

The German revolution

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Looking back it is sometimes hard to realize the panic the European ruling class was in at the end of the First World War. From 1918 to 1924 Workers councils had appeared in Germany, Russia and Hungary, factory committees in Italy, and armed industrial war was being waged in Barcelona. Even in Ireland the War of Independence included a massive radical mass element with the Limerick soviet, workplace occupations a general strike and tens of thousands taking part in May Day demonstrations even in small rural towns. With this in mind it is unsurprising that the British Prime Minister Lloyd George could write to the French Premier Clemenceau saying “The whole existing order is questioned by the masses from one end of Europe to the other”

For many, particularly on the pre-War Marxist left it was widely expected that the German working class would initiate the world revolution. Anarchists as it happened were correct in generally looking to Russia but it was easy to see why many pin pointed Germany to play this role. Germany did indeed see a revolutionary upheaval in these years but as we shall see what many had seen as its strength, its disciplined working class loyal to the SPD turned out to be its major weakness.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was the largest and most influential left organisation in the world before WW1. In 1914 it had one million members and 90 daily papers. It had hundreds of full time officials and a huge range of social and sports clubs. It was said that it was possible to live entirely within the party. The Erfurt program of 1891 on which it was based declared it to be revolutionary with no illusions in parliament. And as the Prussian State had never allowed it into power it had yet to betray this trust. Indeed its members were subject to significant repression, from 1890 – 1912 SPD members were sentenced to a total of 1,244 years in prison.

However the party did little apart from engage in propaganda and education of its members. Despite its revolutionary language it was largely based around winning elections and indeed had led the push in the 1890’s to get the anarchists physically thrown out of the second international on just this issue. There was a low level of industrial struggle in Germany but in any case the party didn’t intervene in such struggles. Self-activity of the working class was never even an issue on the agenda of the SPD or any of the loose oppositions within it. It was firmly leadership based, seeing the introduction of socialism as being the SPD coming to power and legislating on behalf of the workers.

In the period before World War One it vigorously opposed at least in print and at rallies the move towards war. Tens of thousands of German workers at mass SPD meetings voted never to fight their fellow workers of France in the interests of German imperialism. And initially the SPD greeted immediate preparation for war with anti-war demos, there were 27 in Berlin alone. But by 4th August in an atmosphere of national hysteria all the SPD deputies voted to support it. It was not till November/December that SPD deputy Karl Liebknecht voted against war credits, and shortly afterwards he was joined by the SPD deputy (and later anarchist) Otto Ruhle.

The trade union bureaucracy was if anything worse. The unions declared a ‘social truce’ for the period of the war and some elements even speculated about the advantages for German workers in German imperialism winning additional markets for their goods. This capitulation without significant opposition is part of the reason why many of the left came to reject work in the unions completely.

It is important to state that in this the SPD deputies and union bureaucrats were probably being swept along on a genuinely popular wave of German nationalism and jingoism that swept the

German working class in the same way that it swept other European countries. In the early days of the war to take a public stand against it was not only to guarantee popularity but risk attacks by nationalistic mobs. However as elsewhere in Europe as the 'Victory by Christmas' failed to materialize mass enthusiasm for the war was rapidly diminished especially as its cost began to bite not only in terms of lives lost but in real suffering in the cities. By late 1916 the meat ration was 1/3 of the pre war level, and the weekly diet was only 1300 calories well below that required for even easy work. By early 1917 food distribution was in danger of breaking down completely in the cities leading to the period known as the Turnip winter.

The left inside the SPD that opposed the war consisted of little more than handfuls of individuals with no public voice. Because the pre-War left had been obsessed with the Party taking power they remained loyal 'internal oppositions' convinced that there was no political life outside the mass party. This left them without the experience or structures needed when they needed to break with the SPD and its pre-war line. Locally groups of militants did come together leading to several anti-war left groups mostly confined to specific geographical areas and around particular pre-war publications

The war also rapidly undermined the organisations of the left, even of the SPD that supported it. Military law introduced for workers in 1916 and some 66% of SPD members ended up at the front. Union membership halved in the early war years. For the anti-war activists things were far worse as the state conscripted their activists into the army and commonly assigned them to punishment battalions or the most dangerous sections of the front.

Initial nationalist enthusiasm for the war began to fade quite rapidly, in particular when the hope of a quick victory vanished and the economic costs began to be felt. The winter of 1915/16 saw the first bread demonstrations and by December 1915 19 of the SPD deputies were voting against war credits. In the summer of 1916 55,000 Berlin workers struck when Karl Liebknecht was put on trial for his anti-war activity.

Because of the size of the pre-war left some socialists who were conscripted started to develop underground rank and file organisations. These were particularly strong in the fleet, which was confined to port and where the sailors faced pretty miserable conditions while the officers lived in luxury. In June and July of 1917 the sailors started to demand recognition for their committees, this movement was put down, two sailors were executed and total sentences of 360 years hard labour given out to the ringleaders.

1917 also saw the formation of the Independent Social Democrats, who had been expelled from the SDP for their anti-war stance. These were to be the largest of the left groups outside the SDP but were never very revolutionary. More importantly August 1917 saw 200,000 Metal workers strike against cut in bread ration, large-scale strikes were to become common over the next years and in particular under the influence of the Russian revolution they became increasingly radicalized.

In January 1918 250,000 workers went on strike in Vienna and elected workers councils to represent them. There were also mass strikes in Budapest at this time as active opposition to the war spread across Europe.

This encouraged the Spartakus League (a Berlin split from the SDP) to call for a strike in Berlin. This met with some success encouraging 500,000 to strike. The strikes spread outside Berlin and were to see a meeting of over 400 factor delegates in Berlin but the SDP was able to use its influence amongst the workers to defuse the strike. Afterwards the strikes 1 Berlin worker in 10

was sent to the front. Rosa Luxemburg would become the best known of the Spartakus League leaders.

The German High Command strategy in 1918 with Russia out of the war was to bring the war to a swift conclusion by a mass offensive, which would, smash through the allied lines. This failed with considerable losses to the German army. After the collapse of this Summer offensive the military command looked for an end to the war and sought to bring the SPD into government to ensure stability in the post war period.

However the Allied terms were considered too harsh so in a desperate last bid the High Command ordered the mostly undamaged fleet to sea. But the sailor's underground organisations were prepared for this. They responded by electing councils, taking over their ships and the surrounding ports and barracks.

This was the November revolution, which spread rapidly all over the country. By the 8th it had reached Berlin. Mass demonstrations took place with the left seeing an opportunity for revolution. The SDP however succeeded in heading off this movement, although in the process it was forced to proclaim the republic in order to forestall the proclamation of a workers republic.

This period showed the problem that was to continue to dog and eventually defeat the German revolution. The workers looked to 'the left' parties and in particular the SPD for leadership rather than looking to their power and carrying out the transfer of power directly into their organisations. The popular concept of socialism for almost all was limited to getting 'their' party into power. Hence it was easy for SPD to take charge of revolt in region after region. The Spartikists and others did not put forward a radically different strategy; they just sought to have themselves rather than the SDP appointed as the workers representatives.

The 10 November saw the formation of 'revolutionary government' but also a meeting of delegates of workers and soldiers councils. The SDP controlled this by setting up councils itself. It ended up that there were more delegates who were party officials than there were delegates who were workers! 18 of the 24 delegates on the Berlin executive of the Councils were SDP. By mid December this led to power being handed back to the Reichstag.

The situation in 1918 was that the SDP leaders controlled both the government and the congress of councils. The left had significant numbers of members, well into the hundred thousands but not the support of masses who remained loyal to the SDP. In addition the councils were only weakly coordinated and while some were genuine many were creations of the various parties. Some councils in the army were even controlled by the officer core which had decided to was better to try and incorporate army councils by leading them rather than trying to openly oppose them. What was lacking was a strong network of independent councils that could have put forward an alternative to the various schemes for party rule.

In this sort of situation the control of the military was vital to all sides. The left set up the League of Red Soldiers to win the army rank and file over to the side of revolution. The SDP leaders sought to construct forces loyal to its government like the Republican soldier's corp. They were aided in this by foreign capital, which saw them as the best hope of staving off revolution. However while these were based on conservative SDP members who would suppress the left they proved to be opposed to open counter-revolution.

The SDP need a force which could be used to roll back the revolution so in addition they set up the Noske guard, (named after the SDP leader). It was composed of the old officer corp and the units of Storm Troopers (elite assault troops) from the war. However it was to be remembered in history as the Frei Korps and was to become the direct fore runner of the Nazis.

Nov and Dec saw many Spartakist demos in Berlin, in particular daily demos of the Red Soldier League. The Spartakus League had 3000 members at this stage. On Dec 23rd widespread fighting broke out in Berlin. This revealed the government had almost no reliable troops there, a situation similar to the eve of the October revolution in Russia in 1917.

The Spartakus League and the Bremen Left Radicals met to form KPD (German Communist Party) at end of December. Rosa warned the new party that they must win over the masses rather than organise a putsch but she still saw the revolution in terms of the party taking power. Rosa and Levi argued that they should take part in elections to the national assembly but were defeated on this indicating a large number of members were open to a different approach.

The unions were to treble in numbers in the first year of the revolution. Many KPD members wanted to raise the slogan 'out of the unions' but no decision was made on this. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards movement refused to join because of the Spartakus League continued use of putchism.

As we can see politics in the KPD at this stage was very complex, but still focused on seizing power despite some rhetoric to the contrary.

On Jan 4 1919 the Government provoked a crisis by announcing that the revolutionary Eichorn was dismissed as police chief. They wanted to provoke a premature rising. The KPD called a 'peaceful demonstration' which 100,000's attended but a small group stormed the SDP newspaper building and dumped copies of the paper in river.

At a meeting after this the USP, Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and Spartakus League delegates decided it was now possible to overthrow the government. and to put themselves in power. They called a rising. At first things went well and they rapidly controlled the center of Berlin but many on the Revolutionary Committee had acted without the backing of their organisations.

In this situation the committee spent the next day and night debating while 200,000 armed workers waited outside in the freezing streets. No military preparations made except by isolated groups of workers. Again a key weakness was the lack of self-organisation by the workers. In addition many workers and soldiers took neither side, instead calling for 'left unity'. This shows the revolutionary left had not seriously exposed the real role of the SDP leadership in any way.

Perhaps the revolutionary left could have seized power in Berlin if they had acted decisively but even then without workers self activity they could have simply created a second state capitalist regime. As it was workers started to return home, the SPD leaders got organised and even before the Frei Korp entered the city on the 13th the revolutionary forces had largely evaporated. The Frei Korp proceeded to massacre those that remained including, with the support of the SPD paper, Rosa and Liebknecht. The SDP paper 'Vorwärts' was the first to announce that Rosa had been "killed by the people" (16th).

Many Leninists due to their misunderstanding of the October revolution (as a 'planned' event rather than the outcome of the crumbling of support for Kerensky) see the small size and lack of discipline of the KPD as the core weakness. In fact it was lack of self-activity of workers that meant they waited for orders while their leaders debated tactics. The Berlin rising was probably premature but it was also the case at this stage that the government had very little loyal forces.

Elections were called which saw the SDP getting 11.5 million votes (of the 30 million electorate) while the USP only got 2.3 million. The SDP now set about using the Frei Korp to smash the workers councils, which were the only power in many areas. Over the next few months they marched around Germany smashing the Councils. The Frei Korp went from Bremen – Ruhr – Central Germany – Berlin – Ruhr – Central Germany – Munich & Hamburg.

Bremen's council declared itself an independent socialist republic on Jan 10th due to KPD influence but by 21st voted to set up new authority through 'citizens elections' reflecting the lack of support from workers. On 28 Frei Korp attacked Wilmshaven and on 3rd Feb Bremen was attacked fierce fighting followed but without support from the army the workers were defeated.

The Ruhr was dominated by SDP councils, which had used its militia against strikers in Dec. and Jan. leading to some councils being replaced by the left. Plans for the socialisation of mines were being made when in February the Frei Korp arrived and began the killings. This led to the formation of first Ruhr Red army which temporarily halted the Frei Korps but the SDP undermined this Red Army.

Next Frei Korp went to central Germany to smash a general strike. It returned to Berlin in March in the midst of a massive general strike supported by the SPD rank and file. The Frei Korp crushed the pro-SPD forces (with the backing of the SPD leaders) with 1500 to 2000 killed. In April the Frei Korp was in the Ruhr to smash a 800,000 strong strike for the 6-hour day.

The overall picture was of the SDP ensuring until the autumn that the resistance was uncoordinated so that the Frei Korps could dismantle the councils one by one. Throughout this period the revolutionary left continued to grow in numbers.

In Bavaria on 21 Feb the assassination of Eisner led to workers and solders dissolving the parliament and handing power to a council, but as it was mostly SDP dominated it voted to reconvene the parliament as soon as possible. In fact it was March before this was possible. By April discontent had grown and government power collapsed to the point where some anarchists and SDP members proclaimed a soviet republic. This seems to have been putchism and lasted less than a week. In its defense against a coup however a second KPD dominated soviet republic was formed, this time based on armed factory committees. This 2nd one was also doomed as it was isolated to Munich so it seems the KPD's real objection to the first one was that they would not control it. Due to an economic blockade the KPD fast lost support and resigned from the government. On the 1st May the Frei Korp arrived and 600 died in the fighting that followed and 186 executions

Although the KPD grew to 100,000 members in 1919 the USP grew much faster. In October 1919 the KPD leadership though a carefully rigged conference made acceptance of electoralism and the existing unions a condition of membership and then proceeded to expel over 50% of the local organisations. This was part of an international process led by Moscow where local Communist Parties were forced to comply with the Moscow line.

On the 13 March 1920 some of the military organised a putsch under Kapp to take over from the SDP. Most of the military and parties remained neutral but the coup was defeated by a massive general strike. Everywhere workers armed themselves and set up councils but in particular in the Ruhr, central Germany and northern Germany.

Although this was sometimes with the support of the local SDP leadership for the first time it was heavily dependent on self-organisation. In the Ruhr at least its probable that the 200,000 strong FAUD (anarcho-syndicalist organisation) played an important role. I have found no detailed anarchist sources in English on this though and the various Leninist texts only hint at the role the anarchists played!

The Ruhr Red army was 50,000 strong with artillery and forced the Reichweir (German army) to withdraw after five days. This Red army was formed from the base up, which meant it lacked co-ordination initially. This was to prove a disaster later as the Eastern RA negotiated a cease-

fire (and handed over much of its weapons) while the western RA fought on and so provided the excuse to bring the troops in.

The SDP took back power and did their best to end the strike and rehabilitated many of the coup leaders and supporters! They then offered a 'workers government' of the SDP, KPD and the USP. Both the other parties rejected this after some discussion but in a confused fashion, which allowed the SDP back into power without needing to take specific action against the right.

The KPD had little influence in events outside of one or two areas. In Berlin it actually opposed the general strike for the first couple of days. This was in fact the end of the mass period of the revolution, however the KPD was yet to perform two additional tragedies

In April 1920 the KPAD formed with 38,000 members as a left break from the Moscow line of the KPD, this included the council communists. Within 6 months it had lost half this membership. In the summer of 1920 at the urging of the (Moscow based) Third International the left of the USP expelled the right and then merged with the KPD to give it 500,000 members

The March action

In March of 1921 the KPD tried to take advantage of its much greater size when the SPD moved against its central German strongholds. The KPD called for workers everywhere to arm themselves and for a general strike in Central Germany. A KPD guerilla army under Hoelz was briefly active but the police alone managed to crushed this. When the KPD called a general strike only 200,000 responded despite the fact that the KPD supposedly had 400,000 members. In some places the KPD resorted to an 'armed strike' i.e. trying to physically intimidate and prevent workers going to work.

This resulted in many militants being imprisoned, papers banned and half the membership of the KPD leaving. The farcical nature of the rising meant the KPD may simply have been acting on the orders of Moscow. Indeed the KPAD refused to support the March action as it saw it as being designed to take attention away from the Kronstadt rising in Russia. In Kronstadt workers and sailors who were demanding new and free elections to the soviets were brutally crushed by the Russian Red Army at the behest of Lenin and Trotsky.

1923 saw the start of the great economic crisis in Germany and hyperinflation. The French were occupying the Ruhr and the far right was growing in the south. The KPD proposed a united front with the SPD against the violence of the far right but the SPD leadership choose to put their faith in the state. Nevertheless this enabled the KPD to bring its membership up to 220,000 and for it to gain some influence in the factory councils and the unions. In response to the far right the 'Proletarian hundreds' were set up linked to the factory councils but probably under KPD control. Union membership in this period halved.

May, June and July 1923 saw a massive strike wave as inflation bit into workers living standards. This also crippled the SPD's network of full timers and papers as they lost the income needed to pay for them. The KPD began to catch up on the SDP in the union and parliamentary elections. It also recruited another 70,000 members.

By this time the Soviet Union was helping the German army secretly re-arm. The KPD was also coming close to supporting the German nationalists and after June leading figures of the KPD intended to enter into public debate with the Nazis, but the Nazis called off these debates.

The start of August saw a massive and militant strike wave with armed workers dragging the bosses from the factories. In Berlin the union leadership refused to strike so on the 11 Aug some 2000 delegates from the Berlin factory councils met calling a general strike and calling for the downfall of the (Cuno) government. The SPD again saved the day joining a government of national unity including the far right. The strike ended despite efforts by the KPD to keep it going.

At the point the second tragedy starts to unfold. The Moscow leadership, in particular Trotsky, decided the moment was ripe for revolution. He even demanded that a date be set for it to coincide with the anniversary of the Russian revolution! Red Army officers were sent to Germany to help prepare the 'Proletarian hundreds' for the rising.

In September the far right came to control Bavaria and then threatened to march on Berlin. Moscow decided that the threatened advance of the right on Saxony would be used to launch a revolutionary counter offensive. This way they hoped to win over the SPD rank and file. The 3rd International was told defense of the German revolution would soon be a central task.

On Oct 21st, earlier than planned, the army started to enter Saxony. The KPD tried to get a pre-arranged joint delegate conference with the SPD to call for a general strike of all Germany. The KPD' secret plan was to turn this general strike into a revolution but the SPD delegates refused to support this as they said this was the role of the Saxon government (which the KPD had entered).

The KPD thus called off the general strike and with it the revolution except in Hamburg where the party was never told and a few hundred communists seized half the city center police stations. This Hamburg rising marked the end of the revolutionary period in Germany.

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