

Germany 1918-19: when reformists murdered a revolutionary movement

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Towards the end of the First World War, as the Russian Tsar's armies faced defeat, the workers of St. Petersburg and the city's garrison rose in revolution. Ten months later, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, they had established a republic based on workers' soldiers' and peasants' councils. The Bolsheviks, as they had promised, took Russia out of the war.

The Russian revolution acted as a detonator, setting off revolutionary struggles across Europe in the years that followed. The most important, for its result affected the fate of Russia and all of Europe for decades to follow, was the German Revolution, which began in November 1918.

Strikes

Back in January of that year a huge strike wave hit Germany, by now the German army was victorious over Russia on the eastern front and seemingly on the verge of launching a crushing offensive in the west. Factory shop stewards organised the strikes against economic hardship, but also calling for a rapid end to the fighting. The rank and fellow level organisation was necessary because the leaders of the German trade unions were enforcing a "civil truce" and doing all they could to prevent strikes that would damage the war effort. Backing them to the hilt was the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). The strikes eventually ran out of momentum, and many of the workers delegates were imprisoned or sent into the army or navy.

In the German empire political power and control of the army still lay in the hands of the Prussian landowning aristocracy, the Junkers. At their head, nominally, stood the German Emperor, the Kaiser, with power to appoint the government and command the armed forces. In peacetime, democracy was restricted to elections to an imperial parliament, the Reichstag, elected by universal male suffrage but with very limited powers over the government. After 1916, The Reich was virtually a military dictatorship under Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff who formed the Third Supreme Command.

The big German capitalists who stood to gain from the investment opportunities an expanded German empire would bring had, since 1871, decided there was no need for a fully-fledged democratic state. Quite the contrary they had good reasons to fear it, this was due to the growing power of the workers' movement. The German capitalists had therefore become allied to the Junkers who were enemies of the one consistently democratic class: the workers. In spite of the restrictions imposed by the semi-autocratic state, the working class had built the strongest working class party in the world, the SPD. By 1914 the SPD had over one million individual members, 110 seats in the Reichstag, and which led the Free Trade Unions with 2.6 million members.

The German imperial army's great spring offensive in the west failed. By early autumn 1918 the German war-machine was under a counter offensive launched by the French, British and increasingly the American

forces. The working class, including the workers in uniform in the army and navy, with defeat staring them in the face, were breaking from the unthinking patriotism that had tied them to the war effort. The famed Prussian discipline began to crack. By October the high command realised the game was up. They demanded the civilian government sue for peace from the US President Woodrow Wilson.

The news of the imminent collapse of the western front took the SPD leaders by surprise, but they loyally set about bringing an end to the war. In negotiations with the Americans Ludendorff decided politicians with pre-war democratic credentials were needed. He turned to a liberal aristocrat Prince Max of Baden and to the SPD. Philipp Scheidemann, one of the two key leaders of the party (with Friedrich Ebert), was willing to take on the job, saying: "better a terrible end than terror without end"

The SPD, once the leading Marxists party in the Second International (1819-1914), had betrayed its pledges to the international working class when it supported for the imperialist war by Germany. By 1918, as news of possible armistice spread the civil truce broke down, there was rising anger in the factories over working conditions and growing poverty which the SPD could no longer contain.

Armistice

At the same time, the negotiations with Wilson did not go well for the German High Command. He made it clear that the Kaiser and the whole Junker regime had to go before he would consider an armistice, let alone peace negotiations. Ludendorff suddenly tried to call off the peace negotiations but it was too late, the army was already disintegrating. Attempts to launch a new offensive would simply destroy it. In fact a partial attempt, an order for the German fleet to sail out for a desperate, final naval assault on the British navy on 30 October, led directly to the eruption of revolution.

Sailors in the northern port of Kiel, outraged by the futility of such an action when the war was plainly lost and negotiations under way for a ceasefire, refused to carry out the order. Over 1,000 of them were immediately arrested.

Within a few days the working class of Kiel, hearing of this, came to their aid. A general strike closed port and city and a mass demonstration freed the imprisoned sailors. Following this success 2,000 armed workers and sailors marched to the town hall, occupied it and established a workers' and sailors' council. This took control of the city. The German revolution had begun. Karl Artelt, one of the leaders of the mutiny, remembered the events:

îIn front of the Kaiser-Cafe we suddenly received machine gun fire. Our demonstration stopped. When we realised that nobody was hit, we moved on. After that the machine gunners fired directly into our demonstration. Forty to fifty demonstrators, among them also women and children, collapsed under the bullets. Eight of them were killed and 29 injured severely. The people screamed in indignation and protest. ... Young marines and workers charged the position of the machine gunners and put them to flight.

The next morning (4 November 1918) all troops in Kiel had to line up for inspection. ... After the usual reports, the division commander, Kapit?n zur See Bartels, climbed onto table and made a speech. He narrated yesterday's incidents, but said that a soldier had to abstain from politics, because he could not understand politics. After he left the table, I didn't think twice and jumped up. I also made a short speech calling the marines to elect soldiers' councils (Soldatenr?te). Officers, trying to shoot me from the table, were recklessly disarmed by marines' fists. Thereafter we charged our arms arsenals and elected soldiers' councils in all companies. I was elected chairman of the soldiers' council.î

The strengths and weaknesses of the movement were clear from what happened next. Hearing of the disturbances the SPD had sent one of its most right wing leaders Gustav Noske to Kiel. Noske found the

soldiers and workers councils in control and promptly declared his support for them. They promptly elected him chairman of the councils; surrendered their arms and allowed him to nominate a council of trustees. By 8 November order had been restored.

However from Kiel the workers' and soldiers' council movement undoubtedly inspired by the soviets created in the Russian revolution spread rapidly throughout Germany. Even in traditionally conservative Bavaria a socialist republic was declared in Munich by the Independent Social Democrat Kurt Eisner before a crowd of 200,000 demonstrators.

In the Ruhr, the industrial heartland of the country, factories, armed units and whole towns were brought under the control of workers councils. By 7 November the revolution had reached the capital, Berlin. Strikes and demonstrations in the capital culminated in a massive armed demonstration outside parliament, the Reichstag, on 9 November.

'Councils Republic'

The scale and vehemence of the revolutionary movement quickly convinced the SPD leaders Ebert and Scheidemann and the trade union leader Karl Legien to demand Max von Baden force Kaiser to abdicate. "You can still keep the masses in harness by making concessions", Scheidemann pleaded. Other leaders like David and Sudekum wept to show the sincerity of their fear of revolution. They assured the army chiefs that they were far from being republicans and would accept a constitutional monarchy with another Hohenzollern. When Wilhelm II threatened to lead his army back to Germany to drown the revolution in blood, the reply was: "your Majesty no longer has an army." Now the ruling class had no saviour except the SPD. Ebert assured Prince Max: "I hate the revolution like sin". To the last instance he tried to save the Hohenzollern dynasty as long as he was able.

Faced with the vast demonstration outside the Reichstag and hearing that the revolutionary opponent of the war Karl Liebknecht was about to declare Germany a socialist republic based on the workers and soldiers councils, Scheidemann acting on his own initiative rushed out onto a Reichstag balcony and declared Germany a Republic. Scheidemann's action earned an indignant rebuke from Ebert for his impetuosity. But he too soon realised the monarchy could not be salvaged. Any temporary concession could be made if it prevented a "Bolshevik Revolution." This meant temporarily accepting of the existence of workers' and soldiers' councils.

Of course it was a calculated attempt to demobilise the mass movement that had made the declaration of the Republic inevitability. From that point on the SPD strove to preserve the bourgeois republic, which days before it had not wanted, from the working class which was clamouring for a socialist one.

November 1918 created a situation of dual power in Germany, similar in its fundamentals to the one that existed in Russia after February 1917. Workers and soldiers' councils existed as one pole of administrative and military power. But there the similarities began to end. The new SPD government, based on the machinery of the capitalist state, parliament and the military general staff, formed the other. Such a situation was unstable. The struggle that ensued was dominated by the conflict between these two centres of power.

In the first phase of the revolution the majority of workers and soldiers still looked to the SPD as their party. Despite its betrayals, its organisational strength and its Marxist traditions had enabled it to maintain this allegiance. Those who had become disillusioned during the war had split and formed the Independent Social Democratic Party, the USPD in March 1916, after the SPD leaders expelled their leaders deputies who finally voted against the war credits. This party rapidly gained support and by November 1918 had about 120,000 members.

A weak revolutionary left

Despite the situation of dual power created in Germany there were certain important differences between the situation in Russia a year earlier. True, the Russian Soviets were like the workers councils, or Räte in German, and they had also been dominated from February to September by the right wing of the workers' and peasants' movements the Mensheviks and the Right Socialist Revolutionaries. But the Mensheviks and SRs turn to supporting the provisional government and its attempt to continue the war, had come later than the 1914 conversion of the SPD into a social-imperialist party. In any case, far more important was the existence of the Bolsheviks in Russia which had effectively been built as a public faction and then a separate party, following splits in Russian social democracy which had begun back in 1903.

In 1907 after the first Russian Revolution in 1905, as a faction of the re-united Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, it had 150,000 members. Weakened by the Tsarist counter-revolution it nevertheless recovered to represent the majority of Russian workers again between 1912-1914. The war drove it underground again, it meant that tens of thousands of worker and soldier cadres had been members of the party and many rallied to it again once it became legal following the February Revolution in 1917. Moreover its members were steeled in underground work, had experienced a full-blown revolution in 1905, and this had seen the creation of the first soviets, mass general strikes and even a (defeated) armed uprising in Moscow.

The Bolsheviks had learned, not without mistakes, how to conduct patient propaganda and mass agitation for its key slogans so that it won a majority in the soviets. It learned how to operate what was later called the 'the united front' with the Mensheviks and SRs, uniting with them for limited objectives and placing demands on them that exposed the leaders in front of their membership. These tactics combined with a drive towards working class power, enabling it not only to win over the soviets but the regiments too and to arm the workers. By this means it rose to nearly a quarter of a million members by the time of the October insurrection. All this experience of Bolshevism was to a large degree unknown to the cadres of the German revolutionary left in the winter of 1918-19.

If in February 1917 the Bolsheviks had "only" 2,000 members in St. Petersburg, in November 1918 the German revolutionary left probably had scarcely that number in the whole of Germany. Events were to prove that, important as revolutions are in creating hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries, important as the spirit of improvisation is, in such conditions, there are limits to what can be done in weeks or a month or two to create a revolutionary party able to bring things to a victorious conclusion.

In fact the German revolutionary left had not prepared an instrument anything like the Bolshevik party. They had attracted around them many committed young revolutionaries but these did not and could not have understood fully what the Bolshevik party was or how it had acted between February and October 1917. Above all what Bolshevism seemed to them was the daring and will to seize power by means of an armed insurrection which it was. But it was much, much more. In the trenches the young soldiers had learned the importance of force. Social Democrats had learned during the war that the "weapon of criticism has at a certain point to give way to the criticism of weapons" as Marx said.

The revolutionary left, the Spartakusbund, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, was weak in numbers and despite the latter's fame and personal following amongst the Berlin workers, its ideas were not known or understood to the broad masses.

The SPD in power

The majority of the workers still looked to their old leaders who they thought had brought about the republic

and still hoped could without the need for violence bring about socialism too. They were completely unaware (as was the SPD leadership itself) of the secret deal Ebert had done with the new de facto political head of the army, General Groener. On 10 November, Ebert was recognised by the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council as head of a government of Peoples' Commisars, consisting of three SPD members and three Independents. On the very same day he promised Groener to do all he could to help the army restore order in the cities, and "fight against Bolshevism".

At roughly the same time the Spartakists launched the daily paper, Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag). In it Rosa Luxemburg, newly released from prison, spelt out the tasks of the revolution and the choices facing the revolutionary workers: "Either the continuation of capitalism, new wars and a very early decline into chaos and anarchy or the abolition of capitalist exploitation."

The new German Communist Party (KPD) was formed around the nucleus of the Spartakusbund at the end of December 1918. But before it had time to consolidate itself and launch a renewed challenge to the social democratic traitors, the reformists went on the offensive. Ebert and General Groener between them had put together together a reactionary armed force made up of crack front line troops the Freikorps.

Gustav Noske, who had proved his worth to the forces of order in Kiel, was brought to Berlin and now moved to combat the revolutionaries. The SPD's daily Vorwärts launched an unprecedented propaganda war, accusing the Spartakists of drawing ordinary workers into renewed bloodshed.

Using this authority, the SPD began to campaign for the closing down of the councils, establishing the supremacy of a National Assembly (parliament), and restoring order in the armed forces. By placing themselves completely at the service of the bourgeoisie, the leaders of the reformist SPD revealed once again their pro-capitalist politics.

In Berlin the SPD moved quickly to disband the councils. The SPD dominated Executive Committee declared, as early as 11 November, "all provisionally formed bodies in Greater Berlin, dating back to the beginning of the revolution, including those called workers' and soldiers' councils - are now defunct."

But the combativity of the working class prevented the SPD from peacefully carrying through their goals. As the revolution unfolded the SPD proved itself capable of using ruthless and bloody counter-revolutionary measures. In Russia, the Bolshevik Party armed with a programme for power and rooted in the workplaces was decisive in leading the revolution forward and defeating their own reformists, the Mensheviks. In Germany in 1918 no such party existed.

To the left of the SPD were several groups. The USPD led by Hugo Haasse, Karl Kautsky and others, was the largest. They were also the most wavering, offering from the beginning to bury their differences with the SPD and support the government. In a word, they were centrists, politically inconsistent and useless in the revolution.

The key problem that both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries faced was resolving the dual power situation that existed. This meant a choice between a workers' council republic or a parliamentary republic, only one could lead the country. Caught in the middle of this debate the USPD, through Kautsky, urged the combination of the two! He wrote: "therefore, it is not a question of national assembly or workers' councils, but both." The USPD's attempt to combine two different types of state was an attempt to harmonise two antagonistic classes. They failed miserably. Their best elements would later join the German Communist Party while their right wing rejoined the SPD.

The most decisive force on the left was the Spartakist group, the forerunner of the Communist Party, led by

Luxemburg and Liebknecht. The Spartakists, who rallied many of the best revolutionary young workers to their ranks, especially in Berlin, represented the vanguard of the revolution. They also represented the political immaturity of that vanguard.

It was not, in the first stages, a party and had to be built from scratch. But despite their brilliance and revolutionary courage, Luxemburg and Liebknecht did not have a clear programme for victory, and neither did they have the means of creating one. They lacked both the organisational and political advantages that a previously built revolutionary party would have.

Liebknecht tended towards voluntarism, believing exhortation and example (he was a marvellous speaker and tireless agitator) would activate and raise the consciousness of the masses. Luxemburg tended to view the very presence of the worker masses in the revolutionary process as a guarantee of victory. After a series of economic strikes exploded in December 1918, Luxemburg, speaking for the newly formed Communist Party (KPD), declared: "By its mere appearance on to the scene of the class struggle, the proletarian mass has skipped over all the revolution's shortcomings." This was a dangerous illusion.

The SPD make their move

The vanguard, then, was ill-equipped to weather the storm that was about to break. Knowing that the Spartakists were still too weak to stage a successful uprising the SPD government decided to act. It knew full well that the strike movement would strengthen the Spartakists and jeopardise its counter-revolutionary moves.

Unable to rely on the regular army, it built up the Freikorps (a far right militia), staffed by the most reactionary dregs of the professional soldiery, many of whom later became ardent Nazis. The Freikorps in fact first used the swastika symbol that would be taken up by Hitler a few years later. Following an armed clash with revolutionary sailors in late 1918 it prepared to strike a deathblow against the Spartakists and the revolutionary workers of Berlin.

In the face of a series of provocations the Revolutionary Shop Stewards an organisation of the Berlin factory workers along with Karl Liebknecht became convinced they had to respond and set on a course of overthrowing the government. Luxemburg was convinced that the revolutionary workers and the KPD were not yet strong enough for such a decisive confrontation.

She understood that many workers still clung in hope to the SPD. But she concluded that the communists had no alternative but to take full responsibility for the rising. During her final few days, her brilliant articles for Rote Fahne concentrated first on the need for decisive action and, as the right wing tightened its grip, on assimilating the lessons and preparing for the next phase of struggle.

In early January a poster appeared on the streets of Berlin. It was issued by the "Front Soldiers" and declared: "Workers, Citizens: the Fatherland is close to destruction. Save it! It is not threatened from without, but from within, by the Spartakus group. Murder their leaders! Kill Liebknecht! Then you will have peace, work and bread."

A few days later the first stage of the counter-revolution began. The SPD leaders deliberately provoked the workers of Berlin by dismissing a USPD police chief, Emil Eichorn, from the post he had held since November. When he refused to give up his post a general strike engulfed the city and a crowd of 150,000 gathered outside the police building.

The Spartakists, the revolutionary shop stewards and USPD of Berlin immediately formed the Revolutionary Committee to meet the challenge. As the SPD threatened force to remove Eichorn, Gustav

Noske, another SPD leader, placed himself at the head of the counter-revolutionary troops. Noske grimly declared, "somebody must be the bloodhound".

This situation was unfavourable to the Spartakists. The bulk of the city's troops were confused and not ready to join the side of the revolution. A defensive action was clearly necessary in the face of the SPD attacks. Such action may have won the support of the troops. But a struggle for power was premature. Yet the Revolutionary Committee decided to go on the offensive and launch a rising. As a result many of the city's regiments declared themselves neutral in the ensuing battle between the revolutionaries and the Freikorps.

On 7 January key buildings such as telegraph stations and newspaper buildings were occupied. 500,000 workers many of whom were armed heeded the call for a demonstration that day.

But then the Revolutionary Committee hesitated and left the crowd standing in the cold. Then the USPD betrayed the revolutionaries by entering into negotiations with the SPD much of the impetus of the previous few days was lost. In the final battle for Berlin the Spartakists and the workers who supported them fought a heroic battle against the Freikorps, in the newspaper district around the Vorwärts newspaper building, but they were isolated and overwhelmed.

Drowned in blood

The Spartakist uprising was crushed; their actions were premature and ill prepared. They moved into an armed confrontation with the state before the mass of the working class and soldiers had been convinced of the need for such an action. But compared to the reformist traitors and the miserable cowards grouped around the apologists for the right, the Spartakists were revolutionary giants, a pledge for the future. A pledge that new generations of young revolutionaries will honour in the future. But their defeat allowed the right to go on an all out offensive. Reformism unleashed its dogs of war, the Freikorps. They indulged in a bloody frenzy against the left making sure that the most militant sections of the working class were hunted down and killed.

The two leaders Karl and Rosa decided to stay in Berlin. They went into hiding in a friend's house but were betrayed by suspicious neighbours. They were ruthlessly hunted down. On 15 January 1919, the two leaders were caught and dragged off for "interrogation" in the Eden Hotel, near the Tiergarten Park. In fact they were going straight to their deaths. Liebknecht was beaten, then taken in a car to the park and shot in the back so his captors could claim he was "shot while trying to escape." After Luxemburg was taken from the hotel, her head was smashed in with a rifle butt. She was then shot in the head and her body was thrown into the Landwehr canal. To this day every January tens of thousands of workers and socialists join the "Karl and Rosa" demonstration in Berlin to remember their sacrifice.

While we will never forget the martyrs of the January rising, the eagles as Lenin called them, we will honour them by taking to heart the lessons of their defeat. The counter-revolutionary character of reformism, the uselessness of centrism for the purposes of revolution, and the centrality of building a revolutionary party are those lessons. And by remembering them we will ensure that one day the murders of Karl and Rosa will be avenged by a mighty workers' revolution against capitalism.

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