 10 Dec. 1930.

<sup>25</sup> *LVZ*, 17 Sept. 1931.

of politics. While these two arguments concern the experiences of rank-and-file members of both parties, a third argument concerns conflicts on the 'official' level, where disagreements about the proper place, role and form of politics between social democrats and communists made any political co-operation more difficult. Communists and social democrats could not even agree on *how* to do politics. None of these developments was likely to lead to a 'United Front from Below' against the Nazis similar to the Popular Front in Lyon.

The boundaries of the political were also contested in Lyon, albeit in different ways, as the second part of the essay will show. As in Leipzig, communists tried to politicise social struggles, in particular strike movements – at least this was the official strategy of the Communist Party. Its main competitor was, however, not a political party as in Leipzig, but the explicitly anti-political *Cartel Autonome du Bâtiment*, a federation of various trade unions belonging to the construction trade, most importantly masons and excavators, who remained faithful to the traditions of French revolutionary syndicalism and insisted on the independence of unions from any political party.<sup>26</sup> Before 1934, these autonomist construction workers vigorously rejected any communist attempts to politicise construction sites. Importantly, socialists played only a marginal role in these conflicts, which meant that the *political* division between communists and socialists never became as important in Lyon as in Leipzig. In addition, politics never permeated everyday life to such an extent as it did in Leipzig, and was thus not perceived as a nuisance. Yet, the situation changed after the February events cited above. During the mobilisation phase of the Popular Front (1934–6), a deep politicisation of the local working-class movement took place that helped to unite formerly hostile workers. In a way, it was the relative absence of politics before 1934 that made this dynamic possible. Yet, the story of the Popular Front did not end with the tremendous success in 1936, but with complete defeat in 1938. The increased role of politics within the working-class movement, and in particular the influence of the Communist Party, contributed to this rapid downfall, as struggles previously conceived as social, most notably strikes, were overburdened with political meaning that made it impossible successfully to pursue pragmatic strategies to the workers' advantage.

Before proceeding with the empirical analysis, a conceptual clarification of the meaning of 'politics' and the 'political' is necessary. Despite its common usage, the term 'political' is surprisingly elusive and difficult to define. Historians and other scholars have long debated what constitutes the political, be it 'actions within the sphere of the state',<sup>27</sup> or all kinds of 'places where forms of power were organised and

<sup>26</sup> On the Cartel and its anti-political standpoint, see the excellent work by Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', and idem, *Lyon, Un chantier Limousin: Les maçons migrants (1848–940)* (Lyon: Editions Lieux Dits, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Volker Sellin, 'Politik', in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978), 873. Sellin effectively ends his discussion with Max Weber. See, however, Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen: Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Dunker und Humblot, 1987), 24. First published in 1932, Schmitt regarded the equation of 'state-run' (*staatlich*)

realised', as Geoff Eley suggested.<sup>28</sup> This essay avoids a clear definition of the 'political', but asks what issues and conflicts contemporary actors regarded as political, where they thought politics should take place, how such questions were contested among them, why actors chose to depict their struggles as political or not, for example, to legitimise their actions,<sup>29</sup> and what consequences such choices had.<sup>30</sup> In other words, instead of defining the political, the essay argues for a sincere historicisation of the category of the political itself. The challenge is to trace the changing and contested boundaries of the political throughout history, and to analyse the consequences of these contestations.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, while paying close attention to conflicts about the boundaries of the political among historical actors is crucial, this approach also runs into a problem: while communists and social democrats frequently argued, for example, about the appropriate place of politics, they never bothered to explicate what exactly they meant when using the term 'political' or 'politics'. They simply assumed their interlocutors would understand them. Often, we are to a degree left to guess what exactly they meant when they used the term. The challenge is thus, in a way, to 'sense' what the term means, without imposing a specific definition. A point feminist theorist Anne Phillips has made might help. She characterised the political arena as one in which people transcend their 'more private, localised interests and tackle what should be the community's common concerns'.<sup>32</sup> The decisive phrase here is 'the community's

and 'political' as increasingly anachronistic, since state and society increasingly permeated each other. For a similar definition, see Charles S. Maier, ed., *Changing Boundaries of the Political* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Geoff Eley, 'Wie denken wir über die Politik? Alltagsgeschichte und die Kategorie des Politischen', in Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, ed., *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte: Zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte* (Münster: Westphälisches Dampfboot, 1994), 17–36, here 18–20. See also the essays in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Carl Schmitt saw this very clearly, see Schmitt, *Begriff des Politischen*, 31f.

<sup>30</sup> I am thus critical of imposing an understanding of politics on historical actors that they did not share and would urge for some caution. See, to name only two, Belinda Davis, 'The Personal is Political: Gender, Politics, and Political Activism in Modern German History', in Karen Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert, eds, *Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 107–27; Frederick F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of its Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). I am equally reluctant to speak about a 'politics outside of politics', as does Crew, *Germans on Welfare*, 207. His reference is Thomas Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik: Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin, 1900–1914* (Politik- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 39, Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 1995), 16.

<sup>31</sup> This approach is in line with the call for a 'new political history' Ute Frevert has formulated, see Ute Frevert, 'Neue Politikgeschichte: Konzepte und Herausforderungen', in Ute Frevert and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds, *Neue Politikgeschichte: Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2005), 7–26, here 13f, 23f. She notes that a 'new political history' will not find its object in a certain 'field' (*Sachgebiet*; Schmitt), but in the 'modes and mechanisms of drawing boundaries'. An alternative might be to avoid even such a minimal definition, as Pascal Eitler has suggested, see Pascal Eitler, 'Gott ist tot – Gott ist rot': *Max Horkheimer und die Politisierung der Religion um 1968* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2009), 18f.

<sup>32</sup> Anne Phillips, 'Citizenship and Feminist Theory', in Geoff Andrews, ed., *Citizenship* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 76–88, here 79. Interestingly, she reintroduced the distinction between 'private' and 'public' other feminists have so vigorously fought against.



common concerns'. This might sound dangerously vague. After all, it is all but self-evident what is of 'the community's common concern', and what is of merely private concern, not least because the key concept 'community' remains under-theorised. What role, for example, does the state play in this conception of the community? However, it is exactly this vagueness, I argue, that makes Phillips's approach useful for historians. It allows us to read struggles about the boundaries of the political as struggles about what issues should be of the community's common concern, who belonged to this community, and where such questions would be negotiated. From a theoretical perspective, it is important to note that this approach does not, by necessity, link the sphere of the political exclusively to the state: it is another question open to historical change. For the historical actors this essay is concerned with, however, the state and, by extension, political parties that, as French syndicalists put it, sought to gain power in the state, were key to an understanding of the political. Distinguishing between *party* politics and politics more generally makes, I would argue, little sense in the context of this essay.

Understanding the 'political' as a constantly changing and negotiated sphere draws attention to the process of 'politicisation', a category that is central for this essay. Put most broadly, 'politicisation', as it will be used here, shall signify investing a certain issue, practice or question with political meaning, that is linking it to the 'community's common concern'. In practical terms, this usually meant linking an issue or question with political parties. Such a politicisation often involved turning spaces into political arenas, although we should also note that places such as swimming pools could be politicised by using them for political practices in the more conventional sense, such as spreading propaganda. Both processes of politicisation and contestations of the boundaries of the political have thus, as this essay will show, an important spatial dimension.

### **Leipzig: politics as a nuisance**

Historians have frequently noted the deep politicisation of Weimar society.<sup>33</sup> The working-class milieu in Leipzig was no exception to this.<sup>34</sup> Particularly male workers, both employed and unemployed, could be confronted with political conflicts and agitation in all spheres of their daily life, especially if they were in one way or another involved in the working-class movement.<sup>35</sup> However, as the initial example indicated,

<sup>33</sup> See, to give only two examples, Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Neue historische Bibliothek, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987); Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt and Kristin McGuire, eds, *Weimar Publics / Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> On the working-class movement in Leipzig, see Thomas Adam, *Arbeitermilieu und Arbeiterbewegung in Leipzig 1871–1933* (Demokratische Bewegungen in Mitteldeutschland, 8, Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> My findings on Leipzig contradict those of Alexander von Plato on the Ruhr area. His study is primarily based on interviews. Perhaps the descriptions of a relatively apolitical harmony his interviewees gave him reflected more of a nostalgic desire for harmony than reality. See Alexander von Plato, "Ich bin mit allen gut ausgekommen" oder: War die Ruhrarbeiterschaft vor 1933 in

this politicisation was not generally welcomed. Activists struggled with both the interpretation of practices – were they political or not – and the appropriate place of politics. Violent clashes between national socialists, communists and at times social democrats offer a first example to examine these issues. Typically, historians depict this violence without much hesitation as ‘political’.<sup>36</sup> Many contemporaries would certainly have agreed with them, not the least those involved in the violence and the police that, as part of the identification process of any person interrogated, inquired about his (though not always her!) political affiliations. Communists embraced violence and celebrated it as an essential part of the anti-fascist struggle, most notably when it came to defending ‘red’ proletarian neighbourhoods against national socialist ‘invasions’. ‘Hard proletarian fists chased the fascist truncheon-guards [*Knüppelgarden*] out of the streets of Leipzig’s red West’, the communist *SAZ* wrote in October 1930 after a Nazi demonstration had been assaulted by communists.<sup>37</sup>

Violence during demonstrations might easily be characterised as ‘political’; in fact, most contemporaries – communists, the police, but also bourgeois newspapers<sup>38</sup> – did so, though social democrats had, as we will see in a moment, a different perspective. But not all cases were that clear. When a foreman of the textile company *Wollkämmerei* was assaulted by a group of men in August 1931, the police first thought the background was a personal quarrel. Yet, after some investigations, it turned out that a communist ‘commando raid’ had committed the act because the foreman had barred a communist factory council member from flirting with a woman on a different work-floor from his own. Was this a political act of violence, or ‘merely’ a private deed to support a friend who happened to be a communist? At least one of the attackers, when interrogated by the police, interpreted the act in a political framework: the foreman had received a ‘wipe-down’ because he ‘harassed workers on the shop floor’.<sup>39</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the violence was part of class struggles, and hence inherently political. Foremen harassing workers on the shop floor, Nazis marching through working-class neighbourhoods – these were issues not only of private interests to some workers, the implication was, but concerned the working-class community at large.

Social democrats had a very different official perspective on violence. According to the rhetoric of the social democratic *LVZ*, both Nazis and ‘Kozis’, as the paper liked to call communists, were mere ‘riot brothers’ (*Krawallbrüder*).<sup>40</sup> Acts of violence, in which social democrats participated less often and less actively, were not motivated

politische Lager zerspalten?’, in Alexander von Plato and Lutz Niethammer, eds, *Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll: Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*, vol. 1 (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1983), 31–65.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*.

<sup>37</sup> *SAZ*, 27 Oct. 1930.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the article ‘Politics of the Street’ (‘Politik der Straße’), in the bourgeois *Neue Leipziger Zeitung*, 23 Oct. 1932.

<sup>39</sup> SStAL, PP-S 926. Interestingly, the police, too, qualified the incident as political.

<sup>40</sup> *LVZ*, 3 Jan. 1930. See also *LVZ*, 11 Jan. 1930, calling communist rioters [*Radaubrüder*], suggesting that they had nothing but ruckus in mind.

by serious political concerns, the paper argued, but were the result of a ‘primitive’ longing for revenge on both sides, as an image of a ‘perpetual turntable’ after the murder of communist Johannes Franke by national socialists in June 1930 shows: a Nazi kills a communist, the turntable moves on, [the communists] cry ‘revenge’, then kill a Nazi, [and they] in turn cry ‘revenge’, and it starts all over again.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, when communists shot and killed a Nazi after the acquittal of Franke’s murderers, the *LVZ*’s point seemed to be proven.<sup>42</sup> The killing was, the *LVZ* claimed, a revival of

vendetta politics, long thought to be overcome, from a time of most primitive societal and legal relations ... Social democracy most fiercely condemns such rowdy politics. This is no way to ‘renew’ the world, but it cannot be denied that there is a danger that one day all ties of order will dissolve into an inextricable chaos and that possibly even the economy, state and people will be handed over to absolute destruction.<sup>43</sup>

Importantly, it was the form, not the content of communist politics that social democrats attacked. Rather than being a *serious* form of politics, the rhetoric implies, the violence in Leipzig’s streets was a manifestation of ‘primitive’ and irrational desires for revenge. Serious politics would be concerned with renewing the world in a constructive and rational way. In other instances, social democrats belittled the violence as a sort of childish ‘military game’ (*Militärspielerei*), somewhat similar to the ‘Cowboy and Indian’ game ‘immature lads’ were playing in Leipzig’s street.<sup>44</sup> No doubt, this was itself an argument meant to attack the KPD, which thus could be read as inherently political. But its implication regarding the forms of politics is important: by engaging in violence, social democrats implicitly claimed, neither communists nor national socialists were in any serious way engaging in ‘the community’s common concern’. They were, if anything, just harming it.

Social democrats reacted to the mounting violence by forming their own paramilitary formations, the Schutzformation and the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, meant to defend the Republic.<sup>45</sup> Yet, this ‘army for democracy’, as the *LVZ* called the Reichsbanner, would not respond to the Nazis’ ‘rowdiness’ in equal terms, but ‘keep them in check’ by its mere existence. ‘Barely any citizen [*Bürger*]’, the *LVZ* proclaimed in February 1931 after a ‘mass parade [*Massenaufmarsch*] for the protection of democracy’, would still be ‘politically worried by the Nazis’ banditry. In terms of its political potential, it [the banditry!] has already lost most of its substance [*Bestand*], [only] as street-rowdies do the Nazis get some attention’ – with hindsight a strikingly optimistic assumption. The rhetoric of the social democrats was no less militaristic than that of the communists. They, too, thought in terms of armies and parades, but it was an army to establish order by its mere existence, not an army that

<sup>41</sup> *LVZ*, 16 June 1930.

<sup>42</sup> For the murder, see SStAL, PP-St 7, Bl. 153, PP-S 268.

<sup>43</sup> *LVZ*, 3 July 1931.

<sup>44</sup> *LVZ*, 7 Jan. 1931. On the ‘Cowboys and Indian’ games, see Sean Dobson, *Authority and Upheaval in Leipzig, 1910–1920: The Story of a Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 55f.

<sup>45</sup> On the Reichsbanner in Saxony, see Carsten Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung: Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold und der Rote Frontkämpferbund in Sachsen 1924–1933* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009).

would actually engage a *political* enemy. However dangerous the violence between Nazis and communists was, social democrats could and would not take it as serious politics. These different conceptions of what constituted serious politics made any rapprochement between SPD and KPD even more difficult, not least because social democrats refused to regard communists as genuine and serious political actors: they were just childish rowdies.

Despite social democratic attempts to keep the 'rowdy politics' of both communists and national socialists in check, violence was ubiquitous in some of Leipzig's working-class neighbourhoods during the early 1930s: between 1 January and 20 November 1932 alone, more than 1,100 complaints about political violence or 'nuisances' were made to the police.<sup>46</sup> Even if one denied that this violence was serious politics, it made party-political conflicts (mostly between communists and Nazis) part of everyday life for many rank-and-file activists. On the one hand, this violence provided an opportunity to participate in politics, especially during national socialist demonstrations in working-class neighbourhoods.<sup>47</sup> In fact, communists were perhaps most successful when it came to mobilising local residents against the Nazis. On the other hand, however, politics could become a massive nuisance, as an altercation in the Oberläuterstraße in December 1931 indicates.

The incident began when Marinus Kesserich, a member of the KPD, accused Michael Kahn, most probably a national socialist, and who lived in the same house as Kesserich, of having denounced 'lady [*Ehefrau*] Tham', living in the adjacent house, for 'political reasons'.<sup>48</sup> Initially, both of them agreed to walk over to Tham's to settle the issue. Kesserich could not prove anything, Kahn told the police, and the issue seemed settled. On their way down, however, they encountered three other communists, all living in the same neighbourhood, who assaulted Kahn. The brawl then continued in the street, where 'numerous residents' had gathered and threatened the police who tried to dissolve the crowd. It took the officers serious efforts finally to arrest several suspects. Was this a case of political violence? Most of those involved, including the police officers, took this for granted. They all regarded political hostilities as the cause for the altercation.<sup>49</sup>

While the case indicates that confrontations between politically hostile neighbours could fairly spontaneously mobilise numerous residents, it also provides an example of a very different reaction. During the subsequent police investigation into the incident, a certain Jessler told the police about Elizabeth Benz, a woman well known within the national socialist milieu in Leipzig, and her two children, Ilse, seventeen

<sup>46</sup> See SStAL, PP-V 4927 and PP-St 92. Using police files, I have personally counted about 200 cases of political violence between 1930 and 1933. The term 'nuisance' is a translation of the German 'Belästigung', a term frequently used in police sources.

<sup>47</sup> See, for one example, SStAL, PP-S 383.

<sup>48</sup> See for the entire incident and all quotes, SStAL PP-S 1451. The police file does not specify what precisely the accusations of the denunciation were about and how this was political.

<sup>49</sup> For a similar incident, see SStAL, PP-S 7024/32.

years old, and Herbert, fifteen.<sup>50</sup> They were the only national socialist family living in the building, Jessler stated: ‘Almost no week passes without disputes between Benz and differently thinking housemates [*Andersdenkenden*]. Every bagatelle is turned into something political by them, which then requires the police to intervene’. It was not so much the content of national socialist politics that outraged Jessler – he simply did not talk about this – but the fact that ‘every bagatelle’ gained a political meaning which made its solution without the police impossible. Unfortunately, it remains utterly unclear what exactly Jessler meant with ‘turning every bagatelle into something political’. We cannot but speculate that, as Jessler saw it, Benz turned every small conflict into something ‘bigger’, something more than just a private dispute, which made it impossible to solve peacefully such conflicts. Even though Jessler did not say this explicitly, his complaint about the Benz family suggests that he wished his neighbourhood to be a space not disrupted by (violent) politics.

Confronted with the massive violence, at least some workers longed for spaces that remained free of politics – swimming pools, neighbourhoods, but also the proletarian leisure associations devoted to activities such as singing or sports for which the German working-class movement is famous. In combination with the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions, these associations constituted what German scholars have termed the (social democratic) milieu. These associations saw their first heyday during the late nineteenth century, when they became a means of avoiding repression under Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws that suppressed social democratic organisations and agitation. Cultural or sporting associations were meant to offer an *apparently* apolitical space where workers would learn the meaning of solidarity and keep the social democratic movement alive. In a way, the milieu was thus an attempt to combine elements of sociability – associational life – and politics,<sup>51</sup> though critics within the SPD worried after the anti-socialist laws had expired in 1890 that these associations would only detract workers from their true, revolutionary tasks.<sup>52</sup>

The political schism of the working-class movement in the wake of the Russian revolution in 1918–19 added to these tensions. Initially, communists and social democrats continued to collaborate in the associations, though differing ideas about the role of politics in them created friction at times. Tensions further increased when communists increasingly attacked social democrats towards the end of the Weimar Republic and tried to create independent associations. This is not the place to discuss

<sup>50</sup> For more information on the Benz family, see SStAL, PP-S 125.

<sup>51</sup> On the milieu during the Empire, see Guenther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working-Class Isolation and National Integration* (Totowa, N.J.: Bedminster Press, 1963); Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878–1990* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966); Adam, *Arbeitermilieu*. For the Weimar Republic, see Siegfried Weichlein, *Sozialmilieus und politische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: Lebenswelt, Vereinskultur, Politik in Hessen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996). See also the work by Peter Lösche and Franz Walter, ‘Zur Organisationskultur der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik. Niedergang der Klassenstruktur oder solidargemeinschaftlicher Höhepunkt?’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 15 (1989), 511–36.

<sup>52</sup> See Adam, *Arbeitermilieu*, 118–20.

these conflicts in detail.<sup>53</sup> What matters in our context is that, to oversimplify for the moment, social democrats wanted to keep the associations free of (party) politics, much to the frustration of some loyal communists, who regarded associations only as a ‘reservoir for proletarian struggles’.<sup>54</sup> Yet, even some communists refused to privilege politics in such a way.<sup>55</sup> At times, conflicts regarding the place of politics went right through political parties, especially the KPD. Leipzig’s proletarian soccer league offers a particularly well-documented example of such a conflict.<sup>56</sup>

Soccer had always had a difficult position within the proletarian sports movement. Traditionally, social democrats had regarded soccer as a non-proletarian sports discipline, given that soccer is a sport that has clear winners and losers, and it attracted many passive spectators. Gymnastics, in contrast, was a good proletarian sport, because it could be performed collectively without competition and with everyone’s participation. Given these ‘sport-political’ conflicts, the KPD hoped to agitate discontented athletes against the league’s social democratic (and pro-gymnastics) leadership.<sup>57</sup> A key role in the KPD’s schemes was reserved for Willy Meißner, president of the Leipzig Soccer Federation and himself a KPD member. His task would be, according to the KPD’s plans, to collect internal documents whose publication would embarrass social democrats in the associations, and to provide the KPD with addresses of individual athletes who might be susceptible to agitation. Meißner, however, refused to follow his party’s orders and instead made the KPD’s plans public in a speech he gave in September 1929 to delegates of various Leipzig proletarian soccer clubs.

The rationale Meißner gave for disobeying his party superiors is worth analysing in some detail. ‘What is at stake?’ he asked. ‘The unity of the soccer district, its unanimity [*Geschlossenheit*] . . . To discuss this question, I will talk neither about world-political problems, nor about the resolutions of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, but will present only facts’, he remarked, somewhat annoyed by the communist tendency to permanently discuss such ‘world-political problems’.<sup>58</sup> In fact, he stressed that communist opinions had always been respected within the associations. But communist practices threatened the unity of the federation. For example, communists within the associations provided the KPD press with internal

<sup>53</sup> Frank Heidenreich, *Arbeiterkulturbewegung und Sozialdemokratie in Sachsen vor 1933* (Demokratische Bewegungen in Mitteldeutschland, 3, Cologne: Böhlau, 1995), 401–10.

<sup>54</sup> Cornelius Gellert, *Kampf um die Bundeseinheit: Zusammengestellt unter Verwendung der Niederschrift über die Verhandlungen der Vorstände-Konferenz der Sächsischen Spielvereinigung vom 28. September 1929* (Leipzig: Verlag: Arbeiter-Turn-und-Sportbund, 1929), 24. The statement was made by a communist functionary of a soccer association who was about to be expelled from the federation in the context of the Meißner affair, see below. He was one of few communists in the soccer federation who explicitly privileged politics over sports.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Bundesarchiv (BArch), RY 1 I/3/8–10/156, Bl. 57f, et passim.

<sup>56</sup> See, for the entire conflict within the soccer league, Gellert, *Kampf*. See in this context also Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 166–81. He stresses that many communist members of the associations valued their leisure-time activities higher than politics. See finally, for two other conflicts, Sportmuseum Leipzig, Archivstücke Nr. 3152d and 3156.

<sup>57</sup> See Adam, *Arbeitermilieu*, 126–30.

<sup>58</sup> Gellert, *Kampf*, 6.

material (what material this was remains unclear), or allowed their comrades to use a sports field for a public rally, thereby disrupting the league's entire schedule. In one instance, four teams, two communist and two social democratic, suddenly appeared on the field, and only narrowly avoided a violent confrontation.<sup>59</sup> These practices – talking about world politics, stealing internal documents to use them in party-political conflicts, fights between teams with different political allegiances – turned sports fields and the assembly halls of associations into spaces of political contestations, which estranged non-organised workers from the proletarian movement, but also frustrated those athletes who simply wanted to play soccer.

At its core, the conflict was about which was more important: (party) politics or loyalty to the sport association. The KPD required its members to be 'first and foremost communists and only then proletarian athletes', Meißner told the functionaries present at the meeting. Meißner, however, refused to privilege party politics, which would have meant, in his words, to become a 'puppet' in the hands of the Communist Party leadership. Both organisations required discipline, but in the KPD, this discipline had turned into 'slavish obedience' (*Kadavergehorsam*).<sup>60</sup> Meißner was not the only communist wanting to keep his association free of politics. Other communists were similarly appalled by their party's tactics and declared that they would immediately leave the KPD. As one communist, Sorge, argued: 'We want to be soccer players, and not puppets in the hands of the KPD'.<sup>61</sup> Apparently, the KPD's attempt to use the associations for political agitation did not even meet the approval of all communists. In other associations, too, communists rejected any 'political leadership' and were, much to the frustration of the KPD leadership, 'ten times more committed to the association [than to the KPD] and communists only outside of it'.<sup>62</sup> The result was that communist athletes did not support their party during election campaigns.<sup>63</sup> When the KPD forced its members to make a decision between sociability and politics, many chose the former. They wished their social life to remain undisturbed by party-political conflicts between SPD and KPD. The working-class movement in Leipzig was thus not only weakened by the struggles between SPD and KPD about the appropriate form and place of politics, but also by the politicisation of many aspects of everyday life that frustrated activists who longed for non-political spaces.

Historians have claimed that while communists attempted, in defiance of the SPD, to create an independent 'red' sports movement, their efforts in fact strengthened – rather than weakened – the pro-SDP sports movement.<sup>64</sup> This is certainly true in terms of the membership and organisational strength of the associations. In another sense, however, the communist political efforts had extremely destructive effects.

<sup>59</sup> SAZ, 28 Oct. 1929.

<sup>60</sup> Gellert, *Kampf*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–22.

<sup>62</sup> BArch, RY 1 I/3/8–10/156, Bl. 3.

<sup>63</sup> BArch, RY 1 I/3/10/116, Bl. 678ff.

<sup>64</sup> Lösche and Walter, 'Organisationskultur', 525f. I disagree with their claim that the associations remained a locus of social democratic politics.

The KPD radicalised tensions already present between politics and sociability and forced its members to make a decision. The difficult fusion between politics and sociability that had in many ways constituted the *milieu* functioned no longer. In reaction to communist attempts radically to politicise sports associations, worker athletes, both in the SPD and KPD, opted for an apolitical sociability. The sports associations' behaviour after the Nazis' rise to power is revealing in that regard. Initially, only communist sports organisations were outlawed. Afraid that communists would now seek to join the reformist worker athletes federation (ATSB), its leader Gellert cautioned the associations not to allow this. All non-sporting activities, such as singing 'communist' songs, were to be strictly avoided. This was, so to speak, an attempt to keep sociability alive at the cost of any political activities.<sup>65</sup> When former members of the now dissolved associations climbed over a fence in May 1933 to play 'wild' soccer matches, as the police called them, this was hardly an act of political resistance against the regime.<sup>66</sup>

As well as in swimming pools, streets and associations, communists tried to agitate in factories. According to the guidelines of the Communist Party, the workplace was the most important place for political agitation. The shop floor was, according to communists, the place where workers could experience their collective strength, could see that it was they who actually produced the riches of capitalist society, and could train for class war during strikes when they would confront the antagonist of the working class, the bourgeoisie. Factories were, in other words, meant to be the key locus for the formation of a proletarian class consciousness. Accordingly, the communist leadership called for the creation of strong factory cells that would form the backbone of the party's organisational structure. Yet these efforts were by and large, as historians of the Communist Party have shown, fruitless.<sup>67</sup> This does not, however, mean that shop-floors remained free of party-political conflicts. Where they could, communists agitated on the shop floor and distributed factory newspapers, often supported by communists from outside the factory.<sup>68</sup> Social democrats' reaction to this politicisation parallels their reactions to communist agitation elsewhere: they tried to keep the workplace free of politics.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Sportmuseum Leipzig, Archivstücke Nr. 157, Nr. 2038. In a circular letter of March 1933, Gellert warned that communists would try to join the sports associations. 'Take care of the purity of the movement!' Generally speaking, communist material in the Sportmuseum focuses mostly on party political issues, in particular attacking social democracy, while social democratic material focuses on issues related to sports, such as instructions for training. Only rarely, for example, before elections, did the ATSB encourage its members to vote for the SPD.

<sup>66</sup> SStAL, PP-St 26, Bl. 33.

<sup>67</sup> On the failure of factory cells, see Ulrich Eumann, *Eigenwillige Kohorten der Revolution: Zur regionalen Sozialgeschichte des Kommunismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 97–128, 258–76; Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 306–12. Specifically for Leipzig, see BArch, RY 1/ I 3/8–10/154.

<sup>68</sup> On factory council elections, see Wolfgang Zollitsch, *Arbeiter zwischen Weltwirtschaftskrise und Nationalsozialismus: Ein Beitrag zur Sozialgeschichte der Jahre 1928 bis 1936* (Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft, 88, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990). In contrast to Zollitsch, however, I would stress the importance of politics during factory council elections.



Leipzig's publicly owned tramway (*Straßenbahnen*) company provides a good, if perhaps somewhat exceptional, example of the contested role of politics in the workplace. Political discussions between communists, oppositional communists<sup>69</sup> and social democrats were all too common, former social democrat Alfred Späher recounts in his 'commemoration report' (*Erinnerungsbericht*) written during the early years of the GDR. Usually a communist orator would speak after lunch, though his sectarian views and the idea of 'social fascism' were not met with approval, Späher claimed. Immediately afterwards, a speaker of the Communist Opposition (KPO) would respond and criticise the KPD's harsh attacks against social democracy.<sup>70</sup> The shop floor turned into an arena for party-political conflicts, these and other incidents suggest, that could divide the workforce – at least according to Späher's version of the events.<sup>71</sup>

From a social democratic perspective, it was the KPD that was responsible for bringing politics to the workplace. Social democrats wanted to keep the workplace free of politics. In August 1929, for example, the social democratic *LVZ* published a report about communist agitation at the *Straßenbahnen*.

Incessantly, these hyperradicals believe themselves bound to proclaim the slogans they receive from Moscow, Berlin or Czermarks Garten [where the Leipzig KPD had its headquarters]. These windbags and parrots [*Nachbeter*] of the Stalinist Church do not even ask whether someone is actually willing to enjoy their bolshevist ragout; they simply serve it to anyone they can reach.<sup>72</sup>

One communist had, the *LVZ* reported, entirely forgotten that he also had to work. 'We should most strongly insist that elements who believe that within communal businesses intensive labouring is not necessary will be cured of this wrong-headed perception as soon as possible', the paper wrote. Inefficient workers would harm the reputation of communally owned companies and provide the bourgeoisie with further arguments for their constant attacks against these companies. Bringing politics to the workplace and agitating for a party would only disturb that desperately needed efficiency. Tellingly, the social democratic newspaper did not even bother to address the content of the communist agitation. The mere fact that communists incessantly spread propaganda instead of working properly was enough of a nuisance. The shop floor was, in the eyes of the *LVZ*, a place for 'fast and clean work', not for politics.

However, despite its stated aim to keep politics away from the workplace, the article itself contributed to the politicisation of the workplace. It offered communists a welcome opportunity to attack social democracy's 'factory fascism'. The article

<sup>69</sup> The Oppositional Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei (Opposition), KPO) was formed in 1928 by communists critical of the leftist turn the KPD made and the party's new strategy of breaking radically with social democracy. On the KPO, see Theodor Bergmann, *Gegen den Strom: Die Geschichte der Kommunistischen-Partei-Opposition* (Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 1987).

<sup>70</sup> SStAL, *Erinnerungsberichte*, V/5 353.

<sup>71</sup> For further incidents, see Stadtarchiv Leipzig (StAL), Kapitelakten, Kap. 70 Nr. 214 Bd. 6, Bl. 38ff.; SAZ, 27 April 1929. See also Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 270. He notes that communists and social democrats in the Leuna Factories ate in separate canteens.

<sup>72</sup> *LVZ*, 1 Aug. 1929.

constituted, the communist *SAZ* that extensively cited it claimed, an ‘explicit appeal to the tramways management to remove workers from the factories who in their [the SPD’s] mind do not achieve enough’.<sup>73</sup> Even though we do not know how workers at the *Straßenbahnen* and elsewhere reacted to the articles, it seems plausible that the medial representation of the incident further increased tensions between the two camps.<sup>74</sup> In a way, the case indicates, social democrats were trapped by the communist politicisation strategy. They had to respond, and thereby contributed themselves to the politicisation of the shop floor and other places.

Strikes provided communists with an opportunity to present themselves as the true defenders of workers’ interest and to denounce the reformist trade unions for treacherously seeking compromises with the bourgeoisie. From a communist perspective, every ‘economic conflict’, that is, every strike, could rapidly gain a ‘political character’, which is why the party had to lead every strike movement.<sup>75</sup> Social democrats, in return, blamed communists for merely abusing strikes as election tricks. In October 1932, for example, communists, in this case even collaborating with the National Socialist Factory Cell Organisation, had succeeded in mobilising a significant portion of the workforce at the textile factory Tittel & Krüger for a strike.<sup>76</sup> The situation at the company was somewhat complicated. The previous owner had sold it, and the new owner terminated the old contracts. The result was that the general collective bargaining rules (*Tarifvertrag*) for Saxony, which entailed less pay than the old company contract, became valid for part of the workforce, while other workers had no valid collective contract. Reformist trade unions called only on the latter workers to strike, but communists and national socialists tried to seize the opportunity and called, quite successfully, for a general strike at the company while at the same time blaming reformist trade unions and social democrats for betraying these workers. But supporting this strike would have been illegal and might have resulted in the confiscation of the union’s funds, as the *LVZ* pointed out. In the paper’s view, the general strike’s only purpose was thus to agitate workers against the SPD: it was a mere party-political manoeuvre. Given that the strike movement collapsed unsuccessfully exactly the day after the national *Reichstag* elections on 8 November 1932, these allegations are, in fact, not implausible. That some 500 workers thereby lost their jobs was something communists did not care about, the *LVZ* bitterly remarked.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> *SAZ*, 3 Aug. 1929.

<sup>74</sup> StAL, Kap. 70 Nr. 214 Bd. 6.

<sup>75</sup> BArch, RY 1 I/3/10/114.

<sup>76</sup> See in this context on the collaboration between national socialists and communists during the public transportation strike in Berlin at the same time, Klaus Rainer Röhl, *Nähe zum Gegner: Kommunisten und Nationalsozialisten im Berliner BVG-Streik von 1932* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1994). See further Conan Fischer, ‘Class Enemies or Class Brothers? Communist-Nazi Relations in Germany, 1929–1933’, *European History Quarterly*, 15 (1985), 259–79; Timothy S. Brown, *Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists between Authenticity and Performance* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> On the strike, see *SAZ* and *LVZ*, 25 Oct.–8 Nov. 1932, BArch, RY 1 I/3/8–10/145, and, on the preparation of the strike by the KPD, BArch, RY 1 I/3/8–10/158. See also SStAL, PP-St 28.

A final sphere in which to examine the contested role of politics is the social welfare system. As unemployment skyrocketed during the final years of the Weimar Republic, in Leipzig as elsewhere in Germany, numerous unemployed workers gathered in welfare offices where communists called on them to take action against the capitalist state that was responsible for their lot.<sup>78</sup> Importantly, communists thereby tried to turn the unemployed into political actors. Not surprisingly, social democrats energetically criticised this agitation and blamed communists for ‘politically abusing’ the unemployed workers’ misery. Social democrats preferred to distribute pamphlets to ‘enlighten’ the unemployed about their rights,<sup>79</sup> while the *LVZ* praised the social democratic city administrators’ efforts to ‘manage’ (*steuern*) the misery as far as municipal funds allowed.<sup>80</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the misery was distinctly not a political, but an administrative problem.

Due to a peculiarity of the municipal welfare system in Leipzig, politics mattered not only in terms of how the parties dealt with the misery – as a political or administrative problem – but also in conflicts between welfare recipients and welfare caretakers. The latter, voluntary welfare workers who were at the first frontline of the municipal welfare system as they were charged with handling the cases of individual welfare recipients, were nominated by the parties in the municipal council according to their relative strength. Compared with the pre-war situation, when the welfare administration was entirely in bourgeois hands, this was a progress for the working-class movement, as generally more sympathetic social democratic welfare workers now handled individual cases. But it also created opportunities for (political) conflicts between social democratic welfare caretakers and communist recipients that the communist press eagerly used to agitate against the SPD.<sup>81</sup> One case may suffice to illustrate this.

On 26 July 1930, the *SAZ* ran a headline ‘Social Democratic Welfare Caretaker Beats Female Worker’. Welfare recipient Riester had, the paper reported, asked her caretaker Häussler for food vouchers for her sick child, which Häussler refused to provide. During the subsequent conflict, Häussler grabbed Riester by the neck and dragged her out of the apartment. To make matters worse, Riester then collapsed in front of her child and had to be hospitalised with a nervous breakdown. From the perspective of the *SAZ*, this social democrat’s behaviour proved how the SPD had alienated itself from ordinary workers. The article concluded by calling on ‘proletarian’ welfare recipients to take action against such social democratic practices.<sup>82</sup> Of course, the *LVZ* responded to the accusations. In its rendition of the story, Riester

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, SStAL, PP-St 82, Bl. 126ff. On communist attempts to organise the unemployed, see also Crew, *Germans on Welfare*, 200–3.

<sup>79</sup> *LVZ*, 20 Feb. 1930. Communists snatched the pamphlets away from their social democratic opponents and tore them apart.

<sup>80</sup> *LVZ*, 16 Jan. 1930.

<sup>81</sup> On the welfare system in Leipzig, see Paul Brandmann, *Leipzig zwischen Klassenkampf und Sozialreform: Kommunale Wohlfahrtspolitik zwischen 1890 und 1929* (Geschichte und Politik in Sachsen, 5, Cologne: Böhlau, 1998).

<sup>82</sup> *SAZ*, 26 July 1930. See for cases from Hamburg Crew, *Germans on Welfare*, 163–5.

had caused problems for Häussler for a long time. When her welfare support was about to be cut by 60 Pfennig, she began cursing Häussler. Failing to calm her down, he had to expel her from his apartment. 'When Comrade Häussler still did not allow himself to become agitated, Mrs Riester jumped at him like a fury, scratched his face, tore his shirt apart and even assaulted Mrs Häussler when she tried to push this frantic woman out of the apartment'. Outside the apartment, the incident continued, when Riester faked a nervous breakdown to agitate other tenants against Häussler.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike the *SAZ*, which gave the incident an explicitly political meaning, the *LVZ* depicted the incident itself merely in psychological (and deeply gendered) terms: Riester was a fury that needed to be calmed down. One could hardly take such a woman seriously politically, the rhetoric implied. Häussler, on the other hand, represented social democratic virtues: he remained calm, even in such a heated situation. From the *LVZ*'s perspective, the incident itself had nothing to do with politics, but was used by the communist *SAZ* to 'defame' a social democratic welfare caretaker. In an interesting way, the renditions of the conflict between Häussler and Riester mirrored how the two party newspapers depicted their respective opponents more generally. While Häussler represented, in the KPD's eyes, a social democracy that had alienated itself from workers' suffering, the SPD denigrated Riester as an irrational fury, just as the party treated the communists in general as childish rowdies; neither of them could be taken seriously on a political level.

What issues, conflicts and practices were seriously political and where politics should take place was, these examples have shown, deeply contested between and within the parties of the Left in Leipzig. Communists tried to make politics part of everyday life in many ways in order to fight the 'class war' on 'all fronts',<sup>84</sup> while social democrats sought to limit the political space to parliaments or party offices.<sup>85</sup> But neither party was successful. Social democrats failed to limit politics to party offices and parliaments. Communists, with the important help of national socialists, made politics part of everyday life. Yet their hopes to use politics to mobilise people were in vain. On the contrary, in different ways, the omnipresence of politics hindered, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, a political mobilisation against the Nazis. First, party-political conflicts between communists and social democrats at the workplace, in associations, and not the least in the streets (re)produced the official hostility that existed between SPD and KPD among the rank and file. Such hostility made any desire for political unity against fascism much less likely. In addition, the different ideas about how and where politics was to take place constituted another gap between SPD and KPD. In a way, social democrats and communists did not even act in the same political space. Finally, people such as Jessler, but also those communists who simply wanted to play soccer, were annoyed or even appalled by politics and the conflicts politics created. They longed for spaces free of politics. It is impossible to quantify how many people had such longings, but it is telling that even members of

<sup>83</sup> *LVZ*, 2 Aug. 1930.

<sup>84</sup> *SAZ*, 10 Dec. 1930.

<sup>85</sup> *LVZ*, 17 Sept. 1931.

the KPD frequently refused to privilege politics over sociability. It might be worth considering whether the Nazis may not have profited from this desire: during the summer of 1933, it was after all finally possible to enjoy a hot afternoon in the swimming pool without being molested by political agitation – at least if one was not being persecuted by Nazis.

### **Lyon: mobilising politicisation**

The situation in Lyon was markedly different from that in Leipzig. Before the rise of the Popular Front, between 1934 and 1936, political parties played only a marginal role within the local working-class movement.<sup>86</sup> The sole working-class organisation that played a significant role within the local context before 1934 was the Cartel Autonome du Bâtiment. This marginalisation of politics within the working-class movement changed only after February 1934. In contrast to Leipzig, where politics had become such a nuisance that it hindered a broad mobilisation against the Nazis, politics in Lyon facilitated a mobilisation against the perceived fascist threat. However, the success of the Popular Front was short lived. Only two years after the victory of 1936, the working-class movement suffered a crushing defeat after a failed general strike on 30 November 1938. The politicisation of the working-class movement, this essay suggests, contributed to this collapse.

Throughout the mid-1920s and into the early 1930s, the Cartel Autonome succeeded in forming a strong community of construction workers in Lyon. Imposing a closed shop system, it forced workers to join its organisation, but also relied on social and cultural practices to form a sense of community. Most importantly, it effectively represented workers' interests vis-à-vis employers, which included of course wages, but also safety measures on construction sites. Part of the Cartel's strategy to form a strong community was its insistence on remaining politically independent, since party-political conflicts only divided workers, it claimed.<sup>87</sup> Political parties, the Cartel argued, were concerned with gaining power in the state, while the Cartel represented workers' 'direct interests', which included all issues they could struggle for by 'directly' confronting their 'class enemy', the bourgeoisie, without the state acting as an intermediary: better wages, shorter working days, the right to determine whom to hire and fire.<sup>88</sup> This was an explicit and self-conscious anti-political ideology.

<sup>86</sup> It is difficult to find exact numbers on the two parties' strength in Lyon before 1934. In 1935, an internal party report claimed 1,760 members. Numbers before the emergence of the Popular Front must have been significantly lower. By 1932, the KPD in Leipzig had 6,634 members, see Vogel, *Parteibeizirk*, 728f. In contrast to Leipzig, where both the SPD and KPD published a daily newspaper, the parties in Lyon published only fairly brief weeklies, and publication of these frequently ceased due to financial problems.

<sup>87</sup> During the early 1920s, construction workers' unions were deeply shattered by political conflicts, see Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', 36–45. See also Boris Ratel, 'L'Anarcho-Syndicalisme dans le bâtiment en France entre 1919 et 1939' (Masters' dissertation, Paris I, 2000), Part A.

<sup>88</sup> This idea of 'direct interests' also explains the notion of 'action directe', which included all forms of 'direct' struggles with employers, both violent and non-violent, see Ratel, 'L'Anarcho-Syndicalisme', 75f.

Should this be taken seriously? Unlike some historians of revolutionary syndicalism who casually dismiss the anti-political rhetoric,<sup>89</sup> I would like to suggest that we should. The Cartel's ideology focused strictly on its members' interests, but was not concerned with the community at large, and in particular – centrally in its own conception – not with the state, which is precisely what communists criticised the Cartel for.

The Cartel's most important competitor in Lyon was the Communist Party and its union, the Confédération Générale du Travail – Unitaire (CGTU), though neither of these organisations ever became as strong as the Cartel before 1934.<sup>90</sup> From an ideological perspective, the Cartel's refusal to engage in politics was a slap in the face for the communists.<sup>91</sup> Like the Cartel, communists claimed to struggle for workers' interests, such as better wages, the seven-hour-day, social security, and peace. Yet, importantly, communists did not frame these issues as 'direct interests'. These might be defended without involving the state, but given the importance of issues such as social security or peace, workers could not simply ignore politics and the state. Ultimately, workers' interests could only be achieved in a genuine, Bolshevik-style revolution in which communists would take over the state; hence, trade unions should submit themselves to the Communist Party. But communists also envied the Cartel its successes in organising construction workers who were willing to engage in violence. Communists hence tried to gain influence within the Cartel, an endeavour that resulted in some violent altercations in 1930, but ultimately ended with the communists' utter defeat.<sup>92</sup> At least for now, Lyon's construction workers defended their autonomy.

Strikes provide an excellent opportunity to observe the practical consequences these different ideas about the role of politics had. The Cartel pursued very pragmatic, but nevertheless, when necessary, violent strike tactics.<sup>93</sup> It was well aware of the dangers and costs involved in a strike and hence tried to avoid going on strike unless it was absolutely necessary. Even then, negotiations with employers usually continued. To breach the front presented by the employers, the Cartel signed individual contracts with companies that accepted its demands, which both put pressure on other

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Ridley, *Syndicalism*.

<sup>90</sup> On French communism, see Stéphane Courtois, ed., *Communisme en France: De la révolution documentaire au renouveau historiographique* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 2007); Courtois and Lazar, *Histoire*; Julian Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: Sociabilités militants au PCF* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010). For the working-class movement in Lyon, see in particular Moissonnier, *Mouvement ouvrier*. For struggles between communists and autonomous workers beyond Lyon, see Marie-Paule Dhaille-Hervieu, *Communistes au Havre: Histoire sociale, culturelle et politique (1930–1983)* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009), 37. In Le Havre, communists had to struggle with autonomist dock workers.

<sup>91</sup> See the multiple ideological debates in *L'Effort*, the newspaper of the Cartel Autonome, and *Le Travail*, the newspaper of the Communist Party in Lyon, both available at the Archives départementales du Rhône (ADR), PER 307/308, and PER 358.

<sup>92</sup> See ADR 10/M/465 and 466. See also the rhetorical battles in *Le Travail* and *L'Effort*, 1929–1932, both available at the ADR.

<sup>93</sup> On strikes, see Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', 115–31. See also ADR 10/M/465–468. On strikes in the construction trade outside of Lyon, see Ratel, 'L'Anarcho-Syndicalisme', 181–9.

companies and allowed some workers to earn money which they used to pay 'strike taxes'. Crucially, this pragmatic approach also meant that the Cartel was willing to find compromises. On the other hand, the Cartel did not hesitate to use violent means to enforce a strike. Strike-breakers would be brought to a virtual tribunal, where they were beaten up and had to pay any money they had earned in defiance of the strike. These workers were put on an 'index' and then had great difficulty in finding work on Lyon's construction sites.<sup>94</sup> All these practices aimed at strengthening the Cartel's position *directly vis-à-vis* employers when struggling for workers' 'direct interests', as well as creating an internally strong community of construction workers. What mattered to the Cartel, exclusively, were the concerns of Lyon's construction workers. But does this not mean, one might object, that these construction workers were concerned with the 'community's common concerns' in Anne Phillips's sense, that is, with politics? Of course, construction workers constituted a community; they struggled collectively for their interests. However, this community did not reach beyond the construction workers immediately concerned and their 'direct interests'; it did not include the *polity* and the state. Hence, the Cartel depicted itself as rigorously anti-political.

Communists criticised the Cartel for this pragmatic and locally limited approach. When the Cartel achieved wage increases in 1928, for example, without going on a prolonged strike, communists reproached the Cartel's leadership for not raising further important demands and pursuing the movement with more commitment (*si l'action avait été engagée*).<sup>95</sup> Communists in Lyon, just as in Leipzig, saw the potential for any strike to turn into a political movement. A strike at the local public transportation company Omnibus et Tramways de Lyon (OTL) may serve as an example for how communists tried to politicise strikes and the difficulties they encountered. On 16 December 1930, workers went on strike to enforce the rehiring of one of their colleagues, Moullin, but the company managed to keep a significant number of vehicles running. Initially, the strike was supposed to last only 24 hours, but during a meeting the same day, about 2,000 workers decided to continue the strike. The next day, 17 December, a group of delegates went to the Prefect and asked him to recommend Moullin's rehiring, which the Prefect refused. In the meanwhile, the company had taken harsh measures against the strikers and fired at least forty of them. Only a day later, 18 December, the strike movement collapsed without success. The company's measures had crushed the strikers' optimism and particularly the *Unitaires'* will to strike. Much to the relief of the Prefect, communists in the strike committee had refused to obey their party's order to resort to violence.<sup>96</sup>

Of course, Communist Party leaders in Lyon were outraged by this disobedience and the lack of willingness to radicalise the strike.<sup>97</sup> The key failure of communists within the strike committee, Lyon's party secretary Dupain complained, was that they

<sup>94</sup> See for those practices Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', 74–85.

<sup>95</sup> *Le Travail*, 19 Jan. 1929.

<sup>96</sup> ADR 10/M/466. It is probably not by accident that communists in both Leipzig and Lyon were particularly strong in publicly owned transportation companies.

<sup>97</sup> Archives départementales Seine-Saint-Denis (AD SSD), 3 Mi 6/62 Séquence 412.

failed to understand the ‘political significance’ (*l'importance politique*) of the strike, though Dupain did not bother to explain exactly what this political significance was. Recognising the strike’s ‘political significance’ would have had very practical consequences. While the strike committee hoped that the *Pouvoirs Publics* would intervene in favour of Moullin, Dupain predicted, quite rightly, that both the company and the authorities would do everything to crush the strike. The only way to counter such attempts, Dupain argued, would be to radicalise the strike, to formulate demands that went beyond the rehiring of Moullin, and to prepare for an ‘unlimited strike’ (*grève illimitée*). But instead of strike picketing and preventing conductors (*contrôleurs*) from maintaining an emergency service, Dupain complained, workers simply struck ‘with crossed arms’ (*grève de bras croisés*). The Communist Party had even prepared a newspaper to be distributed among striking workers, but communists at the OTL rejected any intervention of the party and did not distribute the paper. They apparently did not want their strike movement politicised, which would have meant pursuing a more confrontational course vis-à-vis the public authorities.

The role and place of politics was also contested within Lyon’s working-class movement, as this brief discussion indicates. As in Leipzig, communists attempted to politicise strikes and the workplace more generally. Yet they usually failed in these endeavours. Just as in Leipzig, workers longed for spaces, above all the workplace, that would remain free of politics, most notably within the Cartel Autonome, but even within the Communist Party. Given the long tradition of anti-political revolutionary syndicalism in France and the strength of the Cartel, this anti-political desire may even have been more pronounced in Lyon than in Leipzig.

But there were also important differences between Leipzig and Lyon. First, there were in Lyon spaces that remained undisputedly apolitical, such as workers’ sports clubs, the social welfare system, and swimming pools, at least as far as sources indicate.<sup>98</sup> For the most part, the workplace was the only space in which the role of politics was contested. The reason might simply be that there never were, in Lyon, milieu organisations comparable to those in Leipzig that provided opportunities to become political. Second, political conflicts between socialists and communists that certainly existed on the official level never permeated everyday life in Lyon as they did in Leipzig. In Leipzig, the conflict about the boundaries of the political was one between political parties; in Lyon, in contrast, it was a conflict between an explicitly anti-political union and a political party, even though members of the communist parties in both cities never unconditionally supported their parties’ strategy to politicise everyday life.

This situation was to change profoundly with the emergence of the Popular Front in the spring of 1934. Having witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany, many on the Left, already before the 6 February riots, feared a ‘fascist threat’ that would endanger the Republic. While communists, socialists and autonomist construction workers

<sup>98</sup> There are, as far as I can see, simply no sources suggesting conflicts about the politicisation of such places, nor sources indicating that these places were used for political agitation.



agreed on the danger, they disagreed on how to meet the threat. In September 1933, the radical right-wing Parti Social-National had planned to hold a meeting in Lyon, but cancelled it at the last minute. The parties of the Left had organised a counter-demonstration and then moved to the Bourse du Travail to have their own meeting, where Vacheron of the Socialist Party and Rocher of the Communist Party gave a speech. According to Vacheron, the trade unions (*syndicats*) were most ideally suited to fight fascism, since political parties all struggled for the power in the state and were obliged to have a national politics, which the *syndicats* did not have. Most importantly, it was by strengthening the *syndicats* and not by destroying them that the working class could most effectively oppose fascism. Unfortunately, communists only used the 'workers' movements' for their own agendas, socialist Vacheron argued. 'Politics [*la politique*] cannot and must not use the working-class movements [*les mouvements ouvriers*] for its own advantage. Politics has the right to support them, but that's it.' In his mind, the working-class movement was entirely separated from politics, as was the fight against fascism – quite a remarkable idea, given that the radical Right aimed at gaining power in the state.<sup>99</sup>

The communist newspaper *La Voix du Peuple* agreed that all workers should unite to fight fascism, but that is where agreements ended. Mocking Vacheron for having implicitly admitted that his party did not fight against fascism, the paper praised German communists for their bravery in fighting the Nazis. In fact, the *syndicats* should fight against fascism, but only by placing themselves on the 'terrain of class struggle, that is by collaborating with the party of the proletariat: the Communist Party'. Class struggle was, from the communist perspective, a deeply political struggle that went far beyond defending worker's 'direct interests'.<sup>100</sup> And did communists not have a point here? If there really was a 'fascist threat', as many believed, then not only the fate of the Republic, but that of all of Europe was at stake. The struggle against fascism had a significance that pointed beyond the highly localised 'immediate interests' of workers the Cartel had so successfully defended. This may be one reason why communists succeeded in organising the struggle against the radical Right, while the Cartel lost its autonomy in the following months. In a profound political crisis, an anti-political approach simply made no sense.

The September meeting, however, remained without consequences, despite the general sense that unity was urgent. Only in response to the right-wing riots in Paris on 6 February 1934 was this to change.<sup>101</sup> In Lyon as in the rest of France, left-wing parties organised mass demonstrations and a general strike on 12 February.<sup>102</sup> Though autonomous construction workers participated in the demonstrations as

<sup>99</sup> *L'Effort*, 23 Sept. 1933.

<sup>100</sup> *La Voix du Peuple*, 30 Sept. 1933. (*La Voix du Peuple* was a communist newspaper that had replaced *Le Travail*.)

<sup>101</sup> On the riots in Paris, see most recently Chris Millington, 'February 6, 1934: The Veterans' Riot', *French Historical Studies*, 33 (2010), 545–72. On the events in Lyon, see ADR 4/M/235 and 10/M/470, and *Lyon Républicain*, 8–12 Feb. 1934; *La Voix du Peuple*, 10 and 17 Feb. 1934; and *L'Avenir Socialiste*, 10 and 17 Feb. 1934.

<sup>102</sup> For Lyon, see in general Fauvet-Messat, 'Extrême droite et antifascisme'; Maurice Moissonnier, '1934: Six Mois de Lutte Ouvrière à Lyon', *Cahiers CGT d'Histoire Sociale*, 36 (1996), 4–14. For France, see

well as in violent altercations with members of the leagues that preceded them, it was political parties that dominated the demonstrations. On 11 February, when the mass demonstration took place in Lyon, some 25,000 people marched through the streets. According to the left-wing journal *Lyon Républicain*, the demonstration had two distinct faces. In the front rows, socialists chanted 'Liberty!', 'Forty Hours!' or 'Down with Fascism!', while communists at the rear end chanted 'Les Soviets! Les Soviets!' Both groups, however, sang the 'Internationale'.<sup>103</sup>

During the following weeks and months, the Left continued to mobilise workers. In Lyon and its suburbs as well as in the rest of France, numerous 'anti-fascist committees' were formed that often included not only members of the communist and socialist parties, though they were certainly their main constituency, but also members of other left-wing organisations such as the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme or the Cartel Autonome.<sup>104</sup> In contrast to the *syndicats* that engaged in struggles with employers and were organised on a professional basis, these committees focused on political issues – anti-fascism and the future of the Republic – and were organised on a neighbourhood basis; they united workers independently of their professions. These committees quickly held mass meetings, some of which attracted several hundred local residents.<sup>105</sup> At the same time, the radical Right continued to stage demonstrations and meetings in Lyon, against which the Left organised counter-demonstrations that frequently resulted in clashes with the police, even killing one militant construction worker in June 1934.<sup>106</sup> As had happened in Leipzig, these demonstrations and battles transformed the streets and places of Lyon into an arena for politics. In a literal sense, the political space extended into Lyon's working-class neighbourhoods and streets, which replaced construction sites as the key sites for the formation of the working-class movement.<sup>107</sup> Both the success of the anti-fascist committees and the mobilisation against the radical Right indicate that, at a moment of political crisis, people rallied round political issues, though sources, which are relatively sparse, do not allow for a more detailed analysis as to how the relative apathy that existed before may have been overcome.

While this politicisation of Lyon's working-class movement marked a significant shift that made the situation in Lyon look somewhat similar to the situation in Leipzig, it is equally important to note differences. Politics never permeated everyday life as deeply in Lyon as they did in Leipzig, it seems. Neither did socialising in leisure-time associations gain a political meaning – maybe because communists had stopped

Antoine Prost, 'Les manifestations du 12 février 1934 en province', *Le Mouvement social*, 54 (1966), 532–45.

<sup>103</sup> See, in addition to the sources quoted above, Moissonnier, *Mouvement ouvrier*, vol. 1, 226–36. Whether autonomous construction workers participated remains unclear. They did, however, massively participate in anti-fascist demonstrations that took place during the preceding days.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, *La Voix du Peuple*, 31. Mar. 1934, and Moissonnier, *Mouvement ouvrier*, vol. 1, 249.

<sup>105</sup> See Fauvet-Messat, 'Extrême droite et antifascisme', 176f.

<sup>106</sup> See *ibid.*, 160–4.

<sup>107</sup> See in this context Danielle Tartakowsky, 'Stratégies de la rue 1934–1936', *Le Mouvement social*, 135 (1986), 31–62; *idem*, *Les manifestations de rue en France, 1918–1968* (Histoire de la France aux XIXe et XXe siècles, 42, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998), Chs 9–16.

attacking socialists wherever they could. Venues such as swimming pools were not turned into arenas for political propaganda, nor did political violence become as ubiquitous as in Leipzig. It was still possible to escape from politics, which might explain why sources in Lyon do not indicate a longing for some quiet, non-politicised spaces. In addition, the forms of politics – demonstrations against the radical Right that could involve violence – that were deeply contested in Leipzig were never an issue for conflicts between socialists and communists in Lyon.

An important aspect of the politicisation of the working-class movement in Lyon and France in general is the rise of the Communist Party.<sup>108</sup> In Lyon and its suburbs, the number of communist cells increased from 74 in June 1934 to 102 a year later, including twelve factory cells. In the suburb Villeurbanne alone, some 1,000 members had joined the PCF, an internal party report claimed. In total, the PCF in Lyon now counted 1,760 members.<sup>109</sup> The municipal elections in May 1935 similarly show the communists' increasing influence, even among those workers who did not join the party: In Lyon, the number of votes increased from 7,352 to 9,067; in addition, communists won two neighbouring working-class municipalities, Villeurbanne and Vénissieux, though they lost the suburb Vaulx-en-Velin. 'In Lyon as everywhere in France, our Party appears as the champion of the anti-fascist struggle', the party report cheerfully claimed.<sup>110</sup> In contrast to Leipzig, where communist political agitation failed to mobilise workers, communists in Lyon succeeded, these numbers suggest, in mobilising workers around political issues.

The developments in the Cartel that had previously been so radically anti-political exemplify maybe most dramatically how profound the shift within the working-class movement of Lyon was.<sup>111</sup> In 1935, the Cartel and particularly the autonomous masons' union (*Syndicat autonome des maçons*) went through a deep crisis, as its leadership was accused of embezzling the union's funds and bringing it close to a collapse. By the end of the year, the old leadership was chased away and replaced by a pro-communist one. It remains unclear, as noted by Jean-Luc de Ochandiano, historian of the Cartel, whether these accusations were actually true or not. What matters is, however, that the old autonomist tendency could no longer muster enough support to keep control over the Cartel. In the face of a profound national and international political and economic crisis, the locally limited perspective of the autonomist Cartel was no longer compelling to workers. The Cartel's explanation for the economic crisis provides an example for how limited its perspective was: for the Cartel, it was merely a conspiracy of employers. The economic problems were caused, according to the Cartel, by malevolent employers, so it demanded that

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Noiriel, *Workers*, Ch. 5; Sylvain Boulouque, 'Les unitaires, le Front populaire et l'unité syndicale: mutations sociales, actions collectives et pragmatisme partisan', in Gilles Morin and Gilles Richard, eds, *Les deux France du Front populaire: Chocs et contre-chocs* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 157–65.

<sup>109</sup> See AD SSD 3 M I 6/117, Séquence 743.

<sup>110</sup> On the elections, see Moissonnier, *Mouvement ouvrier*, vol 1, 339–61; for the numbers, 357, fn. 128. See also AD SSD 3 M I 6/117, Séquence 743.

<sup>111</sup> See Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', 152–4, 166–9. See also ADR 10/M/471.

the state intervene and solve them, thereby defying its anti-statist beliefs. In this situation, communists could not only offer an interpretation of the crisis that took its global dimension into account, but could also, maybe more importantly, point to a country that had, or so it seemed, successfully overcome the problems of capitalism and strongly intervened in the economy: the Soviet Union. But the economic crisis and rising unemployment also posed a very practical problem for the Cartel that had previously formed a community at and around the workplace.<sup>112</sup> With many workers out of work, this was no longer a viable alternative. Attempts to organise unemployed construction workers failed. In this situation, the anti-political and workplace-centred ideas of the old Cartel were radically marginalised.

The national elections of May 1936 brought a stunning victory for the parties of the Popular Front and especially the communists, in Lyon as all over France, even though the total number of votes for the parties of the Left increased only marginally.<sup>113</sup> In conjunction with the subsequent summer strikes and factory occupations, the victory at the ballots marks the apogee of the French Popular Front. However, it was a short-lived victory. In the late spring of 1937, Léon Blum, first socialist minister president of France, resigned. His second term, from March 1938, was even more short lived; the failed general strike of 30 November 1938 then finally marked the definitive defeat of the Popular Front.<sup>114</sup> It would go beyond the scope of this article to discuss the summer strikes and the subsequent decline of the Popular Front in Lyon in detail.<sup>115</sup> Instead, it will focus once more on construction workers to demonstrate how the politicisation of the working-class movement contributed to the rapid collapse of the Popular Front. In general, conflicts between former adherents of the reformist CGT and the communist CGT(U) regarding the role politics should play in trade unions continued after the two organisations had united in 1935.<sup>116</sup>

In response to the nationwide wave of strikes and factory occupations that had begun in May 1936, the reunited CGT, employers and the state had signed the Matignon agreements that granted workers, among other things, wage increases between 7% and 15%. But the strikes continued despite the agreements, much to the communists' dismay, including in Lyon. One of these strikes concerned construction workers in Lyon, where employers had refused to comply with the wage increases the Matignon agreement had granted workers. They had, employers argued, just signed

<sup>112</sup> Construction site delegates, for example, who had not had any legal protection before 1936 and had hence to rely on the support of their fellow workers, received legal protection after 1936, which made the support of their fellow workers less important. In fact, some (younger) workers regarded them as a new form of 'government', the police remarked, see ADR 4/M/236.

<sup>113</sup> Nationwide, the PCF gained seventy-two seats (previously: eleven); in Lyon, they gained two seats (previously none). For Lyon, see ADR, 4/M/236, and Jérémy Faure, 'Le Front Populaire à Lyon et autour de Lyon: Événements, Images et Représentations (Avril – Juillet 1936)', *Mémoire de Maîtrise*, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Lyon, 1998, 32.

<sup>114</sup> On the failed strike of 30 November 1938, see in particular Guy Bourdè, *La Défaite du Front Populaire* (Paris: Maspéro, 1977).

<sup>115</sup> On the summer strikes in Lyon, see Nicolas Walter, 'Les grèves de juin/juillet 1936 dans l'agglomération lyonnaise', *Mémoire de Maîtrise*, Université Lumière Lyon II, 1999.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, ADR 4/M/236, report of 20 Aug. 1937. See further Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', 167; Prost, *Front populaire*, 110.

a collective contract with the Cartel that should remain effective. Not surprisingly, workers disagreed, not least since the new contract had stipulated significant wage reductions, though a strike in April and May 1936 had averted the greatest reduction suggested. As employers stubbornly refused construction workers' demands to benefit from the wage rises the Matignon agreements had stipulated, workers also encircled the Chamber of Commerce (*Chambre patronale*) to force employers to comply, and even hoisted a red flag on its roof; but it still took an intervention of the new government in Paris to make employers accept that the Matignon agreement would also be applied in the construction trade. Shocked by their utter defeat at the hand of politicised workers who followed a communist leadership, employers vowed to ensure that 'the working class, remaining faithful to legitimate syndicalism, should abandon any allegiance to leaders who have introduced political intentions into their professional organisations, with the aim of establishing a Marxist regime in France that would destroy liberties and natural rights'.<sup>117</sup> Importantly, the anti-communism of the employers (*patronat*) – their leader, Rousseau, was particularly radical in this regard – contributed to the politicisation of labour conflicts.

The wage increases workers had gained in 1936 were soon eaten up by the inflationary effects of Blum's economic policy. Construction workers thus demanded another 20% wage increase in 1937. An arbitrator, appointed by the government, granted them 13%, which constituted a victory for workers. But inflation did not end, and, by November 1937, workers asked for another 20% wage increase. This time, however, employers did not accept a first ruling in March 1938 that favoured workers and called for a new arbitrator.<sup>118</sup> Contrary to the law that demanded a speedy process, it took the new arbitrator Dilhac until late August to render his ruling. Anticipating a less favourable ruling, construction workers had already by 8 August 1938 decided to go on strike. Initially, the companies that had complied with the original ruling were exempted from the strike, but when Dilhac finally announced his ruling and these companies followed his suggestions that called for more modest wage increases for workers, these companies were hit by the strike too. In addition, the strike did not remain limited to Lyon itself, but soon affected the surrounding villages. As negotiations did not produce any results, workers issued an ultimatum: if employers would not concede to their demands by 9 September, the strike would become general by 12 September and include even the socialist co-operative l'Avenir, which had complied with the workers' demands. As employers refused to surrender, the strike did indeed become general, and soon turned increasingly violent. On 3 October, several hundred striking workers attacked strike-breakers at the Vitriolerie barracks, among them former leaders of the Cartel. In the aftermath, most of the current leadership of the unions was arrested. The situation finally escalated on 11 October, when a Polish foreman was shot and killed, allegedly by striking workers. By 22 October, workers went back to work without having achieved anything.

<sup>117</sup> *Lyon Républicain*, 7 July 1937, quoted in Ochandiano, 'Formes syndicales', 165.

<sup>118</sup> On the new forms of regulated labour arbitration, see Weber, *Sozialpartnerschaft*, 1037–64.

To make matters worse, construction workers' unions were effectively banned from construction sites during the following months. The workers had lost spectacularly.

The Communist Party, which had taken control of the construction workers' union by then, played an important role in this escalation. Albert Fau, at the time secretary of the masons' union, noted in his memoirs that negotiations were going well, that an increasing number of employers had made concessions, and that the union had thus breached the employers' front.<sup>119</sup> However, by making the strike general, workers had not only deprived themselves of the 'strike taxes' workers still employed had to pay, but also literally forced employers to close ranks. Why did workers change their time-proven strategy? According to Fau, the local union had 'too hastily applied the national guidelines', guidelines that were designed by a communist leadership that wanted to use the strike as a test of forces for a national strike movement that should bring down Daladier's government, whose appeasement policy was regarded as a danger for the Soviet Union.<sup>120</sup> From the perspective of the party leadership, a local struggle about better wages mattered little. World politics did, and Lyon's construction workers had been ascribed a role in world politics. In a way, the strike movement was overburdened with political meaning. The politicisation of the working-class movement that had initially contributed to its stunning successes proved ultimately destructive for its local power position. When the CGT called for a general strike in Lyon on 30 November 1938, the working-class movement had already been broken. Only a minority joined the strike, and Lyon kept its normal appearance.<sup>121</sup>

### Conclusion

Historians have for some time destabilised the field of the political and analysed its historically changing boundaries. Focusing on practices rather than on discourses, this essay, too, has highlighted how, in the case of Lyon, the role and place of politics changed dramatically within a relatively short period of time, and how, in the case of Leipzig, the boundaries of the political were deeply contested. Making politics part of everyday life had very practical, but, depending on the situation, different effects. In Leipzig, politics became a massive nuisance for some who longed for spaces free of the political conflicts that divided workers along party-political lines. The 'left-proletarian milieu' (Mallmann) in Leipzig was fractured along party lines; there were few opportunities for a broad rank-and-file movement for unity as it happened in France. So is the 'over-institutionalisation' of the German working-class movement, and in particular the KPD, to blame for the defeat of the Left, as James Wickham

<sup>119</sup> Albert Fau, *Maçons au pied du mur: Chronique de 30 années d'action syndicale* (Montreuil: Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs de la Construction CGT, 1989), 234f.

<sup>120</sup> Weber, *Sozialpartnerschaft*, 1074f.

<sup>121</sup> *Lyon Républicain*, 30 Nov./1 Dec. 1938. *La Voix du Peuple*, 3 Dec. 1938, claimed that between 70 and 75% of the workforce participated in the strike, while the police reported some 22%, see ADR 4/M/236. See also Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identities: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, 1900–1939* (International Studies in Social History, 16, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 241f.

suggested in 1979.<sup>122</sup> Based on the comparison with Lyon, I would suggest otherwise. The Cartel's history is particularly revealing in this regard. At first sight, the Cartel may seem to provide an example of an alternative, less institutionalised way of organising workers around the workplace, rather than in political parties – a form of organisation whose absence Wickham deplored in his studies on Frankfurt. Yet, the Cartel and its focus on workplace related matters ceased to appeal to workers precisely at the moment of a political crisis. A situation of intense and often violent political struggles required, both the examples of Leipzig and Lyon suggest, a political reaction. Solely focusing on the workplace simply made no sense under such circumstances. In Lyon, formerly hostile workers were able to form an alliance, at least temporarily, under the banner of anti-fascism, that is, on political grounds. But this political mobilisation, too, was short lived. This leaves us with a conundrum. Fighting the radical Right, there was no way to escape politics; and yet, it was politics that people sought to escape from – in swimming pools, football associations or at the workplace.

**La lutte des classes sur tous les fronts  
et l'autonomie antipolitique: Le  
débat sur la place de la politique dans  
les mouvements de la classe ouvrière  
à Leipzig et à Lyon entre les deux  
guerres**

Cet article examine le débat concernant les limites de la politique au sein des mouvements prolétaires à Leipzig et à Lyon à la fin de la république de Weimar et pendant le Front Populaire. Au sein des organisations ouvrières dans ces deux villes, la portée et la place de la politique faisaient l'objet de fortes contestations. L'article soutient d'une part que l'échec de la mobilisation ouvrière contre les Nazis à Leipzig était dû en partie à un excès de politisation du milieu prolétarien de gauche, et d'autre part que la dynamique de politisation à Lyon contribua non seulement à la formation du Front Populaire, mais aussi à son effondrement rapide.

**Zwischen Klassenkampf an allen  
Fronten und politikfeindlicher  
Autonomie: Die umstrittene Rolle  
der Politik in den  
Arbeiterbewegungen in Leipzig und  
Lyon während der  
Zwischenkriegszeit**

Der Aufsatz befasst sich vergleichend mit den umkämpften Grenzen des Politischen in der Arbeiterbewegung in Leipzig und Lyon gegen Ende der Weimarer Republik beziehungsweise während der französischen Volksfront. Was Gegenstand von Politik sein sollte und wo diese stattfinden sollte, war zwischen den Organisationen der Arbeiterbewegung in beiden Städten heftig umstritten. Der Aufsatz argumentiert, dass die Überpolitisierung des links-proletarischen Milieus in Leipzig zu einer Schwächung der Arbeiterbewegung im Kampf gegen den Nationalsozialismus führte, während Dynamiken der Politisierung in Lyon zunächst zur Formierung, dann aber auch zum schnellen Ende der Volksfront beitrugen.

<sup>122</sup> James Wickham, 'Social Fascism and the Division of the Working Class Movement: Workers and Political Parties in the Frankfurt Area 1928–30', *Capital and Class*, 7 (1979), 1–34. See also idem, 'Working-Class Movement and Working-Class Life: Frankfurt am Main during the Weimar Republic', *Social History*, 8 (1983), 315–43. It is telling that Wickham pays little attention to the violence between communists and national socialists. For a related argument concerning leftist campaigns in favour of legalising abortions, see Atina Grossmann, 'Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign against §218 in Germany', *New German Critique*, 14 (1978), 119–37.