

Shawn Kofman  
Hist 133B  
Prof Marcuse

HIST 133B Source Exploration: A Libel Suit in Weimar Germany

Source: Arnold Brecht on Matthias Erzberger's Libel Suit against Karl Helfferich in 1920

(Retrospective Account, 1966)

[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3831](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3831)

Source of English translation: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 177.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884-1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 298-99. [Original Source: Karl Helfferich, *Fort mit Erzberger*. Berlin: Scherl 1919, pp. 81-83.]

Background:

The author of the document, Arnold Brecht (1884-1977), was a substantial political figure in several different departments of the Weimar Government, experiencing much of the intricacies of German politics. Serving positions as a political scientist, civil servant, and a judge in the government, gave him a wide perspective of the German system of rule under which he lived. Towards the end of his career in government in the late 1920's when he began publicly speaking out against the Nazi party, he decided to flee to the United States where he would continue his successful career as a political scientist. During the next several decades, he would go on to write several books including autobiographies, such as *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An*

Shawn Kofman

Hist 133B

Prof Marcuse

*Autobiography*. In this particular autobiography, he dedicates a portion to his experience of the libel suit that occurred between the major political figures of Matthias Erzberger and Karl Helfferich. Originally published in 1970 when he had already established his life as an American citizen, Brecht comments on the intricacies and crucial aspects of the libel case, and more importantly the implications that came as a result of the case verdict. The reason for Brecht's opinion on historical moments such as this libel suit is because of his lived experiences and firsthand knowledge during this time. "Professor Brecht depicts in detail the social milieu of pre-war Germany and the political decisions—internal and external—of a country based before the world. He is able to write from firsthand knowledge of Hitler, Chancellor Max von Baden, President Friedrich Ebert, Matthias Erzberger, Gustav Stresemann, Walter Rathenau, and many others."<sup>1</sup>

Karl Helfferich (1872-1924):

Karl Helfferich was a German economist and politician, serving as Secretary of the Treasury and Vice-Chancellor during World War I under the German Empire. A key figure in managing Germany's war economy, he later joined the German National People's Party (DNVP)<sup>2</sup> and became known for his conservative and nationalist views, especially opposing the Treaty of Versailles. Helfferich's political stance made him a contentious figure in the early Weimar Republic. Most crucially, he was a prominent and outspoken critic of both Matthias Erzberger,

---

<sup>1</sup> "Hardcover." Princeton University. Accessed March 2024.

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/ebook/9781400867455/political-education-of-arnold-brecht>.

<sup>2</sup> WILLIAMSON, JOHN G. *Karl Helfferich, 1872-1924: Economist, Financier, Politician*. Princeton University Press, 1971. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1bnp>.

Shawn Kofman

Hist 133B

Prof Marcuse

and his policies in regards to Germany's treaties' and position on the global stage post World War

1.

Matthias Erzberger (1875-1921):

Matthias Erzberger was a German politician from the Centre Party, known for his advocacy for peace during World War I. He led the German armistice commission, negotiating the Armistice of 1918 that ended the war. Post-war, Erzberger served as Minister of Finance in the Weimar Republic, where he implemented significant tax reforms. His stance and reforms made him controversial and a target for nationalist extremists. Due to his signing and advocating for several different peace policies at the end of the first world war, such as the Armistice and his known advocating for the republican-democratic system, Erzberger became the target of many public attacks from the Weimar Conservative right, and was ultimately assassinated in 1921 by members of the right-wing Organisation Consul.<sup>3</sup>

Matthias Erzbergers Libel Suit against Karl Helfferich

Erzberger would suffer several public attacks on his character for months, such as Helfferich's publication of a pamphlet in a popular conservative newspaper "*Kreuzzeitung*" titled "Fort Mit Erzberger"<sup>4</sup> (Away with Erzberger). He accused Erzberger of financial improprieties, such as his financial decisions to use war bonds instead of taxes during the war, and questioned

---

<sup>3</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Matthias Erzberger." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 29, 2024.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthias-Erzberger>.

<sup>4</sup> "Karl Helfferich: 'Fort Mit Erzberger!', 1919 - Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek." Startseite, n.d.

<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/2UV26DMWGIPF43U6IRZHGXG46SGIKBI4?lang=de>.

Shawn Kofman

Hist 133B

Prof Marcuse

his patriotism, particularly focusing on Erzberger's role in the armistice negotiations, which Helfferich and his nationalist supporters viewed as a betrayal of Germany. The court proceedings attracted extensive media attention and public interest, serving as a forum for the broader debate over Germany's war guilt, the Treaty of Versailles, and the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic. The case concluded with a partial victory for Erzberger; however, the court's decision did little to quell the political tensions or restore his reputation fully. Legally, Erzberger did win the case. The court in the end found that Helfferich was guilty of libel, however, the only retribution to him was to pay a fine that was inarguably laughable considering the grandiosity of his actions.<sup>5</sup> After the conclusion of the trial, Erzberger would not be out of the fire yet. After pressure from his own party, he was forced to resign his position as Finance Minister. In the eyes of the public, support had fully rallied behind Helfferich, portraying the sway of the political climate during this tumultuous time period. Unfortunately, tensions continued to rise against Erzberger, until he was assassinated by two individuals who were directly tied to the Organization Consul and subsequently the conservative right-wing.<sup>6</sup>

Helfferich's trial became so widespread that news of it had even reached the interest of the United States. In my research, I found an article printed by the New York Times on January 22, 1920, detailing the first day of the trial. "**Helfferich Assails Him at Opening of Minister's**

### **Libel Suit.**

---

<sup>5</sup> Wikisource contributors, "1922 Encyclopædia Britannica/Erzberger, Matthias," *Wikisource*, [https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=1922\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\\_Britannica/Erzberger,\\_Matthias&oldid=13645535](https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=1922_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Erzberger,_Matthias&oldid=13645535) (accessed March, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> "The Assassination of Matthias Erzberger, Signatory of the Compiègne Armistice and Versailles Treaty." *Roads to the Great War*, 2023. <http://roadstothegreatwar-ww1.blogspot.com/2023/06/the-assassination-of-matthias-erzberger.html>.

Shawn Kofman  
Hist 133B  
Prof Marcuse

BERLIN, Jan. 20.—Acrimonious clashes between litigants and attorneys marked the opening of the trial of the libel case of Mathias Erzberger, Minister of Finance, against Dr. Karl Helfferich, former Vice Chancellor, today.”<sup>7</sup>

Helfferich unwaveringly berated Erzberger in his book “Fort Mit Erzberger”:

“This is Herr Erzberger, whose name will nevertheless always be connected irrevocably with Germany’s misery and Germany’s disgrace!

“This is Herr Erzberger who, if not finally stopped, will lead the German nation [ . . . ] to total destruction.

“There is, therefore, only one salvation for the German people. The country must be filled everywhere with the irresistible cry: ‘Away with Erzberger!’ (*Fort mit Erzberger!*)”<sup>8</sup>



A Photo of Helfferich outside of the court during his libel suit with Erzberger<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1920/01/22/103196347.html?pageNumber=3>

<sup>8</sup> [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3831](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3831)

<sup>9</sup>

<https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/noartistknown/karl-helfferich-in-front-of-the-court-in-berlin-moa-bit-1920-b-w-photo/black-and-white-photograph/asset/3015585>

## Bibliography

Mannheimer General-anzeiger. 1916-1924 1922. Accessed March 2024.

<https://druckschriften-digital.marchivum.de/download/pdf/262442.pdf>.

“Karl Helfferich: ‘Fort Mit Erzberger!’, 1919 - Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek.” Startseite.

Accessed March 2024.

<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/2UV26DMWGIPF43U6IRZHXG46SGIKBII4?lang=de>.

- Document Relevance: This is the original pamphlet that Helfferich printed in the popular conservative newspaper, that set the wheels in motion for Erzberger bringing the suit against him. The pamphlet was roughly 92 pages long, consisting mostly of Helfferich berating Erzberger’s political decisions, as well as his morality, character, and affliction towards the future of the German Empire.

“Wants Erzberger Ousted.; Helfferich Assails Him at Opening of Minister’s Libel Suit.”

The New York Times, 1920. Accessed March 2024.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1920/01/22/103196347.html?pageNumber=3>.

- Document Relevance: This was a very interesting article to find when researching about the libel suit, as I did not think that there would have been any documentation of it outside of Germany. However, this article published in English by the New York Times on the first day of the trial thoroughly discounts

Shawn Kofman  
Hist 133B  
Prof Marcuse

that. Despite the publication of this article, I was not able to find any others from the New York Times, or any other American publications depicting the libel suit.

“Image of Karl Helfferich in Front of the Court in Berlin Moabit,.” Image of Karl Helfferich in front of the court in Berlin Moabit,. Accessed March 2024.  
<https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/noartistknown/karl-helfferich-in-front-of-the-court-in-berlin-moabit-1920-b-w-photo/black-and-white-photograph/asset/3015585>.

Document Relevance: This document is an image that was taken by a photographer on Helfferich as he stepped outside of the courthouse after concluding a day in court of his trial. The importance of the photo puts a face to one of the names in the trial, as well as shows just how big of a spectacle this was during the time. The few photos that are available all depict a substantial crowd of people outside the courthouse showing their interest.

WILLIAMSON, JOHN G. *Karl Helfferich, 1872-1924: Economist, Financier, Politician*. Princeton University Press, 1971. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1bnp>.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Arnold Brecht." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 16, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arnold-Brecht>.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Matthias Erzberger." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 29, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthias-Erzberger>.

Shawn Kofman  
Hist 133B  
Prof Marcuse