



1918: Germany - reformists versus the revolution

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Towards the end of the First World War the workers of Russia rose in revolt against Tsarism. By October 1917 they had pressed on to establish, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, a Soviet (workers' council) Republic, the world's first workers' state.

This revolution was like a detonator. In its wake revolutionary struggles exploded all over Europe. The most important of its result affected the fate of Russia and all of Europe for decades to follow was the German Revolution, which began in November 1918.

Germany was ruled by the old Prussian landowning aristocracy, the Junkers. Their figurehead was the monarch, the Kaiser. Democracy was severely curtailed.

The big German capitalists who stood to gain through expansion of a German empire achieved through the war had no need for or interest in achieving a fully-fledged bourgeois democracy. They had become the allies of the Junkers and the enemies of the one consistently democratic class, the workers.

By late 1918, however, it had become clear that, despite its firepower and efficiency, the German war-machine could not crack the bloody stalemate that the imperialist war had become. The working class, including the workers in uniform in the army and navy, were breaking from the unthinking patriotism that had tied them to the war effort.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the major working class party in Europe and the one that betrayed the international working class in 1914 with its support for the imperialist war by Germany was unable to contain the anger that was rising in the armed forces and the factories.

On 30 October the German High Command issued an order for a final naval assault on the British. Sailors in the northern port of Kiel, outraged by the futility of such an assault, refused to carry out the order. Over 1,000 of them were duly arrested.

Four days later the working class of Kiel came to their support. A general strike was launched and a mass demonstration freed the 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 over control of the city. The German revolution had begun.

From Kiel the workers' and soldiers' council movement undoubtedly inspired by the Russian revolution spread rapidly throughout Germany. In Bavaria a socialist republic was declared.

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

The old rulers were terrified. The scope and strength of the revolutionary movement led them to panic. The Kaiser abdicated and the question of the republic was poised point-blank. It was at this point that they turned to the SPD to save them from the insurgent masses.

Just as they had obliged the bourgeoisie in 1914, so in 1918 the SPD the archetypal social democratic reformist party

? came to the rescue of capitalism once again.

Faced with the mass demonstration and desperate to contain it, Scheidemann, an SPD leader, declared the Republic from a Reichstag balcony.

But Scheidemann's action did not mark his sudden conversion to the revolution, despite him being attacked by other SPD leaders for his impetuosity.

It was a calculated attempt to demobilise the mass movement that had made the declaration of the Republic an inevitability. From that point on the SPD strove to preserve the bourgeois republic from the working class which was clamouring for a socialist one.

November 1918 created a situation of dual power in Germany. Workers' and soldiers' councils existed as one pole of administrative and military power. 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, of necessity, unstable. The struggle that ensued was dominated by the conflict between these two centres of power.

In the first phase of the revolution the overwhelming majority of workers and soldiers looked to the SPD as their party. Despite its betrayals, its organisational strength and its socialist traditions had enabled it to maintain this allegiance.

The influence of the revolutionary left, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, was marginalised. Thus, when the party formed a cabinet made up of SPD members alone the Executive Committee of the Berlin workers' and soldiers' council recognised the cabinet as the 'Council of People's Representatives'.

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 SPD revealed once again their fundamentally pro-capitalist nature.

In Berlin the SPD moved quickly to close down 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 itself prevented the SPD from peacefully carrying through their goals. As the revolution unfolded the SPD proved itself willing and able to secure their objectives by 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 1917 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 stood several groups. The Independent Social Democrats (USPD) led by Hasse, Kautsky and others, were the largest. They were also the most irresolute, offering from the beginning to bury their differences with the SPD and support the government. In a word, they were centrists of the classic sort, vacillating all over the place and useless in the revolution.

The key problem that both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries faced was resolving the dual power. This meant a workers' council republic or a parliamentary republic. The two could not co-exist. 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 joined the 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. It had, in many ways, to be built from scratch. Moreover, despite their brilliance and revolutionary courage, Luxemburg and Liebknecht did not have a clear programme for victory, nor really the means of hammering one out. They lacked both the organisational and political advantages that stem from a previously built revolutionary party.

Liebknecht tended towards voluntarism, believing exhortation and example (he was a marvellous speaker and tireless agitator) would activate the masses. Luxemburg tended to view the very presence of the 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.’

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 use the regular army, it built up the Freikorps (far right militias), staffed by the most reactionary dregs of the professional soldiery, many of whom later became ardent Nazis. Following an armed clash with sailors in late 1918 it prepared to strike a death blow against the Spartakists and the revolutionary workers of Berlin.

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 deliberately provoked the workers of Berlin by dismissing a USPD police chief, Eichorn, from his post. 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 KPD, revolutionary shop stewards and USPD of Berlin immediately formed the Revolutionary Committee to meet the challenge. As the SPD threatened force to remove Eichorn, 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 engage in a struggle for power. 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 numerous key buildings such as telegraph stations and newspaper buildings were occupied. The call for a demonstration that day was heeded by 500,000 workers, many of whom were armed.

But then the Revolutionary Committee hesitated and left the crowd standing in the cold, which dampened the enthusiasm of the Berlin masses. When the USPD then 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, but they were isolated and overwhelmed.

The reformists danced with delight. In an orgy of violence following their victory they gave the Freikorps leave to murder Luxemburg and Liebknecht and a host of other communists. Reformism was happy to drown the revolution in blood, smashing in the brains of the finest and most courageous class fighters in the process.

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.

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