

100 Years since Germany's November Revolution

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Part 1: War and Revolution

The German bourgeoisie has always had an ambivalent attitude to the November Revolution of 1918. While it certainly showed that the war, the dominance of the military high command and the monarchy had to be ended, at the same time, it was a revolution that stopped halfway. It led to the Weimar Republic and a bourgeois-democratic constitution that neither the country's bourgeoisie, let alone the monarchist reactionaries, nor the revolutionary workers wanted. Rather it was a by-product of a failed social revolution.

No wonder, then, that it was first and foremost the Social Democracy, the SPD, which took over leadership of the revolution and promptly allied itself with the counterrevolution in the name of "saving the republic," that strongly identified with its outcome and presented itself as the sole defender of democracy.

The uprisings of the sailors in Kiel and the soldiers at the front, as well as the demonstrations, strikes and struggles of the workers, which had started in early 1917, were subsequently forced into the straitjacket of the "foundation" of the Weimar Republic. In the social democratic and liberal interpretation, their working class, revolutionary and socialist drives and goals are presented as just the basically hopeless programme of a minority. Against that, we want here to outline briefly the real lessons to be learnt from this episode.

Imperialism, War and the Working Class

The First World War revealed the character of the imperialist epoch. It was the first industrial mass war, the result of the arms race, the race for colonies, and the struggle between monopolies and nation states to control global markets. Millions perished as cannon fodder at the front or were crippled for life while the civilian masses went hungry, even approaching starvation in the last phase of the war. This reality of war, of the emerging misery not only at the front, but above all on the "home front", also showed that this apparently all powerful "military order" was built on sand. While nationalism and chauvinism affected large parts of the European proletariat and the peasantry in 1914, the experience of the war shook and undermined this consciousness.

The Second International (1889-1914) had capitulated to the wave of national chauvinism unleashed in August, 1914. The resolutions of its international congresses in Stuttgart (1907), Copenhagen (1910) and Basel (1912) had repeatedly pledged to take measures against the impending war, but when faced with the catastrophe it was incapable of any action to obstruct it. On the contrary, the leading parties of European and international social democracy became "defenders of the fatherland", active supporters of a "social peace" or union sacrée, sacred union, for the duration of the war.

The interests of the masses and the class struggle in every major section, apart from the Russians and Serbs, were subordinated to the war requirements of their "own" imperialist regime. The opponents of the war, like the Bolsheviks in Russia or the left around Rosa Luxembourg in the German Social Democracy,

SPD, or the Independent Labour Party in Britain, formed a small minority, which was itself divided between revolutionary internationalists on the one hand and pacifist forces or forces seeking reconciliation with the majority social democracy on the other. Imperialism had thus already celebrated a great victory at the beginning of the war, namely the elimination of the International.

As the war dragged on, the repeated offensives brought only huge numbers of casualties. As Britain's naval blockade and Germany's submarine warfare brought hunger to the "home front", the rejection of imperialism and war grew noticeably. Massive production drives on the workforce, the elimination of democratic rights, the drafting of "troublemakers" to the front, were part of the everyday life of the working class. The whole of production was subordinated to the war effort. But the workers increasingly protested and revolted against this, for example, in Berlin there was a mass strike in the arms industry in January 1918. While the living conditions of the working class as well as of the peasants and large parts of the urban petty bourgeoisie deteriorated massively, big capital and big land ownership were able to make ever higher profits.

Poverty

For the overwhelming majority of the population, war meant a daily struggle for bread, coal and wages, while the big landowners and capitalists enriched themselves with overpriced products of ever-poorer quality. Real incomes fell by 40 percent during the war; the average daily calorie intake fell from 3400 at the beginning of the war to 1000 (!) in 1917. At the same time, health and safety regulations were lifted, the working day rose to 14, or even 17, hours. Not only the working class and peasants fell into misery, but also the incomes of the educated middle classes (civil servants, employees) fell considerably.

At the same time, the profits of large corporations increased. The 16 most important steel and mining companies were able to increase their profits by an average of 800% by 1917. "The dividends are rising, the proletarians are falling," Rosa Luxemburg aptly remarked. These developments formed the social point of departure for the proletarian revolt.

Politically, the disillusionment and radicalisation of the masses was finally reflected in a split in the SPD. In 1916, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany, the USPD, emerged after the exclusion of those Social Democratic members of the Reichstag, who refused to approve the war credits. By March 1917, it had about 120,000 members, as compared to about 240,000 around Friedrich Ebert in the SPD.

The "International Group" around Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg was formed in 1914, but remained active in the SPD until 1916. Known as the Spartacus League, the group, along with other "left-wing radicals", provided the pole of the determined, revolutionary opponents of war. The mass vanguard of the class, however, was largely to be found in the USPD, including important leaders of the Kiel Sailors' Uprising and the "Revolutionary Stewards" (Revolutionäre Obleute), who had already initiated strikes in Berlin in January, 1917.

Countering the Revolution

The outbreak of the November Revolution had long been foreshadowed, and not only in the form of mass dissatisfaction and war fatigue among the working population.

In April 1917, a wave of strikes demanded an increase in bread rations. In January 1918, a political mass strike organised by the Revolutionary Stewards, especially in the Berlin armaments factories, shook the country. The latter, although organised under the conditions of illegality, raised not only social but political demands such as an immediate peace without annexations or the lifting of the wartime state of emergency.

Even though this struggle ended in defeat and thousands of fighters were transferred to the front, where many would die, the signs of revolutionary ferment became ever clearer.

At the same time, it was also clear that the German Reich and its allies could not win the war. The January strikes in Austria showed that the allied Habsburg Empire was threatening to implode. Despite the dictated peace of Brest-Litovsk, which meant the occupation of Ukraine by German armies, the Russian Revolution threatened to spread westwards to Europe.

But the Supreme Army Command, the actual centre of power during the war, which used the Kaiser and princes merely as window dressing, and which ultimately also set the agenda for the parliamentary majority of the Progressive Party, the Centre Party and the Social Democrats, wanted to avoid a surrender whatever the cost. By September 1918, however, Erich Ludendorff, the political-strategic head of the army leadership and of the German reaction, had to recognise that defeat could no longer be averted, but was determined to ensure that the "shame" of an armistice and the likely harsh peace conditions of the Allies should be accepted by a civilian government.

The Supreme Army Command and Ludendorff supported, indeed suggested, that the SPD should be invited to form a government which then had the dubious honour of negotiating the Armistice for which it was then unable to avoid taking "responsibility". This then became the basis for the myth of the "stab in the back", according to which the army was undefeated in the field and would have remained so had they not been betrayed by parliamentarians, "civilians" and social democrats, who were then dubbed "the November criminals".

In reality, the SPD pulled the chestnuts out of the fire for German capitalism. It urged Kaiser Wilhelm II to abdicate in order to sell its policy to the masses as a democratic revolution. The main SPD leaders, Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann, were only too aware that not only were the war and the monarchy finished, but that events could also sweep them away as they had swept away the Kaiser and the princes.

The Revolution Spreads

The Wilhelmshaven and Kiel Sailors' Uprising of November 3-11, and the extension of the Revolution to the whole country in just a few days, showed how realistic this fear was. The soldiers were no longer willing to open fire on the masses of demonstrating workers, and the revolution thus conquered the cities. Sailors, soldiers and workers formed councils, Räte, of delegates in imitation of the Russian workers' soviets, of the preceding year.

The SPD leadership around Ebert and Scheidemann were aware that they could only retain control over their own mass base and, at the same time, behead the revolution, if they gave themselves "revolutionary credentials", that is, tried to put themselves at the head of the council movement. The party had to exercise governmental power in the name of the councils - or it threatened to lose its influence. The SPD was thus forced to fight for, and organise, the majority in the workers' and soldiers' councils. Its leaders skillfully manoeuvred the USPD into a coalition in order to have all its measures endorsed by the left. They even invited Karl Liebknecht to participate, but he, of course, refused, knowing full well what such a government was about. In the councils, the SPD relied for their majority on the trade union apparatuses, and the more politically backward soldiers.

Most cities followed the same sequence of events as in the capital, Berlin. The councils took formal power, practically as a committee of the SPD and USPD. Often the workers' councils were nominated by the party executives and then elected by acclamation.

The SPD thus won its first political victories in mid-November 1918. It consolidated its position of power in the elections for the Reich Council Congress, which met on 16 December. Of the 489 delegates, 405 workers' delegates and 84 from soldiers' councils, 288 were members of the SPD, 90 of the USPD, including 10 of the Spartacus League. Neither Liebknecht nor Luxembourg had been elected and both were denied the right to speak.

Without Party and Programme, No victory

The most important difference from the Russian October Revolution was the lack of a mass revolutionary party with a programme for working class power. While the Bolsheviks had undergone a programmatic reorientation in 1917 with Lenin's April Theses, concentrating on the need to win a majority in the councils to the programme of taking power themselves, the situation among the November Revolution councils was completely different.

The sailors from Wilhelmshaven and Kiel in particular formed councils directly after they refused the order to wage a hopeless battle against the British navy at the behest of the admiralty and oriented themselves to the Russian soldiers' councils and their decrees against the officers. The "Central Executive Council" in Berlin under the leadership of the Revolutionary Stewards and USPD, the nationally elected workers' and soldiers' councils and later the soviet republics in Bremen and Munich, were also organisationally oriented on the example of the Russian councils of 1917. But politically they lacked clarity about the role of the councils themselves and the goals of the revolution. Decisively, their leaders lacked the tactics necessary for defeating the SPD and USPD right wing leaders whilst combating the powerful armed forces counterrevolution.

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