

Poor Taste as a Bright Character Trait: Emmy Noether and the Independent Social Democratic Party

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Argument

The creation of algebraic topology required “all the energy and the temperament of Emmy Noether” according to topologists Paul Alexandroff and Heinz Hopf. Alexandroff stressed Noether’s radical pro-Russian politics, which her colleagues found in “poor taste”; yet he found “a bright trait of character.” She joined the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) in 1919. They were tiny in Göttingen until that year when their vote soared as they called for a dictatorship of the proletariat. The Minister of the Army and many Göttingen students called them Bolshevik terrorists. Noether’s colleague Richard Courant criticized USPD radicalism. Her colleague Hermann Weyl downplayed her radicalism and that view remains influential but the evidence favors Alexandroff. Weyl was ambivalent in parallel ways about her mathematics and her politics. He deeply admired her yet he found her abstractness and her politics excessive and even dangerous.

1. Introduction

David Rowe highlights the shift of mathematics around 1900 from a written culture of largely isolated practitioners to an oral culture of practitioners who often knew each other by daily contact (Rowe 2004). Göttingen was an early example of the latter. Personal traits and actions of a mathematician began to matter in a way they could not have done when they were generally unknown. So the political views of Emmy Noether (1882–1935) affected both the career opportunities she was offered and the reception of her mathematical work as she and Hermann Weyl (1885–1955) jointly made Hilbert’s vision of mathematics the worldwide standard.

Noether and Weyl shared Hilbert’s view of axiomatics as the key method across the wide range of mathematics; but within that, Noether emphasized axiomatics, while Weyl emphasized the wide range. Weyl sometimes complained of Noether’s abstraction, as we will see. Noether left in writing few complaints about anything. Their contemporary Richard Courant (1888–1972) was Hilbert’s most famous coauthor in mathematical physics and he was Hilbert’s administrator organizing the Göttingen Mathematisches Institut in the 1920s and later the Courant Institute in New York. Of these people only Courant was prominent in party politics but only Noether was

known as a radical. Her pro-Soviet politics was as important a factor in blocking her career as her being a woman and a Jew.

The main sources of information on Noether's politics are the eulogies by Weyl and by Paul Alexandroff (Pavel Aleksandrov) (1896–1982). Both men knew Noether well and were regular guests at mathematical gatherings in her rooms. Both held a high opinion of her personally and professionally and admired her courage during the Nazi rise to power. Both were deeply fond of her. Yet they give very different pictures. Weyl says Noether “sided more or less with the Social Democrats” during the Revolution and later took “no part in matters political” (Weyl 1935, 431). However, neither Alexandroff nor his Moscow audience would have thought of the mainstream Social Democrats when he referred to “her well known extreme radical political convictions.” He said the “she always had a lively interest in politics and hated war and chauvinism in all its forms and with her whole being. Her sympathies were always unwaveringly with the Soviet Union.” He insisted that “to be silent about this would be tendentiously to distort her whole image as a scholar and as a human being” (Alexandroff 1981, 107).

Given Weyl's status, his care as an historian and essayist, and the fact that Alexandroff was speaking in Moscow, historians have tended to favor Weyl's account. This paper, however, will show that the evidence supports Alexandroff. We will consider German politics at the time, especially in Göttingen and especially among mathematicians, and the evidence about Noether. We will see that she was a pro-Soviet radical far to the left of her Göttingen colleagues and that these issues were very serious in her circles.

Emmy Noether was a member of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) (hereafter USPD) from 1919 until it dissolved in 1922.¹ Weyl's vague statement could suggest that Noether believed the USPD was close to the ruling Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) (hereafter SPD). We will see that no one in Göttingen in 1919 could believe so. Noether's friends and colleagues had heated debates on politics, including the USPD, recorded in Göttingen newspapers. Weyl says that during the Revolution “without being actually in party life she participated intensely in the discussion of the social and political problems of the day” (Weyl 1935, 431).

At the start of 1919 the USPD was a small party, widely hated as a party of Bolshevik terror, and far smaller in Göttingen than in Germany as a whole. The SPD Minister of the Army, Gustav Noske, prominently and stridently called it Bolshevik. It grew quickly in 1919 as it supported the revolutionary Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and called for a dictatorship of the proletariat. In that bloody year thousands were killed as the government suppressed strikes, demonstrations, and the Councils.

¹ Asserted without documentation in Dick 1981, 72. Cordula Tollmien recently found it in a letter of Emmy Noether to Helmut Hasse dated 21.7.1933, in the *Handschriftenabteilung* of the *Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*, Acc.Mss.1991.11, Brief 69. I thank Dr. Tollmien for telling me of this. The most extensive research on Noether to date remains Tollmien 1990.

This in no way contradicts Noether's pacifism. Minister Noske famously proclaimed his reliance on violence: "Someone must be the blood-dog, and I do not shrink from the responsibility" (Noske 1920, 68). Noske's word "Bluthund" is often translated "Bloodhound" but it did not mean the placid tracking dogs called bloodhounds in the United States and called St. Hubert hounds throughout Europe at that time. Noske's word "Bluthund" was a vivid, violent composite. A pacifist could easily side with the Councils.

No one in Göttingen failed to see how the Army and its nationalist supporters could never accept the loss of World War I nor the new Republic. This included the majority of academics both students and professors, although the Göttingen mathematicians were more moderate or even socialist. Everyone knew the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils had somehow rivaled the government and that some of them had meant to replace it and that they were being crushed in 1919. Noether probably did not know the arcane details of German party politics. She knew what the people around her knew and said about the parties. She knew few details of Soviet politics, but she knew where she stood. She was vividly told where she stood when nationalist students expelled her from her rooms. She was far to the left of Social Democrat Richard Courant who was already anathema to the nationalists. Before looking at evidence about her politics, let us look at her life and mathematics.

2. Her whole image as a scholar and as a human being

Alexandroff and Heinz Hopf (1894–1971) said in their influential textbook:

The tendency to strict algebraization of topology on group theoretic foundations, which we follow in our exposition, goes back entirely to Emmy Noether. This tendency seems self-evident today. It was not so eight years ago. It took all the energy and the temperament of Emmy Noether to make it the common property of topologists, and to let it play the role it does today in framing the questions and the methods of topology. (Alexandroff and Hopf 1935, ix)

This topology on group theoretic foundations is today's algebraic topology and is basic to research in topology.

To understand her energy and temperament, you must understand that Emmy Noether was no gentle refined lady:

Her great sense of humor, which made social gatherings and personal contacts with her so pleasant, enabled her to counter the injustices and absurdities that beset her academic career easily and without anger. In such circumstances, instead of being offended, she would simply laugh. But she was very offended indeed, and protested sharply when even the smallest injustice was directed at one of her students. (Alexandroff 1981, 110)

The number theorist Olga Taussky-Todd (1906–1995) studied with Noether in Göttingen and later at Bryn Mawr.² She gave humorous voice to her awe as a student facing Noether in a 1931 poem, where she is a trapped bird bravely “calculating away” with numbers while the fierce cat Noether approaches with sharp claws and abstract algebra (Taussky-Todd 1997). Though she came to know the power of Noether’s methods in solving concrete problems, she always recalled her initial shock: “For my own training was in number theory, the kind of number theory that involves numbers” (Taussky-Todd 1981, 79). She tells us: “not everybody liked [Noether], and not everybody trusted that her achievements were what they were later accepted to be. She irritated people by bragging about them” (ibid., 84).

Many in the University would consider it poor taste that: “[Noether] was especially popular with the Russian visitors; and when they began to go around Göttingen in their shirtsleeves – a startling departure from proper dress for students – the style was christened ‘the Noether-guard uniform’” (Reid 1986, 352). Even her table manners were unprofessorial. Taussky-Todd first met Noether at a 1930 Deutsche Mathematiker Vereinigung meeting in Königsburg and sat on her left at lunch. It seems Noether spoke with everyone but her:

Emmy was very busy discussing mathematics with the man on her right and several people across the table. She was having a very good time. She ate her lunch, but gesticulated violently when eating. This kept her left hand busy too, for she spilled her food constantly and wiped it off from her dress, completely unperturbed. Life was still quite peaceful in those days and Emmy was having a wonderful time. (Taussky-Todd 1981, 80)

We will see that Weyl found Noether’s abstraction excessive, one-sided, and in the long run a threat to mathematics, notwithstanding his friendship and his admiration for her results. More traditional and less talented mathematicians took a harsher view. In politics, as in mathematics, and indeed in being a woman academic, Noether was often seen as excessive, one-sided, and even a threat.

3. SPD and USPD before the Revolution

At the start of World War I the SPD was the largest Marxist party in the world and the largest political party in Germany. It called for revolution though not in a very clear sense. The Party Congresses often heard and rejected calls for a dictatorship of the proletariat. Members such as Eduard Bernstein believed capitalism could only be reformed and not overthrown. In principle the SPD called for international worker solidarity and opposed capitalist war. Yet in 1914, when the Kaiser called on the

² Taussky-Todd has been called the most noted woman mathematician, after Emmy Noether, to come to the United States in the emigration of 1933 (Murray 2000, 10).

Reichstag to approve war credits, most of the SPD did. Leftist SPD member Karl Liebknecht was the first in the Reichstag to publicly oppose the war. By December 1915 he was one of 18 SPD Reichstag members who voted against the credits. The mainstream of the SPD, meanwhile, became immensely more respectable. They eventually led the wartime government, while the Supreme Army Command actually controlled it. The SPD was brought in just in time to take the blame for the collapse of the war.

SPD opponents of the war met in April 1917. Germany had one million dead and faced desperate food shortages. The United States had just entered the war, throwing a fresh continent of people, farmland, and industry against Germany. The Bolsheviks had just taken power in Russia. The meeting founded a new party. They considered naming it the Communist Workers Party, but many center and right-wing socialists were there so the party was founded as the USPD, with 15 Reichstag members, and perhaps 150,000 party members (Engelmann and Naumann 1993, 32). Its members were often called “Independents” while the SPD was sometimes called the “Majority” Social Democrats or *Mehrheits SPD* (hereafter *MSPD*).

The USPD linked radical leftists like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht with the center and with right-wing socialists like Bernstein. They could not agree to entirely oppose the war. They did condemn some German war goals as expansionist. The party was resolutely legal in the face of harsh wartime restrictions on speech and political activity, but party members often supported illegal protests and strikes. Most importantly Luxemburg and Liebknecht had organized the Spartakus group for illegal war resistance and quickly made it a faction of the USPD.

The USPD was widely seen as traitorous allies of Russia. Actually in 1917 “the Independents critical of the Bolsheviks were far fewer than the enthusiasts” and “uninformed sympathies in the USPD were probably then, as later, generally pro-Bolshevik” (Morgan 1975, 100, 103). The full spectrum of German Marxism remained in the USPD even after Luxemburg and Liebknecht left to found the German Communist Party and Bernstein left to rejoin the SPD. But the membership began largely pro-Bolshevist and grew rapidly more so.

4. Göttingen 1918

The Göttingen SPD began as a poorly respected working class party that met in a pub with constant police surveillance. “Comrade Frau Peyer raised complaints about the immorality that reigns in our meeting pub” and members often spoke of how to become respectable (Saldern 1998, 9, 208, 210). They achieved respectability by supporting the war: “For this the party was ‘rewarded’ by the military and the police: They only harassed the very small left-wing organized in the USPD” (*ibid.*, 214). Of course, officially the USPD was not left wing but anti-war, or rather a wing opposing certain aspects of the war; but it was universally seen as left wing.

As the war ended in 1918 there were rumors that the Kaiser's government would fall – some said to a Workers' Republic led by Karl Liebknecht. Events in Göttingen were vividly described in the diary of a conservative university student, later historian, Georg Schnath (1898–1989), who was at the time medically unfit for military service. Like most people then, Schnath had strong political feelings but no clear position. By fall 1918 he believed Germany faced a choice between “the Majority Socialists and the Bolshevik program of the Independents” (Schnath 1976, 174). He frequently contrasts USPD Bolshevism to Majority Socialism. In Berlin, 9 November 1918, the Kaiser and the Crown Prince abdicated. Schnath called it “the only thinkable conclusion.” Many people declared new governments. Liebknecht declared a Free Socialist Republic. SPD members Scheidemann and Ebert in the Kaiser's government declared a German Republic. Supported by the Reichstag, the army, and most of the police, it became in fact the government. Schnath wrote that “one is quickly attached to these unfamiliar words, though no genuine concept stands behind them” (*ibid.*, 175, 177). The German Republic became the Weimar Republic.

Throughout autumn 1918 Workers' and Soldiers' Councils arose all over Germany, generally as local spontaneous groups, though SPD and USPD members often led them. Göttingen was late in this. The day after the abdication, members of a Workers' and Soldiers' Council walked into the train station, post office, telegraph, and city hall of Göttingen, and took control without disrupting business. Such transitions were common as the Councils stepped into a power vacuum. The Göttingen Council co-existed with the municipal government, enforced rules against the black market in food, regulated the dance craze, and faded away within the next year (Popplow 1976). The German term for these Councils, “Räte,” was also German for the Russian “Soviets.” The street slogan “All power to the Councils” echoed the Bolshevik slogan “All power to the Soviets.” The Councils were rarely Bolshevik in fact. But everything was up in the air and Germans on both the left and the right took the comparison seriously. Schnath wrote:

Developments so far have a damned Russian smell. Starting point of the revolution: the Fleet. Everywhere Soldiers' and Workers' Councils. Disintegration of the Front, while the enemy in the west presses harder and takes advantage of the situation by raising their peace conditions to the extreme. This is all just like Russia in the fall of 1917. And just as in Russia, everything here is based on the contradiction between two parties: The Mensheviks, the social revolutionaries, our Majority Socialists, and the Bolsheviks, our Independents. (Schnath 1976, 178)

His only hope was that the Independents would join the MSPD government: “It is now certain class warfare and Terror will break out here, if there is no such unification” (*ibid.*).

The Independents did join with the MSPD to form the government on 9 November, then quit in December, charging the government with terrorism. The central figure

in that charge was Gustav Noske, soon to be SPD Minister of the Army. In November 1918 Noske was the SPD spokesman on the Navy in the Reichstag when a mutiny broke out in the port city of Kiel. He was sent to calm it down and was elected governor of Kiel by the local Soldiers' Council. He returned to Berlin in December. Noske vigorously defended the new Republic, making it clear that he saw threats only from the left, from Bolshevism, and for him that meant the USPD.³

Noske allied with the Freikorps to suppress strikes and protests and eventually the Councils. The Freikorps were extremely nationalist, rightist private armies initially recruited from soldiers leaving the war. Their lurid obsession with Bolshevism is graphically documented in Theweleit 1987. Noske got them government subsidies. The Freikorps were a stronghold of the "stab-in-the-back" legend which said Germany was not defeated on the battlefield but betrayed by Jews and Socialists at home. In the Freikorps eyes, Germany was betrayed by the Weimar Republic.

In late December 1918 Noske urged decisive action against workers' protests. He made the bold declaration, mentioned above, that he and his enemies both loved to quote: "By all means! Someone must be the blood-dog, and I do not shrink from the responsibility" (Noske 1920, 68). USPD members withdrew from the government. Noether joined the USPD the next year.

5. Views of the USPD, December 1918–January 1919

The government scheduled a National Assembly to draft a new constitution. Its election was set for 19 January 1919. The SPD generally supported the Assembly against the Councils. The USPD ran to make the Councils a force within the Assembly. On 29–30 December 1918, Liebknecht and Luxemburg took Spartakus out of the USPD to form the German Communist Party, *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (hereafter KPD). The KPD would boycott the election and demand all power to the Councils.

During this time Liebknecht briefly equated the USPD with the SPD. He said the USPD leadership (apart from himself) shared guilt with SPD leaders for government repression (Liebknecht 1982, 642, 671, 753). He said the USPD leaders had "erased (*verwischt*) the feeling the masses have, for a difference between USPD politics and those of the majority socialists." He accused them of supporting the National Assembly against the Councils and against a dictatorship of the proletariat (*ibid.*, 666–73). Luxemburg and Liebknecht were arrested and killed in Berlin on 15 January 1919. The USPD continued its leftward shift and its membership soared while the KPD quickly dropped Liebknecht's view of them. A KPD leaflet from December 1919 says the great majority of USPD members follow the example of Liebknecht and Luxemburg

³ Noske referred to the USPD constantly. He spoke of Spartacists and Communists much less often and always in association with the USPD (see Noske 1920; Noske 1928). The fact that the USPD was defunct by 1928 makes his continued stress on that party more striking.

(Engelmann and Naumann 1993, 139). USPD member Eugen Prager contrasted the Majority and Independent SPD:

For [the Majority SPD] the Revolution was only a passing phenomenon, and even unwelcome. So they demand that the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils should disappear as soon as they complete their task of re-establishing the old bourgeois order. The National Assembly should decide the final configuration of the state. The Independent Social Democrats, on the other hand, demand recognition of the Councils as the organs of the Revolution [and thus as] the truly democratic constitution of the land. (Prager 1921, 175)

Richard Courant campaigned for the MSPD on just the position that Prager says that party took. For Prager, the USPD was split between those who consider "the Council system and dictatorship of the proletariat as the goals for which the party must strive" and those who consider them only "means to the end of actualizing socialism" (*ibid.*, 186–87). Prager saw the pro-Soviet members as taking dictatorship for a goal and he was bitterly disappointed that the pro-Soviet wing of the USPD was dominant.

Many of Noether's colleagues at Göttingen would have taken the non-socialist liberal view of the USPD reported by the urbane Victor Klemperer, a student and later professor of Romance languages. He fought in the war and by late 1918 was a newspaper reporter in Leipzig especially covering leftist political parties. He voted Democratic (Deutsche Demokratische Partei), the party most eager to ally with the SPD from the right, and a very suitable party for non-Nationalist academics. He described a political meeting:

Lipinski, the Independent, who recently spoke against the National Assembly at the Berlin national conference [of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils] spoke for his party. . . . Lipinski is a common little man, looks like a trade worker. He spoke, or rather shrieked, in choppy words sounding like an over-excited tailor. . . . He assailed the traitorous Dependent Socialists who do not demand more, like the national liberals. He defended the Independents, though one scarcely sees how or with what right, against the charges of Bolshevism and Terror. (Klemperer 1996a, Entry of 29 November 1918, vol. 1, p. 11)

The far right found the SPD and USPD similar. But, quite contrary to what Weyl might seem to suggest about USPD moderation, they found the SPD and USPD identical with the Communists. A 1921 pamphlet used terms familiar since the Revolution:

Anyone who still thinks German (*deutsch denkt*) will renounce, indeed must renounce, Marxism. Anyone who does not think German or is completely biased, will think international Marxism through to the end and will attempt to carry it out, that is they will join the Third (Moscow) International. [Most USPD members will do so] and I welcome this clarification. It ends the deceptive Independent party tactics. (Anonymous 1921, 1)

To summarize: Nationalists considered all Marxists "unGerman" dupes or agents for Moscow. The conservative student Schnath, the liberal newsman Klemperer, and the SPD minister Noske agreed the USPD was Bolshevik. The USPD member Prager felt too much of it was, while he said even the non-Bolsheviks in the party wanted

a temporary dictatorship of the proletariat. By late 1919 the KPD claimed that most USPD members followed Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Many Germans considered the split of the KPD from the USPD a sham with both parties masks for Soviet Bolshevism.

6. Göttingen 1919

On 19 January 1919 Germany elected a National Assembly. In Göttingen, as in Germany overall, the SPD got 37 per cent of the vote, outpolling its two closest competitors combined, the Democrats and the Center Party. The half-dozen leading parties all did about as well in Göttingen as they did nationally, except for the USPD which got 7 per cent nationally, and 0.7 per cent in Göttingen. They got 143 votes in Göttingen, where they had 146 members (Saldern 1973, 397–8). No Göttinger mistook it for the triumphant SPD.

Early March 1919 was a period of general strike and armed confrontation in Berlin with some 1200 workers and protesting soldiers killed and 1600 arrested. They were nearly as often killed as arrested. The USPD met in the midst of this, March 2–6, united against government violence and especially against “the strong man Noske [who hopes] soon to give the Revolution its deathblow.” But the right and left wings split over the Councils. The right called for “development (*Ausbau*) of the system of Workers’ Councils and establishing it within the constitution.” The left called for all power to the Councils, meaning “dictatorship of the proletariat . . . [in] the form we find laid down in the conception of the Russian Soviet Republic.” The right wing won so the “Short-term Demands of the USPD” were more moderate. But note well what was moderate at this time and place: dissolution of the State Army (*Reichswehr*) in favor of a People’s Army (*Volkswehr*) of class conscious workers, immediate nationalization of heavy industry, and other socialist measures led by the “inclusion of the Council System into the constitution.” Moderation meant they did not call for a dictatorship of the proletariat or all power to the Councils (quotations of party documents in Engelmann and Naumann 1993, 105, 108, 108–9, 112).

At the same time, on 5 March, most of Göttingen’s 2500 students crowded into the city park so that Schnath wrote that “surely many participants had to turn back”:

The discussion took a dramatic turn of the most political kind when student Baade came forward. He identified himself as a former member of the Essen Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council and he spoke so skillfully and persuasively of his former activity that his time (5 minutes) was twice extended by consensus of the assembly. Based on his experience he found the world Revolution approaching with deadly certainty, so that all armed resistance to it was hopeless. As proof he said every use of bloody force against the Spartacists had only increased the radical element. . . . [He said that] the cancer of Bolshevism eats ever deeper into the body of the people thanks to untiring propaganda. . . . Thus he held any participation of Youth in this war of desperation amounted to hara kiri of the intelligentsia. . . . Then came Dr. Stavenhagen. . . . who also found the situation very serious but not so hopeless. . . . He believed, based on authoritative sources, that only the successful suppression of the latest Spartakus putsch in Berlin had prevented the

proclamation of a [Workers' and Soldiers'] Council Republic. One must be ever ready to face the approaching Council Congress and unceasing subversion by the Independents (USPD). (Schnath 1976, 198–99)

Schnath was inspired. Within three weeks he overcame his medical disability and joined a Freikorps. During this time he heard the report by Ackermann and Courant described in the section on Courant below.⁴

As thousands were killed in strikes, assassinations, and the expulsion of the last Councils, the USPD grew dramatically. By March 1919 it had some 300,000 members, and by December 700,000, peaking around October 1920 with about 900,000 (Feuchtwanger 1995, 79, 103). The Göttingen USPD tripled from 146 members to 450 by the end of 1919. They multiplied their popular support there by a factor of 17. That is, in June 1920 the USPD got 2,500 votes in Göttingen, second to the MSPD's 4,500 (Saldern 1973, 396–97).

In November 1919 for the first time the USPD called for a dictatorship of the proletariat, and unanimously approved it in the "Action Program" (Engelmann and Naumann 1993, 131). There was a huge debate over joining Lenin's Third International which finally resulted only in calls to defend the Soviet Union. In the June 1920 Reichstag election the USPD got 18 per cent of the vote nationally, a close second to the MSPD's 22 per cent. The three major parties to their right each got about 15 per cent, and the KPD 2 per cent (Feuchtwanger 1995, 306). The SPD loss would quickly prove more permanent than the USPD gain.

One USPD faction split to join the KPD in 1921. They brought perhaps 300,000 members, nearly half the USPD membership at the time, overwhelming the estimated 80,000 KPD members (Engelmann and Naumann 1993, 193). They took half of the USPD vote with them while the other half evaporated, so in the 1922 Reichstag election the USPD fell below 1 per cent nationally, the KPD rose to 12 per cent, and the SPD fell slightly to 21 per cent. USPD voters turning to the SPD were less than the SPD lost to other parties. Most of the remaining USPD leadership merged into the SPD.

7. Richard Courant

Richard Courant is sometimes called a Göttingen radical. As a locally prominent SPD member he was unusually leftist in his university milieu but neither he nor his colleagues would have called him radical. With 44 per cent of German voters supporting either the SPD or the USPD in January 1919, he was not notably leftist in the national context.

⁴ The *Einwohnerwehren* or Citizen Militias were more bourgeois than the Freikorps but still largely rightist. The Majority Social Democrats were divided between opposing the Militias, and joining them to keep them from going too far right. Independents were barred. There was no exclusion of rightists but among other measures against leftists the Army Ministry declared that "arming supporters of the USPD is not allowed under any circumstances, even if they meet all the stated requirements" (Kolb 1962, 391).

Courant later summarized his position on the Revolution, saying he acted to “prevent disturbances,” and that by late 1918 he felt “the Social Democratic Party under men like Noske was the only remaining bulwark against Bolshevism.”⁵ These claims were true, except that in 1918–1919 Courant criticized Noske for provoking violence.

When the Revolution began Courant was a Lieutenant in the Army stationed a short distance from Göttingen. He was elected President of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council in the small town of Ilsenburg. He wrote to Hilbert:

Even in our little Ilsenburg, with me as President of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council, it is hard to make anything workable from the competing forces of dilettantism, hate, mistrust, good will, conceit, and idealism, and in general to prevent major disturbances and disruption. . . . I see no enthusiasm for the new order among most soldiers. They take it as an unalterable fact, just as they took the old command relations. The only thing the great mass of soldiers cares about is to get home as soon as possible and be spared all war and unrest. This state of mind means the soldiers’ natural moderating influence on politics grows less and less, because the more radical and more active minority, which stays around for strictly political business, can easily gain control at least for a time.⁶

There was nothing unusual in Courant’s perspective. At one point the Göttingen Soldiers’ Council kept apart from the Workers’ Council because “the Workers’ Council was a political matter. We as soldiers wanted to assure our distance from politics” (Popplow 1976, 214). But it was neither a radical perspective nor the USPD perspective.

Courant suggested to Hilbert that, with the government in disarray and wide open to petitioners of all kinds, this was a good time to ask Berlin for university reforms: “for example, department committees for deciding appointments” rather than having the whole philosophy faculty decide on every hiring.⁷

Only one comment on socialist measures has come to us in Courant’s publications, his correspondence with Hilbert, or in the newspaper coverage of 1919. He agreed with a speech by Eduard Bernstein saying “For him the ‘achievements of the Revolution’

⁵ An official letter from Courant to Weyl as Director of the Göttingen Mathematical Institute, dated 18 May 1933 (quoted in Dahms and Halfmann 1988, 80).

⁶ “Schon in den kleinen Ilsenburger Verhältnissen, wo ich ausserdem selber Vorsitzender des Arbeiter- und Soldatenrates bin, ist es schwer, aus dem auseinanderstrebenden Kräften von Dilettantismus, Gehässigkeit, Misträuen, und gutem Willen, Eitelkeit, und Idealismus irgend ein aktionsfähiges Gebilde zu machen und zu verhindern, dass über all schwere Störungen und Beunruhigung eintritt. . . . Bei dem Gros der Soldaten konnte ich keine sonderlich Begeisterung über die Neuordnung der Dinge wahrnehmen. Sie nehmen sie ebenso als eine unabänderliche Tatsache hin, wie ehemals den alten Zustand mit dem Vorgesetztenverhältnis. Das einzige, was für die grosse Masse der Soldaten wirklich von bestimmendem Interesse ist, das ist der Wunsch, so bald wie möglich nach Hause zu kommen und endlich mal von jeder Art Krieg und Unruhe verschont zu sein. Diese Gesinnung führt entscheiden dazu, dass der mässige Einfluss, den die Soldaten auf politische Entwicklung naturgemäss haben würden, mehr und mehr zurücktritt; die aktivere und radikalere Minorität, welche für die eigentliche politische Betätigung zurück bleibt, kann leicht wenigstens zeitweise die Oberhand gewinnen.” Courant to Hilbert, dated 23.11.18, in the *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*.

⁷ “Fachausschüsse für die Entscheidung der Stellenbesetzung z.B.” *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*.

were merely to demolish the old system. He wants the rule of law returned as soon as there is any way to do it. That means a National Assembly very soon, and until then no decisive socialist measures.”⁸ Courant went on to write: “Spartacists, Independents, and Majority Socialists are enemy camps, but the last two are really divided mostly by tactics, temperament, personal conflicts, and their past.”⁹ Actually Spartacists at that time were a faction of the Independents, but an enemy camp to Bernstein’s faction.

In January 1919 Courant worked for the SPD in the National Assembly election. At a large rally on 5 January he said the SPD had done all it could to prevent the Revolution and to moderate it. By this time he linked the USPD with Spartakus: “The Revolution was thus not made by the Social Democracy, and indeed not by anyone at all, not even by the Independents and Spartacists, who overestimate themselves boasting of it. Rather it came as a kind of natural event.”¹⁰ The *Göttinger Zeitung* of 15 January 1919, shortly before the election, reported another meeting where Courant spoke, facing disruption by Nationalist students (McLarty 2001).

On 18 March 1919 Courant and one Walter Ackermann (not Hilbert’s student, the logician Wilhelm Ackermann) made a joint report at a student meeting. This was after the exciting student gathering of 5 March described above, and during the time Schnath was preparing to join a Freikorps. Schnath says these known socialists got on the agenda “explicitly against the will of the majority.” They spoke of their fact-finding trip to Berlin for the Society of Freedom-minded Academics. So far as Schnath’s report goes, Ackermann did the talking but Courant presumably agreed. They said news of the situation in Berlin was wildly exaggerated, and the government was lying about it. They warned against using troops to fight workers. They said, in Schnath’s words:

The imposition of class justice, and even more the widely ridiculed administration of it, are the most decisive failures of Noske’s gun-barrel politics, and have greatly increased the membership of Spartakus. The speaker also wanted to distinguish Spartakus sharply in every respect from Russian Bolshevism. [The majority of the students rejected the report as] expressing word for word the Independents’ interests. (Schnath 1976, 201)

Schnath does not say the speakers mentioned the USPD. He says they denied Spartakus was Bolshevik and the students found this was in the interest of the USPD.

⁸ “Für ihn sind die ‘Errungenschaften der Revolution’ lediglich die Zertrümmerung des alten Systems und er wünscht, dass so bald wie irgend möglich wieder Rechtszustände in Deutschland herrschen, das heisst bald Nationalversammlung und bis dahin keine einschneidenden sozialistischen Massnahmen.” *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*.

⁹ “Spartakusleute, Unabhängige, und Mehrheitssozialdemokratie sind drei feindliche Gruppen, die letzten beiden aber eigentlich mehr nur durch taktische Gesichtspunkte, durch Temperament, durch persönlichen Streit und durch die Vergangenheit getrennt” *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*.

¹⁰ “Die Revolution ist also nicht durch die Sozialdemokratie und überhaupt von niemandem gemacht worden, auch nicht von den Unabhängigen und den Spartakisten, die sich in Selbstüberschätzung dessen rühmen, sondern sie ist gekommen wie ein elementares Naturereignis.” *Göttinger Zeitung* article “Sozial Demokratische Versammlung” 7 January 1919.

So Courant criticized Noske but remained with the SPD. He was no radical. By 1919 he linked the USPD with Spartakus as at least would-be dangerous radicals. He defended both from the charge of Bolshevism, but with small success.

8. Taste and character

Despite her support from Hilbert, then the world's leading mathematician, and from Weyl, Noether never drew a regular University salary. University opposition to women is much studied (see especially Tollmien 1990; Tollmien 1991; Abele, Neunzert et al. 2001). Her Jewish family background also counted against her notwithstanding that her father Max Noether (1844–1921) was a famous mathematics professor at Erlangen.

Anti-Semitism had less effect on Göttingen mathematics from 1900 into the 1920s than in the University as a whole or in other universities (Rowe 1986). But mathematics was only one part of the philosophical faculty and anti-Semites could oppose Jewish women especially. Mathematician Gerhard Kowalewski (1876–1950) supported women for faculty positions when he was Dean of the Philosophical Faculty of the Technische Hochschule allied to the German University of Prague around 1919. He proudly claimed a relation by marriage to the mathematician he called Sonja Kowalewski, today usually called Sophia Kovaleskaia (Sofia Kovalevsky) (1850–1891) (Kowalewski 1950, 168). When he tried to put a certain woman on the faculty, he was sharply told “the first woman dozent at the German University must not be named Moscheles” (ibid., 264). And anti-Semitism was often allied with anti-leftism. Speaking in Moscow, Alexandroff said:

In fact the opposition of influential members of the university's reactionary circles was provoked not so much by the fact that Noether was a woman as by her well known extreme radical political convictions . . . [and] by the fact that she was a Jew. . . . She did not hide her sympathies towards our country and its governmental and social organization, despite the fact that the manifestation of these sympathies seemed both outrageous and in poor taste to most of those in European academic circles. . . . This trait was such a bright one of Noether's character and it cast such an imprint on her whole personality, that to be silent about it would be to tendentiously distort her whole image as a scholar and as a human being. (Alexandroff 1981, 107)

Emmy Noether did not join the USPD to oppose the war. She joined in the bloody strike year of 1919 – the year the USPD first called for a “dictatorship of the proletariat” (*Diktatur des Proletariats*), the year they tripled their Göttingen membership, and multiplied their share of Göttingen voters by a factor of nearly 20. This was no youthful radicalism. She was 37 years old. Nor was it academic fashion. Few USPD supporters were from the University. A sample of 52 identifiable USPD members in Göttingen in January 1919, when the total membership was 146, found no students or academics (Saldern 1973, 397–8).

Exactly one other Göttingen academic is known to have joined the USPD and he was also a Hilbert associate. Hilbert brought the philosopher Leonard Nelson (1882–1927) to Göttingen, against the will of the philosophers there, to explore philosophic issues around axiomatic mathematics (see Peckhaus 1990).¹¹ As an expression of his philosophy Nelson organized the Internationale Jugend-Bund which, among other things, was meant to unite the socialist left. So it sent members into all the leftist parties. Nelson was briefly in the USPD in 1918–1919, and left it without joining any other party, while other people he sent into the USPD eventually went into the KPD (Link 1964, 65–66). His unique political theory was no part of the German party spectrum.

When the USPD split in 1922 Noether went to the SPD but quit it two years later. In sum she was not a Bolshevik but was not afraid to be called one. She was a radical well to the left of the SPD, and of Courant. She spent half a year in Moscow in 1928–29 where Alexandroff says:

She quickly fell in with our Moscow ways, both in mathematics and in everyday life. She lived in a modest room in the dormitory at the Crimean Bridge and generally walked to the University. She was very interested in our way of life, and in particular the life of the Soviet youth, especially the students. (Alexandroff 1981, 109)

Göttingers found that “Upon her return she was all admiration and enthusiasm for her stay in Moscow, which prompted some spiteful people to remark ‘Emmy, of course, with her nearsightedness hasn’t noticed a thing’” (Dick 1981, 62–63). Perhaps these people had themselves not noticed the privation and political violence Noether and others lived with in Göttingen.

In 1931 Noether was one of 80 professors – including her brother Fritz, Albert Einstein, and mathematicians Max Dehn, Hans Hahn, and Hans Rademacher – who signed a letter on behalf of the statistician Emil Gumbel. Gumbel had been promoted to the same rank as Noether, that is *ausserordentlicher* Professor without pay or privileges. Rightists tried to remove Gumbel largely because he had statistically documented the extent of political assassination in Germany and judicial tolerance of right-wing violence. The letter appeared in the newsletter of the German League for Human Rights, in an article on reactionary student groups, specifying the National Socialists and “the brutality of uniformed radicals.” It complained of:

the answer by leaders of the University teachers union to the arrogant letter [against Gumbel], based on misleading allegations, by the so-called German Students (Deutschen Studentenschaft) . . . the teacher’s union has not represented the spirit of the whole Academic professoriate, but made itself the mouthpiece for the politically intolerant, and culturally very inopportune ideas of a special group. (Article “Die Hochschulreaktion,” *Menschenrechte* 15 July 1931, 99–108)

¹¹ Peckhaus also discusses, among others, mathematician Kurt Grelling, a Social Democrat and newspaper writer who was at the political rally with Courant, described in the *Göttinger Zeitung* of 15 January 1919.

The German League for Human Rights, Deutsche Liga für Menschenrechte (DLfM), was founded in 1919 as the German branch of the Ligue pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen, itself founded by Dreyfus supporters. It was a middle class liberal group claiming 350 members in 1930, and 830 in the rising urgency of 1931. The newsletter *Menschenrechte* was fond of quoting and discussing Albert Einstein, Käthe Kollwitz, and Erich Maria Remarque. The DLfM would organize letter campaigns by writers for writers, by lawyers for lawyers, and so on, like the professors' letter for Gumbel. Before it was banned in 1933, the DLfM spent years opposing "emergency legislation" and anti-Semitism, and publicizing Nazi murders and terrorism. It had pro- and anti-Soviet members and participated in an antifascist congress in 1929 sponsored by the KPD. It was re-founded after the war as a branch of the International League for Human Rights (see Fricke 1983, 749–59).

The mathematician Saunders Mac Lane (b. 1909) left a fellowship in Chicago in 1931 for doctoral work in Göttingen, which he finished in 1933 as Nazi laws dismantled mathematics there. He attended lectures by Noether. He later coauthored the first textbook in English on her style of algebra (Birkhoff and Mac Lane 1941). He and Samuel Eilenberg created category theory which systematized and transformed her methods (Koreuber and Grosse-Rhode 1998). He, like many others, used to say that Göttingen mathematicians ignored politics up to 1933, and hardly knew anything was going on. But he recently re-read his letters to his mother from there, and while it is no surprise that a young American intent on his education would later misremember the events, in the letters he finds that from the time he arrived in 1931 "the people I knew were concerned by these issues and often had liberal or left leaning sympathies, but I recall no one who correctly foresaw the future" (Mac Lane 1995, 1135).

Alexandroff was better oriented to European politics than the newly arrived American, and closer to Noether. He later said of 1932: "the atmosphere in Göttingen, as in the whole of Germany, was one of alarm; there was a feeling that something strange and evil was going on. Crowds of Hitler Youth were already going around the streets with their songs. It was clear that a coup was coming" (Alexandroff 1981, 168).

Noether surely saw as clearly as Victor Klemperer did, "how day by day naked violence, denial of rights, the most horrible hypocrisy, completely unconcealed barbarity, are declared the law" (Klemperer 1996b, p. 11, entry of 17 March 1933). She must have compared this time to the 1918 Revolution as often as he did (Klemperer 1996b, e.g. pp. 8, 9, 11). In this atmosphere she let leftist students meet in her rooms (Dick 1981, 80). When books were stolen from the mathematics reading room in 1933, authorities decided Communists had taken them, and so Noether's rooms were searched "because she had once lectured on education in the Soviet Union" (Schappacher 1998, 17 of the MS mentioned on page 523n, not in the "stark gekürtze" published version).

Her university Kurator (chief financial and legal officer) wrote: As to politics, from the revolution of 1918 to today Fr. Noether has had a Marxist stand. And while I think it possible that her political position is more theoretical than committed and practical, I am

also convinced she has such strong sympathy for the Marxist worldview and politics that she can not be expected to enter unreservedly into the national state. With all due regard for the scientific appraisals of Fr. Noether, I find myself in no position to speak in favor of her. (Quoted in Tollmien 1990, 206, and in Schappacher 1998, 530)

In the most precise speech, “Marxist” meant SPD and precluded “Communist” but the right often denied there was a real difference. It is unlikely that the Kurator intended any detailed distinction. Obviously this statement would get Noether removed. Around this time, Noether “was literally driven out of one of the Göttingen pensions (where she lived and ate) by the demands of student leaders in the pension who did not want to live under the same roof with ‘a Marxist leaning Jewess’” (Alexandroff 1981, 107).¹²

Another famous story is usually told to show Noether’s political innocence but I draw the opposite conclusion:

During those tumultuous days Emmy Noether kept mathematics before all else. . . . So it was on one occasion in 1933 when the Noether group gathered in her apartment to discuss the preparations of a lecture by Hasse on class field theory. . . . To the surprise of others attending, one student (Ernst Witt, 1911–1991) of whom Emmy Noether was particularly fond took part in the meeting wearing an SA [Storm Trooper] uniform. It is remembered that Emmy Noether was not visibly disturbed. In fact, when the incident was recalled a few weeks later in a conversation with van der Waerden, she laughed about it. (Kimberling 1981, 29)

Recall Noether always laughed at injustice against herself. Then look at the personnel. Helmut Hasse (1898–1979) and Bartel van der Waerden (1903–1996) were her good friends. Hasse tried to save her job, and van der Waerden took some risk publishing her obituary in Germany in 1935. Yet Hasse was a conservative who, while objecting to some Nazi policies, fervently supported their government.

He later explained his 1930s support for the National Socialists, and his continuing postwar resentment against criticism of Hitler, by saying “I approved with all my heart and soul of Hitler’s endeavors to remove the injustices done to Germany by [the Versailles] treaty” (Segal 1980, 47, quoting a 1975 interview by Constance Reid). This was a common position at the time not only in Germany but also in Germanophile circles in Holland, England, and the United States (see the fuller account in Segal 2003, 124–67).

¹² Note that the Kurator’s report alludes to praise of Noether’s mathematics and makes no effort to condemn it as “Jewish.” Campaigns to condemn Jewish mathematics began only after Noether left Germany. Late in 1933 Hugo Dingler (1881–1954) identified Klein as the source of Jewish domination in mathematics and alleged that Klein had Jewish ancestry (Rowe 1986). In 1934 Ludwig Bieberbach became the chief exponent of “German” mathematics and, contradicting Dingler, credited Klein with correctly identifying “German” versus “Jewish” mathematics (see Mehrtens 1987; Mehrtens 1990; Segal 2003). Klein had indeed written of German and Jewish types in mathematics, but took none of this as invidious, and insisted that all types of mathematics should be represented in a department (Tobies 1987).

Van der Waerden probably supported the Nazi government as well. He took a job at Leipzig when the Jewish faculty were removed, and he remained after the German invasion of Holland. He kept his Dutch citizenship, which “exposed him to much hostile treatment from the Nazi regime” (Frei 1993, 6). But with his reputation he could have had a job outside Germany.¹³

Noether was undisturbed because she was unsurprised. Witt was hardly secretive about being a Nazi and Noether was hardly startled by his clothes. Compare set theorist Abraham Fraenkel (1891–1965) calling Noether a “parlor pink (Salonkommunistin)” (Fraenkel 1967, 159). That should mean she was a communist in the safety of her parlor. It is fatuous when there was a Storm Trooper in her parlor.

She was among the first to be expelled from the university (25 April 1933, pursuant to the law of 7 April) and she soon took a position in the United States at Bryn Mawr. Her brother Fritz (1884–1941) was a professor of mathematics at the Technische Hochschule in Breslau. With his war record he could not be dismissed as a Jew but he was dismissed for his politics, a year after Emmy because he was less prominent. The charges against him were “100 per cent Jewish. . . . Signed the appeal for Gumbel, League for Human Rights!, and attitude opposed to the National movement” (Schlote 1991, 35).

These are all things he shared with Emmy. He took a fairly good position in Tomsk, the oldest University in Siberia. She returned to Germany in 1934 to see him before he left. The trip convinced her to ship the last of her things to the United States (Taussky-Todd 1981, 86). In 1937 he was arrested in Siberia as a German spy on falsified evidence plus the inescapable fact of being German. He was held until 1941, then shot, and the killing was kept secret for decades despite international efforts to learn his fate (Schlote 1991). Emmy died in 1935, in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, a few days after surgery.

9. Weyl’s eulogy

Weyl’s eulogy of Noether is the most graceful possible, and perhaps more graceful than true. He opens with a verse of Edna St. Vincent Millay and remarks that Max Noether once met Nietzsche in the Upper Engadin valley of Switzerland.¹⁴ He says of the young Emmy “there was nothing rebellious in her nature; she was willing to

¹³ The only published political statements by van der Waerden and his wife concern others. She said of their war years, “We often spoke with Litt and Gadamer, who were philosophers, about the Nazi period and how it would go. They were no Nazis.” He said Gadamer used late wartime lectures on Plato to condemn dictatorship: “There were certainly Nazi students attending, but they did not understand”; and she added “They understood nothing anyway” (quoted in van der Waerden 1994, 139–40).

¹⁴ Nietzsche enjoyed the educated and cosmopolitan company where he took meals in the Hotel Alpenrose in Sils Maria, including “occasional conversations with a Mathematics Professor from Erlangen, Noether, an intelligent Jew” (Nietzsche to Overbeck 30 August 1887, quoted in Nietzsche 1984). Perhaps the 5-year-old Emmy was among those who made him avoid the normal dinner hour: “the room is hot, too crowded (ca. 100 people, many children), noisy” according to Nietzsche’s letter to his mother dated 3 August 1887 (Raabe 1994, 42).

accept conditions as they were” (quoted in Weyl 1935, 430). He depicts her as stolid and unimpassioned:

She was a one-sided being who was thrown out of balance by the overweight of her mathematical talent. Essential aspects of human life remained underdeveloped in her, among them, I suppose, the erotic, which, if we are to believe the poets, is for many of us the strongest source of emotions, raptures, desires, sorrows, and conflicts. (Ibid., 443)

And again, more fully than it was quoted above:

During the wild time after the Revolution she did not keep aloof from the political excitement, she sided more or less with the Social Democrats. . . . In later years Emmy Noether took no part in matters political. She always remained, however, a committed pacifist. (Ibid., 431–32)

Compare Weyl’s deep ambivalence about Noether’s mathematics. He knew its value and he responded in a serious way:

When I was called permanently to Göttingen in 1930 I earnestly tried to obtain from the Ministerium a better position for her, because I was ashamed to occupy such a preferred position beside her whom I knew to be my superior in many respects. (Ibid., 432)

This was not false modesty, nor any modesty at all, but neither did he consider her simply his superior. He carefully describes his judgment. He quotes an earlier talk, from 1931, where he had said:

I should not pass over in silence that today the feeling is beginning to spread that the fertility of these abstracting methods is approaching exhaustion. . . . I think that the mathematical substance in the formalizing of which we have trained ourselves during the last decades become gradually exhausted. And so I foresee that the generation now rising will have a hard time in mathematics. (Ibid., 438)

The prediction was never checked. That generation had a hard time for quite other reasons. The point for us is that Weyl honestly feared Noether’s influence would damage mathematics in the long run. He goes on to say in the eulogy:

Emmy Noether protested against that: and indeed she could point to the fact that just during the last years the axiomatic method had disclosed in her hands new, concrete, profound problems by the application of non-commutative algebra upon commutative fields and their number theory, and had shown the way to their solution. (Ibid., 439)

He did not retract his long-term concerns. Yet he was wrong so far as any evidence today can show. Noether’s group theoretic methods went much farther than anyone could possibly have imagined in 1935, most of that after World War II. They are still expanding today notably in the cohomology theories used in many branches of mathematics.

Weyl was a passionately physical, geometric thinker. He could not feel Noether's algebra so vividly. Later he would joke: "In these days the angel of topology and the devil of abstract algebra fight for the soul of each individual mathematical domain" (Weyl 1939, 500). He spoke of Noether with the best of will, with real fondness and the highest personal regard, but he had to work with his own values, and these were very different from hers. He stresses a point they had in common when he says:

It is not quite easy to evoke before an American audience a true picture of that state of German life in which Emmy Noether grew up in Erlangen; maybe the present generation in Germany is still more remote from it. The great stability of Burgher life was accentuated by the fact that Noether (and Gordan too) were settled at one university for so long an uninterrupted period. (Weyl 1935, 429)

The reference is to Emmy's father Max Noether, and her professor Paul Gordan. Max Noether taught at Erlangen for 44 years.

Weyl was deeply attached to his own small town upbringing and to his image of the gentle cultured life of that time. But he became a professor at the Zürich Technische Hochschule in 1913, at the age of 28, and he spent the war years and the years of the German Revolution at that comfortable distance (see Reid 1986, *passim*). While Noether was 5 years older than him, she lived much more the life of what Weyl calls "the present generation in Germany" than he did. She passed the war, the Revolution, the Republic, and Hitler's rise to power in privatdozent poverty in Göttingen student quarters.

Alexandroff demurs from parts of Weyl's eulogy. He chides: True enough, Weyl said in his eulogy that "the Graces hardly stood by her cradle," and that is correct, if one is thinking of the well known heaviness of her figure. But in the very same lines Weyl speaks of her not only as a great mathematician but also as a magnificent woman. And she was that (Alexandroff 1981, 110). He rejects Weyl's fear that Noether's mathematics will run out, and he goes farther to reject Weyl's basic idea that it is derivative from more concrete mathematics:

This connection of all great mathematics, even the most abstract, with real life, was something that Noether felt intensely, with all her nature as a great scientist and a person who was alive and not embalmed in some abstract scheme. For her, mathematics was always knowledge of the world, never a game with meaningless symbols, and she warmly protested when real knowledge was claimed only for representatives of those mathematical fields directly related to applications. (Alexandroff 1981, 104)

As to politics, Alexandroff has Weyl in view when he objects to silencing Noether's radicalism as tendentious distortion of her character. Certainly Weyl never meant to distort. But, like many of the middle class in Weimar Germany, he simply could not believe any decent person stood left of the Majority Social Democrats. He and "even the most politically insightful of my Swiss friends, in early 1930, saw a threat to Germany

only from the Communists, not from the Nazis” (Weyl 1955, 650). He had to adjust Noether’s image to one he could respect. He made her “more or less” a Social Democrat.

He is most moving when he tells of spring and summer 1933 as he and she and others prepared to leave Germany:

I have a particularly vivid recollection of those months. Emmy Noether, her courage, her frankness, her unconcern for her own fate, her conciliatory spirit, were in the midst of all the hatred and meanness, despair and sorrow surrounding us, a moral solace. (Weyl 1935, 434–35)

We must accept what he saw of her actions. We need not accept what he thought of her thoughts. He says poetically and with the strongest feeling “she did not believe in evil, indeed it never entered her mind that it could play a role among men” (Weyl 1935, 444). Yet, surely against Weyl’s intention, this makes her out to be psychotic in the clinical sense of losing contact with daily lived reality. It is an elegant and even poetic misinterpretation of an inelegant hard-lived truth: At age 51, a radical since the German Revolution, believing in the Soviet Union, Emmy Noether took the long view. She never thought evil could win.

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