

University of Wisconsin –Eau Claire

Department of History

A Liberated Voice:

Tony Sender's Autobiography and the German Left's Discourse of "The Woman Question"  
during the Interwar Period

Amanda Niedfeldt

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Instructing Professor: Dr. Lang

Cooperating Professor: Dr. Sanislo

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## CONTENTS

Chapter

ABSTRACT.....	i
INTRODUCTION.....	1
ONE        Sender's Attraction to Socialism	6
TWO        Sender among Socialist Feminist Women	10
THREE     Sender's Self-Representation	15
FOUR      The Distance Between Promise and Reality	21
CONCLUSION.....	25
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	26

## ABSTRACT

The following paper discusses the autobiography of Tony Sender, an active female politician in the Weimar government in Germany between World War I and World War II. The autobiography entitled *Tony Sender: The Autobiography of a German Rebel*, focuses on Sender's participation in the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) (SPD). After placing Sender in the larger socialist political scene of the interwar period, the paper argues that Sender's self-representation as an equal active socialist contradicts other female roles offered to women at the time and suggest that lingering patriarchal structures limited women's activity in the Germany's new democratic society. The article serves as further support for recent research into the limitations male-dominated political activity placed on early 20<sup>th</sup> century German women, despite their constitutional equality.

## INTRODUCTION

The economic changes caused by the Industrial Revolution transformed societies and governments across the globe. In Western countries, several similar effects occurred: labor exploitation, the advent of worker's unions, strenuous child labor, and women's movement into the public sphere. All of these sudden changes inspired individuals to question and redefine their values and societal structures. A major question that confronted all societies was "The Woman Question": What should women's role be in this rapidly changing and demanding world?<sup>1</sup> In several countries, from the United States, to Great Britain, to Germany, the question was hotly debated in newspapers, magazines, government institutions, and private homes. Everyone had an opinion and few people agreed. In Germany, this issue was quickly politicized.

The political changes of Germany that accompanied the advent of "The Woman Question," made the question a key concern of the country's various political parties. In the four strenuous years of World War I, the longstanding Imperial German government went bankrupt and was overthrown by popular uprising. The overthrow offered Germans an opportunity to recreate their country and transpired in the creation of a representative social democracy. The new Weimar Republic, as the government was called, radically changed Germany's government. Among the many changes that followed the formation of the new government was women's suffrage and political equality.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information please consult, Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), especially pages 1-10. Renate Pore, *A Conflict of Interest: Women in German Social Democracy, 1919-1933*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 42-42; Werner Thonnessen, *The Emancipation of Women: The Rise and Decline of the Women's Movement in German Social Democracy, 1863-1933*, Trans. Joris de Bres, (Bristol: Pluto Press, 1973), 108-110. Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*, trans. Stuart Mckinnon-Evans, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

The declaration of women's suffrage in 1918 forced political parties to take a stance on the woman question in order to appeal to and provide a role for their new constituency. Germany's diverse political parties, ranging from the nationalistic German People's Party (*Deutsche Volkspartei*) (DVP) to the far left internationalist Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*) (KPD), fashioned a variety of feminine types and roles to attract women to their parties. These images took various forms, from the attentive young mother to the suffering, overworked wife, and appeared on posters, in advertisements, and in political rhetoric throughout the nation. Women, new to the political world, played a large role in creating and promoting potential roles for women in Germany's newly formed democracy. Tony Sender, a long-time member and leading female politician of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) (SPD) during the Weimar government, partook in this political discourse, formulating a role of her own.

Born in 1881, in Biebrich am Rhein, Weisbaden, in Southwest Germany, Sender grew up in a traditional, middle-class, 19<sup>th</sup> Century German home. When she was fifteen years old she left her family to attend secondary school (*Handelshochschule*) and work in Frankfurt. She joined the SPD in 1906 and lived in France for four years until she was forced to return to Germany at the outbreak of World War I. When she returned to Germany in 1914, she began working for the Frankfurt Workers' Council and protested the war vehemently. In 1917, she helped found the Independent Socialist Democratic Party (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) (USPD). During the years of the Weimar Republic she continued her work on the Worker's Council until 1918 when she began an editorial career, which associated her with several political newspapers until 1933. From 1920-1933, she also served on the Reichstag continuously, first for the USPD and after its absorption for the SPD. When Hitler came to

power, Sender fled Germany eventually settling in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Upon her move to America in 1939, Sender wrote and published her autobiography entitled *Tony Sender: The Autobiography of a German Rebel*. Sender's autobiography traces her life from 1888 to 1939, but primarily focuses on her political and social efforts during the interwar period. Her self-presentation as an activist socialist woman provides insight into how one woman navigated through the political discourse of the Weimar government. Sender's role construction, when considered within and against the feminine images she encountered on a daily basis, suggests that Germany's political environment did not provide women the equal treatment and opportunities it declared on paper, and that lingering patriarchal gender roles limited women's creation of equal feminine roles.

Mainly relegated to women's committees, women were assigned the task of winning women's votes and played a central role in the creation of party propaganda in the form of posters, pamphlets, and educational materials. Through these appeals women articulated what they thought women wanted to hear and in lieu defined new roles for women. However, women's creations were limited by each party's language, ideology, and "the opposition or blank indifference they encountered from party men".<sup>3</sup> Sender's autobiography, after she was disassociated with the party, contrasts with these propaganda materials and provides insight on how parties limited women's identity formation. In her book, *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany*, Julia Sneeringer explores major parties' attempts to appeal to and mobilize female voters in order to understand the effect women's political

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<sup>2</sup> Information gathered from Sender's autobiography and her papers.

<sup>3</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 8.

participation had on the debate of women's role in a new society.<sup>4</sup> Sneeringer articulates that even though many parties appealed to separate groups of women based on religion and social classes, all parties approached women in a similar way: they each assumed that women were politically different from men, distinguished a set of specific "women's issues", and created a women's committee (*Frauenauschusse*) dedicated to educating and recruiting women and advising on women's issues and concerns.<sup>5</sup> Sender's narrative, created outside of the party's separate sphere ideology, contrasts with Sneeringer's sources and her self-representation as an equal, active participant opposes the passive roles Sneeringer discovered. This contrast serves as further evidence for Sneeringer's declaration that male party members limited women's creation of new feminine constructs.

The feminine ideals parties promoted provided women with a variety of models to shape themselves after. In Sender's self-representation, she does not reject all of the left's promoted female roles, but utilizes some to her advantage and rejects others. In his article, "The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman: Gender and Politics in European Communism, 1917-1950", Eric D. Weitz focuses specifically on feminine models of the left to explore how communist promises of equality between men and women interacted and were limited by the politics of gender in Germany, France, and Italy during this uncertain time period.<sup>6</sup> In his discussion, Weitz articulates that "in this environment in which gender had become destabilized

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<sup>4</sup> Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany*, (Chapel Hill, Conn.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 2-10.

<sup>6</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 9. Sender was not a member of the KPD, but as a member of two far left parties she was exposed to the same rhetoric and female types. The far left parties of the Weimar government - the SPD, the short lived USPD, and KPD - competed for the same constituency, often worked towards the same goals, and throughout the period, exchanged many members. As a result, all three parties reached out to women in a similar way; promoting their equal incorporation in all areas of political life, while relegating them to separate organizations and presenting them with passive ideal roles. For more information on the division of the SPD please see David W. Morgan's *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), particularly chapter 1.

and women's roles in particular subject to intense political debate," the construction of an ideal woman was quite varied.<sup>7</sup> While the communist party promoted one ideal male, the heroic laborer and fighter, several female roles were created throughout the Weimar period. Weitz identifies three main ideals that the party promoted: the New Woman, the exploited and oppressed mother, and the joyous and loving mother.<sup>8</sup> In her self-creation, Sender utilizes the independence and activity of the New Woman, but rejects the oppression and pacification of the domestic mother and wife. Sender's self-representation does not prescribe to or adopt many of the prescriptions that her party had to offer, which "rendered women in a passive rather than active fashion."<sup>9</sup> Instead, Sender rejects society's and her party's role prescriptions to the periphery and identifies herself as an equal in all facets of economic and political life; identifying herself not as a female socialist, but as an active socialist.

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Weitz, "The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman: Gender and Politics in European Communism: 1917-1950," in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed., Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 314.

<sup>8</sup> Weitz, "The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman", 314-315.

<sup>9</sup> Weitz, "The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman", 350.

## CHAPTER ONE: SENDER'S ATTRACTION TO SOCIALISM

Out of all of Germany's political parties, "it was the socialist movement that offered the strongest and longest-sustained assistance to women."<sup>10</sup> A revolutionary party, the socialists were the first party to articulate a political theory that included women's rights and women's active party participation.<sup>11</sup> This inspired several women to join the SPD, but particularly intrigued women who were looking for active participation. In her book, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885-1917*, Jean H. Quataert explains that activist women were drawn to the SPD because in the party they could: join a community that would accept and support lifestyles that were different from traditional norms, secure an opportunity to fight for free development and women's equality, and take on an active political role.<sup>12</sup> In her autobiography, Sender suggests that she joined the party for all of these reasons.

Sender represents her childhood as a struggle with a stifling middle-class upbringing and states that she was drawn to the socialist movement by her desire "to organize a world in which one can really live one's ideals."<sup>13</sup> Sender grew up in a traditional middle-class household that restricted her development and attempted to dictate her behavior. In her narrative she describes both of her parents as authoritative, severe, and "demanding absolute obedience" and refers to

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<sup>10</sup> Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women: European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. (New York: Elsevier North-Holland, 1978). 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women*, 1-2. From its inception, socialism acknowledged need of and provided a path for women's emancipation. Early socialists like Charles Fourier, Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx all commented on women's position and attempted to explain its cause and provide a way to emancipation. In 1879 August Bebel, the leading and most highly respected German Social Democrat, gathered these ideas in his book *Woman Under Socialism*. In *Woman Under Socialism*, Bebel declared women were in a position of double oppression, articulating that in order for them to reach equality they would have to obtain economic and sexual emancipation. Both of these, he suggested, would be achieved through the realization of socialism. This socialist doctrine drew several women, including Sender, to socialism.

<sup>12</sup> Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists*, 85-90.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Sender, *Tony Sender: The Autobiography of a German Rebel*, (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939), 28-9. Many other activist, socialist women – Lily Braun, Marie Juchacz, Clara Zetkin, Emma Ihrer- were motivated to join the socialist party by similar early life experiences. For more information please consult, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885-1917* by Jean H. Quataert, especially chapters two and three.

her childhood days as “...gloomy days of submission and obedience.”<sup>14</sup> For Sender, who had a fiercely independent spirit, this was torture. She experienced the same stifling environment in school where “very strict discipline prevailed” and there was not time for questions.<sup>15</sup> Frustrated by this environment Sender left her family when she was only thirteen to attend commercial school in Frankfurt. Reflecting on this decision she stated that she did not care what field she was going into, all that “counted was that within two years [she would] no longer be dependent upon” her family; this idea seemed like heaven.<sup>16</sup> Like all socialist women Sender believed that her economic independence was the key to her emancipation. Sender’s new home and schooling did not bring her the satisfaction she had hoped, but, she did find a community that would shape the rest of her life.

Throughout her early years Sender led a double life hiding her true desires and eventually her political activity from her parents. She was able to sustain this life through the supportive community she found in the labor and socialist movements. In Frankfurt, Sender went to school and then secured her first job.<sup>17</sup> At the same time she read voraciously, exploring several philosophies, ideologies, and political doctrines to try to find a place in the world. In her autobiography Sender articulates that she was not alone in her efforts, but was joined by “a group of middle-class girls and boys who desired to work, not because of economic need, but from a wish to become useful human beings.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout these years, she consistently uses an inclusive “we” to describe her studies and activities and with these friends she joins the labor movement and begins to attend socialist meetings.<sup>19</sup> She directly states her newfound sense of

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<sup>14</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 17

<sup>18</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 18-28.

belonging when she moves to France and joins their Socialist party. She says, “Now at last I felt free. For the first time in my life I felt at home!”<sup>20</sup> In the socialist community, Sender was finally surrounded by people who shared her views and aspirations and, as a result, felt that she belonged. Beyond a sense of community, Sender also found fulfillment through her active participation in the party.

Throughout her narrative, Sender reiterates that she wanted to “... become a worthy member of society.”<sup>21</sup> Like several middle-class women that joined the socialist movement, she wanted to be an active, contributing member of her community, not passively gain from her family’s wealth as many did in the middle-class. Sender makes her active nature clear from her earliest political interaction. Sender’s first contact with political activity was when she began to explore different political parties. As she attended meetings she states that she was constantly tempted to take part in the discussions, but always stopped herself because of her young age and internalized notion that women were not supposed to speak in public.<sup>22</sup> However, by the time Sender joined her first political group, the office workers’ union in Frankfurt, she overcame her fear and immediately became an active member: recruiting new members, monitoring firms, and participating in local demonstrations.<sup>23</sup> In her narrative, Sender continues to display her active determination when she joins the socialist movement. Reflecting on her first socialist meeting, Sender states that she was not satisfied with the proceedings or content of the meetings. However, she resolved to “brush aside” her timid hesitation and “help to do things the way [she thought] they should be done.”<sup>24</sup> Soon after, Sender became an active party member.

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<sup>20</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 15 and 18.

<sup>22</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 15-27.

<sup>24</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 29.

Sender maintained an active role in the socialist party from her earliest involvement until she fled Germany in 1933. Her organizational and leadership activity began when she moved to France. In France she became vice-chairman of her section, began a socialist women's organization, and made campaign speeches.<sup>25</sup> During World War I she returned to Germany and lead anti-war efforts in her region, first through the National Federation of Proletarian Freethinkers and, after 1917, through the USPD. Connected with these efforts, she helped orchestrate the 1918 October Revolution and afterwards became the secretary of the Frankfurt Worker's Council.<sup>26</sup> During the Weimar government, Sender's party participation became her fulltime job. She served on the Frankfurt city council, edited three socialist and labor publications, campaigned for the party, and served in the Reichstag.<sup>27</sup> However, though Sender's motivation to join the socialist movement and the active role she pursued were very similar to other active socialist women, Sender's identification as a woman within the party ranks was quite different from the role that was created and advertised by her fellow socialists, both male and female.

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<sup>25</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 37-8, 46-50.

<sup>26</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 95-108 and 114.

<sup>27</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 122-26, 160-62, 187, 262-64. Sender edited the daily Frankfurt USPD newspaper, the national Shop Council's magazine, and *Frauenwelt*, the socialist movement's women's publication. Sender was a member of the Reichstag from 1920-1933. During her service she was usually involved with economics and foreign affairs.

## CHAPTER TWO: SENDER AMONG ACTIVE SOCIALIST FEMINISTS

Sender, a member of the SPD and the USPD, was drawn to socialism and found the same benefits in active party participation as many of her contemporaries. However, the issues she was involved with and the way she viewed her position within the party contrasted with roles that were created by and presented to other socialist women and women of the left.

Women were drawn to socialism because it offered a clear path to an egalitarian society. However, the nature of the socialist road to sexual equality confronted women with an immediate question: how can you be a feminist and a socialist? In socialist theory, women's emancipation came after the social revolution. This construction made women's liberation a second-class issue and created a conflict for women who desired improvements in their immediate lives.<sup>28</sup> Quataert explains, that this forced socialist feminist women to reconcile their "dual and difficult commitment to both sexual and social liberation"; often prioritizing their socialist and feminist goals respective to their life concerns.<sup>29</sup> In her autobiography, Sender never clearly articulates her socialist or feminist beliefs. However, her relationship with the socialist and the women's movement suggest that her devotion to both causes was equal, but she chose to express her socialism through her political alliance and her feminism through her everyday actions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women*, Introduction.

<sup>29</sup> Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women*, 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Pore, *A Conflict of Interest*, 11-16. In Germany there were two main women's movements, the first was the Union of German Women's Organization (BDF), the liberal bourgeois movement, and the second was the Socialist German women's movement. These two movements differed in a key way. The BDF was an independent organization composed mainly of middle-class women, while the Socialist movement was composed of working-class women and was organized under the SPD. These class and allegiance differences resulted in differing views of women's emancipation. The BDF believed emancipation would come through women's equal political and social rights and tended to focus on reform within the women's sphere, while the Socialist women focused on economic emancipation through equality in the work force. For more information on the differences of and interaction between the two women's movements please see Ute Frevert's *Women in German History* and Renate Pore's introduction to *A Conflict of Interest*.

Socialist women faced a dual battle: they fought “with men for the general cause and together for the goals of feminism.”<sup>31</sup> In general, socialist women believed that if they could achieve equal rights and opportunity now they could further aid men in achieving the revolution, which would emancipate the entire working class.<sup>32</sup> However, while all socialist women believed that their advancement was secondary to the socialist revolution, they were committed to their socialist and feminist ideals in various increments and reconciled their clashing alliances in several ways.<sup>33</sup> A main signifier of women’s prioritization of socialist and feminist goals was their party alliance after the party split of 1917.

During World War I, the main body of the socialist movement, the SPD, whole-heartedly joined the nationalist effort and supported the war. This action upset a large number of socialist party members who felt this action was against the ideals and commitments of socialism.<sup>34</sup> The socialists that disagreed with the SPD’s new platform left for either the newly formed USPD or the KPD. The faction that left the SPD, which included Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Louise Zeitz, and Tony Sender, rallied against the war and advocated for social revolution and

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<sup>31</sup> Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women*, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women*, 115, Pore, *A Conflict of Interest*, 13-14, and Ute Frevert. *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*. Trans. by Stuart McKinnon-Evans. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>33</sup> Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists*, 55-83. In this section, Quataert discusses how eight leading socialist feminists coalesced their socialist and feminist goals.

<sup>34</sup> World War I provided both the SPD with an opportunity to move from the periphery of German society into a legitimate, mainstream role. When Emperor William II declared war in 1914, he also requested a political truce between conflicting parties to create a united national war effort. The vast majority of political parties responded to this call, including the SPD who previous to WWI had ideologically been against the prevention of war. This was a move that both strengthened and divided the party. In the call to nationalism and the subsequent failure of the Imperial government, the SPD found their chance to become a leading party in German politics. They achieved this by giving its full support to the national war effort and moving from a revolutionary to reformist platform. Once the SPD attained a place in the current government structure, the party no longer believed it had to overthrow the government to create change; instead it believed it could work within the system and eventually reform democracy into socialism. This character change was the main element that created the schism of the SPD. For more information on the division of the SPD please see David W. Morgan’s *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), particularly chapter 1.

internationalism, two main goals of socialism they believed the SPD had abandoned.<sup>35</sup> While all socialist women, whether members of the SPD or USPD, remained devoted first to socialism and secondly to women's concerns, the party divide also reflected a distinct divide between socialist feminists. Those who allied with the USPD retained a devotion to revolution through the class struggle, while SPD women transformed their focus to immediate reform efforts within democracy that would further the eventual overthrow of capitalism.<sup>36</sup> Sender, who allied with the USPD, was devoted to the revolutionary cause of socialism.

The fact that Sender sided with the USPD in the split of 1917 points to two of her primary socialist beliefs: she was committed to the socialist revolution and believed in internationalism over nationalism. In her narrative, she emphasizes these concerns by including her reaction to the SPD's support of the war credits and her anti-war activity. When the SPD approved the war credits Sender's first reaction was "to give up [her] membership in the party."<sup>37</sup> She initially dropped the idea because she did not want to be an isolationist, but when the USPD formed she readily joined, commenting that "the Majority Socialists (the right wing) were not prepared for revolutionary changes and were perfectly satisfied to have only parliamentary government."<sup>38</sup> During World War I, Sender led the anti-war effort in Western Germany through the Proletarian Freethinkers and eventually the USPD. She also attended the International Antiwar conference in Bern in 1915. In her narrative, Sender expresses that she believed what she was doing was "destined to serve the best interests of the people" and that her "convictions [were] right and in the end would be victorious."<sup>39</sup> Propelled by this notion, Sender believed it

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<sup>35</sup> Frevert, *Women in German History*, 163-5.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the division of the women's movement please consult. Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists*, 209-227 and Pore, *A Conflict of Interest*, 27-47.

<sup>37</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 124.

<sup>39</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 82-84.

was her duty to risk her sleep, job, liberty, and life for the cause.<sup>40</sup> Truly committed to the socialist doctrine, Sender's beliefs placed her in a very specific community of active, socialist women including, Rosa Luxembour, Clara Zetkin, and Louise Zeitz, but while in her narrative she expresses her admiration of them, her self-representation suggests that she disagreed with them on women's role in the new German society.

Both Zetkin and Zeitz were key leaders of the socialist women's movement in the SPD, USPD, and even the KPD. In 1920, Zetkin drafted "Guidelines for the Communist Women's Movement." In these guidelines, Zetkin "asserted the full equality of men and women, called for the recognition of the social function of motherhood, and demanded equal pay for equal work and wide-ranging social protection measures."<sup>41</sup> These measures, adopted by the KPD and similar to those Zetkin drafted for the SPD, pushed for women's equal participation in social and political life, though they maintained that men and women were different and therefore had different concerns.<sup>42</sup> Sender's life and self-representation suggest that while she respected these women's efforts to advance women's rights and protection, she did not agree that men and women were inherently different and actually had a fervent feminist desire for sexual equality.

Sender's life and self-representation suggest that her opinion about gendered labor and societal roles was closer to Luxembour, who "regarded her sex as irrelevant", than Zetkin and Zeitz who believed women's political activity should be guided by their unique maternal instincts.<sup>43</sup> While the great majority of active women on the left followed Zetkin and worked in the "women's domain" of social policy, Sender differentiated herself by working solely with economics and foreign affairs. From her first involvement in business and political office Sender

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<sup>40</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Weitz, "The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman", 311.

<sup>42</sup> Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Luxembour, qtd. in Boxer and Quataert, *Socialist Women*, 124.

worked in masculine fields. During her first job in Frankfurt she worked her way out of a secretarial position to a higher position not normally occupied by women. Then in Paris, she pursued her special interests and studied law and economics, a typically male area of study in Germany. Later, when she began her political career she refused to be on any boards dealing with social policy and followed her passion of economics both in Frankfurt and in the Reichstag, serving as a Worker's Council leader, a key speaker, and a member of the economics, foreign affairs, military, and agricultural committees.<sup>44</sup> These occupational choices indicate that Sender believed she was equal to any man and should not be regulated to the women's sphere of activity that several political parties promoted. Sender's feminist stance, not represented by any of her party's feminine types, lead her to create a new activist socialist identity in her autobiography.

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<sup>44</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 136, 244-45, and 268-69.

### CHAPTER THREE: SENDER AS A NEW WOMAN

As Weitz articulates, the German left promoted three main ideals of femininity: the New Woman, the exploited and oppressed mother, and the joyous and loving mother.<sup>45</sup> All of these constructions “rendered women in a passive rather than active fashion” or relegated them to a specifically female sphere of labor.<sup>46</sup> While many women identified and promoted these roles, such as Zetkin and Zeitz, in her autobiography, Sender rejects these feminine identities and creates an activist female identity that is her own.

In her autobiography, the type that Sender most closely identifies herself with is the New Woman. The New Woman, most popular in the 1920's, was a model of a single, independent, young woman who was “active, slender, athletic, sexual, and amaternal.”<sup>47</sup> This type of femininity promoted a liberated woman who could partake in various political and social responsibilities. However, the New Woman was not intended to provide women with a permanent liberated identity, but rather, was prescribed to be a transitional identity between girlhood and marriage.<sup>48</sup> All political parties in Weimar embraced the New Woman, but most often invoked her as a threat or unnatural because “all parties believed that women’s highest goal was motherhood” and the New Woman threatened that belief.<sup>49</sup> For example, the SPD and the KPD promoted the New Woman either as future mothers or as “detestable because she was idle and parasitic,” too concerned with fashion and material gain to be dedicated to society and the socialist revolution.<sup>50</sup> The representation the parties adopted was dictated by the current issues

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<sup>45</sup> Weitz, “The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman”, 314-315.

<sup>46</sup> Weitz, “The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman”, 350.

<sup>47</sup> Weitz, “The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman”, 313-314.

<sup>48</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 121-122.

<sup>49</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 16-17 and 151-153.

<sup>50</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 151-153.

being debated and the intended audience. In spite of this contrasting representations, Sender adopted several characteristics of the New Woman in her self-representation.

From the first to the last page of her autobiography Sender presents herself as an independent and liberated woman that is in concert with the New Woman type, but attempts to debunk any stereotypes that would place her as a violent or abrasive revolutionary. Sender begins building her independent nature in her discussion of her youth. Referring to her parent's authoritarian measures, Sender states that she "was ready to be convinced, but never could endure being ordered."<sup>51</sup> Sender did not want to be minimized as a passive entity or blindly follow orders. Instead she viewed herself as an equal human being with an independent will who should be talked to and consulted in decisions instead of demanded to follow orders. In her narrative, she is careful that her independence is not mistaken as an abrasive, brute rebellion, but rather, builds it as a peaceful, egalitarian effort. Instead of opposing her parents and causing turmoil, she leads an inner revolt, avoiding family activities and spending much time on her own.<sup>52</sup> She also does not demonize her parents, but only expresses love and respect for them, blaming their early life experiences as wealthy, orthodox Jews, in Imperial Germany for their authoritarian nature and narrow views. After describing her parents' stifling authoritarian efforts, Sender states that she "...never doubted that [her] mother was aiming only at [their] happiness...and never doubted her good intentions or fathers."<sup>53</sup> Throughout her narrative, Sender continues to build her independent nature, making sure to stipulate that she is not an irrational renegade, but rather, is merely taking the respect and equality she deserves.

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<sup>51</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 10-14.

<sup>53</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 11.

Sender continues to embrace the New Woman ideal of an independent, liberated woman by portraying herself as an autonomous and self-reliant individual throughout her professional and political careers. Sender began to assert her autonomy when she left her parents' home to attend school in Frankfurt. In Frankfurt, she lived in a boarding house and initially was supported by her parents. In her narrative, she expresses that this environment was "hardly much freer than at home" and as a result, decided she needed her economic independence.<sup>54</sup> She solved this dilemma quickly by securing a job and graduating early. However, Sender still felt limited by her family, who constantly tried to persuade her to end her socialist activities and return to a middle-class lifestyle.<sup>55</sup> Feeling the strain of her parent's pressure, Sender resolved that something had to change. As a result, she moves to Paris to obtain her independence without damaging her family's reputation.<sup>56</sup> Expressing her joyous victory, Sender states "how happy I was – the door open at last to real liberty. Paris!"<sup>57</sup> Following her desire for passive resistance and expressing her sincere love for her family, instead of lashing out against her parents and embarrassing them in their society, she removed herself to achieve total independence.

Finally achieving liberation and independence through economic self-reliance and distance from her family's pressure, Sender avoided any potential limitations on her independence throughout her career. While living in Paris, Sender took French literature lessons from a male cousin. When she invited him to her apartment to carry out the lesson her landlady became enraged that she invited a man into the house. Instead of accepting the landlady's demand that no male visitors enter the premise, in her narrative, Sender asserts that "there was

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<sup>54</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 17-31.

<sup>56</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 31.

only one answer – to move out immediately.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Sender avoided any limits on her intellectual and political activities while she was employed at a metal firm in Frankfurt during and after the war.

In her employment, Sender also again presents herself as a faithful, independent woman and not a subversive rebel. During this period Sender was associated with the SPD, worked for the anti-war movement, and also maintained her job at a corporation that supported the war both materially and ideologically. However, in her narrative she articulates that she did not use her position in the firm to better inform her pacifist cause, but rather states that she “resisted every temptation to use for the sake of [her] antiwar activities any knowledge obtained in the execution of [her] business duty.”<sup>59</sup> Sender’s desire to maintain her independence even runs into her party affiliation. In her narrative, Sender articulates that she is put off by party politics, explaining that party loyalty is a “sufficient restriction on one’s free will.”<sup>60</sup> However, Sender joined because she realized that “the well-being of the individual and that of the community [were] interdependent” and the individual needed the community to create a better world.<sup>61</sup>

Sender does not only utilize the independent and liberated characteristics of the New Woman, but also employs her single and amaternal nature. Unlike the majority of socialists though, Sender extended the New Woman’s single status from a brief youthful phase to a lifelong commitment. Sender articulates her stance on familial commitments early in her narrative through a reference to Brand, one of Henrik Ibsen’s characters. In the anecdote Sender includes, Brand leaves his wife and child behind to carry out his political duty. Sender comments that this example gave her faith “later in life, when it sometimes seemed almost impossible to

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<sup>58</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 36.

<sup>61</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 36-7.

reconcile duty and emotion.”<sup>62</sup> By basing her model of dedication on a male sacrifice Sender unsexes the basis of political dedication and enables herself to articulate that her familial sacrifice and dedication are not abnormal for anyone who is truly dedicated to a cause, whether male or female.

Throughout her narrative, Sender continues to suggest that to maintain their independence and be effective political fighters women must refrain from marriage and motherhood. Sender expresses this struggle three times throughout her autobiography when men inquire why she is not married. In each situation, she explains that it is a revolutionary period and “family ties could eventually prevent one from showing all the courage and unselfishness that a great cause requires – especially in the case of a young woman.”<sup>63</sup> To be a revolutionary advocate and maintain full dedication she must make the same sacrifices as Brand. Through her construction of a single, amaternal, active, and independent identity Sender borrows from the New Woman type and rejects any identification with the construction of joyous motherhood. However, Sender also reaches beyond the female types and presents herself as a heroic fighter; a normally masculine type.

Sender continually presents herself as pure devotee to the socialist cause, exemplifying her sacrifice of her time and health to fight for the revolution. Throughout her narrative Sender constantly shows that she works extensive hours. During her school days Sender worked up to twelve hours a day, attended classes, and carried on her political activity. When she returned to

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<sup>62</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 255.

Germany and began her political career she worked twenty hour days to maintain political equality.<sup>64</sup> All of this work leads Sender to have two nervous breakdowns.

Sender's first breakdown occurred just before the Constituent Assembly elections of 1919. She reports that she was so ill that the doctor told her sister that her "family should be prepared for the end."<sup>65</sup> Sender recovers this bout of exhaustion, but ends up having a nervous breakdown two years later. Sender initially collapses right after a meeting and at the urging of her friends and physician visits a sanitarium, but she leaves quickly because she must attend the Vienna International.<sup>66</sup> However, her exhaustion catches up with her and diagnosed with tuberculosis she is forced to retreat to the mountains of Switzerland to recover for about a year. Sender recovers, but five years later in 1927 her tuberculosis returns. At this time, Sender worked in the Reichstag, attended university, and was also editing the worker's union newspaper. So overworked from her professional and political obligations she is forced to return to Switzerland for three months. Sender retained her health for the rest of her career in Germany, but includes this constant imminent threat to establish her sincere and sacrificing commitment to the cause. However, though Sender creates a feminist type that is independent, equal, and active, her identity was not seamlessly accepted within the socialist community. In her narrative Sender expresses that she had to constantly fight to achieve her independent identity, providing evidence for historian's assertion that the New Woman type was "a surface phenomenon" limited by gender stereotypes and sexism.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 130.

<sup>65</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 179-180.

<sup>67</sup> Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 121-122.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE DISTANCE BETWEEN PROMISE AND REALITY

In the midst of the Industrial Revolution and the social changes it inspired, “old social values lived on to retard the realization of new ideals.”<sup>68</sup> In the socialist party this resulted in discrimination against women. While socialist theory dictated women’s emancipation, men within the party were not very willing to share their power. In *Woman Under Socialism*, August Bebel explained this gap, stating that “men gladly accept such a state of things: they are its beneficiaries. It flatters their pride, their vanity, their interest to play the *role* of the stronger and the master; and, like all other rulers, they are, in their *role* of masters, difficult to reach by reason.”<sup>69</sup> Bebel believed that men were too satisfied with their benefits of patriarchy to overturn the system of sexist exploitation and that women would have to fight for their equality on their own. This assertion proved to be correct and caused several troubles for women as they attempted to work for advancement and equality in Weimar Germany.<sup>70</sup>

In Sender’s autobiography, she shows how the distance between socialist theory and reality affected women through her apprehension to actively participate in the party and her articulation of her struggle to reach an equal position. Sender first draws attention to women’s marginalization through her nervousness to address male dominated crowds. When Sender first joined the party she was hesitant to speak at public meetings. Raised in a society that did not accept or promote women’s public speech, Sender realized that if she spoke in public, she would face resistance solely because of her sex. However, with the support of leading male activists she

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<sup>68</sup> Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, eds. *Socialist Women: European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Elsevier North-Holland, 1978), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism.*, trans. Daniel De Leon (New York: New York Labor News Press, 1904), 120-21.

<sup>70</sup> Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism.*, 120-21.

eventually gathered the courage to push these boundaries and continued to through several other avenues of party life.<sup>71</sup>

In her narrative, Sender discusses the resistance she received from male party members as she attempted to create support for women and took on active party roles outside of the feminine sphere. When Sender was in France she took on her first leadership role and attempted, with fellow German Wally Grumbach, to begin a socialist women's organization. In an effort to build the group Sender went to every council in Paris to recruit members. The group achieved limited initial success, but eventually failed. As Sender discusses this event in her narrative she comments on socialist men's hypocrisy in their support of women. Explaining the failure she states that "at that time, in spite of their theory, there were not many feminists among male Socialists."<sup>72</sup> While Sender could get women involved, few male party members had true feminist beliefs and so the group had no solid party support and collapsed. She further articulates men's resistance to women through her experience in public office.

While in public office Sender received resistance from male public servants through marginalization and discrimination. Sender began serving in public office after the October Revolution of 1918 when she was elected to the Frankfurt City Council. Atypical of women, Sender studied and was concerned with economics and foreign policy and did not want or feel that she was qualified to deal with social policy issues. However, while she was on the city council men attempted to marginalize her by regulating her authority to accepted female concerns, such as the Committee for Social Problems and the Board of Education.<sup>73</sup> In response,

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<sup>71</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 29 and 50.

<sup>72</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 48.

<sup>73</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 135. Influenced by popular views of gendered labor, women's party activity was relegated to social and welfare concerns, while men maintained control over economic, political, and international issues. This began from women's first inclusion as equal party members in 1908 and was reinforced by the First World War.

Sender flatly told the men that she “would not do it” because she “was not managing a household” herself and knew nothing about such matters.<sup>74</sup> She reports that the men laughed and allowed her to take on other tasks. Sender is allowed to move outside of women’s concerns, but she must fight to establish and retain that right. She met similar resistance during her 13 years in the Reichstag.

During Sender’s years in the Reichstag, from 1920-1933, she had to fight for equal participation and prove her capabilities, obstacles that her male counterparts did not have to face. When Sender was first elected to the Reichstag it was on the national ticket. She articulates that this was “very unusual for a woman... but helped to make [her] way in the Reichstag easier.”<sup>75</sup> By stating that it made her experience easier she implies that women had a difficult time in the Reichstag. Later in the narrative she directly addresses this issue stating that “...as a woman member of a parliament: A woman must make a greater effort, must show more efficiency than a man in order to be recognized as an equal. Once, however, her ability is recognized and acknowledged, one can forget about difference of sex.”<sup>76</sup> Sender frankly states that women faced sexism even though their party advocated for women’s emancipation. As Sender’s career and self-representation displays, she did not allow herself to be pushed into her designated position as a social and welfare worker, but rather fought against male suppression and pushed into the

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WWI facilitated the transfer of women’s welfare efforts from philanthropy to a legitimate profession, social work. This was officially acknowledged through such efforts as the women’s relief force and the National Women’s Service. While this transfer provided women with access to the male dominated professional role, it also reinforced gender divided labor and limited women’s activity to social welfare concerns. For a more complete discussion of the impact of World War I on women please consult Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*. Trans. Stuart McKinnon-Evans. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), Chapter 13; Renate Pore, *A Conflict of Interest: Women in German Social Democracy*. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1981), Chapter 2.

<sup>74</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 135-6.

<sup>75</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 163.

<sup>76</sup> Sender, *Tony Sender*, 245.

masculine domain. In these efforts she presents herself as dedicated to the socialist revolution as any man.

## CONCLUSION

Sender's attraction to and activity in the socialist movement were not uncommon. However, through her self-representation in her autobiography, it is clear that Sender's self-identification as a political activist within the socialist and feminist movements contrasted with the roles her fellow women and party members promoted. While the political Left promoted domestic, maternal, and secondary female activity, Sender constructed a female identity that was independent, amaternal, and egalitarian. The contrast between the Left's and Sender's representation of femininity speaks to the complex discourse of gender in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did men disagree with women on the role women should take, but women disagreed with each other, even women who came from similar backgrounds and held the same political ideologies. More than this, the resistance Sender encountered provides further proof for Sneeringer's and Weitz's arguments that many members of Weimar's society held onto traditional beliefs and societal constructions of Imperial Germany; lingering connections that not only hampered women, but the entire Weimar Republic's success.

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