Chapter 12 - The Kapp Putsch and the Ruhr insurrection

The Coup d’État and the First Instances of “Workers Government” and “Anti-Fascism”

The Kapp Putsch (May 13-17, 1920) was an attempt on the part of reactionary elements in the Army to take the first steps towards building a strong right-wing government. The German Army (Reichswehr) was reestablished by the constituent assembly: by June 1919 it had 100,000 men, the maximum allowed by the postwar treaties. Including the Freikorps, however, by the beginning of 1920 the Army had 400,000 men, which provoked the protests of the victorious powers.

The Freikorps arose during the period of military demobilization and State disintegration, and their only purpose was to serve as an instrument of the counterrevolution in Germany and Russia. They were paid by the State. As the situation appeared to have stabilized, the government solved part of its problem in September 1919 by prohibiting the creation of local militias, while directly transforming numerous Freikorps units into Reichswehr detachments. But it could not integrate all of them, as it wanted to provide the army with a republican “varnish”. The majority of the troops who would participate in the Kapp Putsch were from Freikorps units which had returned from Russia after having participated in the foreign intervention. They feared they would be discharged due to the terms of the Versailles Treaty. A right-wing faction, encouraged by Kapp, a senior Prussian official, established contacts with their commanders in order to carry out a political operation.

Discovering that 6,000 men under the command of Lüttwitz (one of Noske’s direct subordinates in January 1919) were going to occupy Berlin on March 13, the socialist government fled to Dresden and then to Stuttgart. Ludendorff, who supported the Freikorps, installed himself in the Chancellery in order to establish a “dignified government”. Despite the socialist government’s flight, the Kapp regime fell after four days due to a general strike called by all the parties, except for the rightist KPD. Reacting against “leftism”, it had moved in the opposite direction, becoming hostile to any and all action: the KPD delegates would admit this at the Third World Congress, along with other “errors”. Levi had not expected the “crisis” to break out until 1926. The (excluded) left, however, issued a proclamation calling for the formation of a red army and for an insurrection. The Communist International would reproach the KAPD for having demonstrated its thoughtlessness by prematurely opening “recruiting offices” for a red army.1 In its discussion of the battles in the Ruhr (cf. below), the Communist International declared that “the party must know how to call off the struggle at the precise moment when its continuation would be likely to lead to military or political defeat”. The accusations of “leftism” and adventurism were based on this kind of criticism: they would stand in stark contrast to the facts.
Despite Kapp’s declaration that “all those who do not report to work will be shot”, there is no doubt that there has never been such an absolutely effective general strike in all of history. The bourgeois parties, which had been very prudent since the end of the war, did not support the conspirators. The Bank of Germany refused to grant Kapp the 10 billion marks needed for government operations. Unable to even find a press which would publish his proclamations, Kapp fled to Switzerland. The episode of the Kapp Putsch did, however, leave 3,000 victims in its wake. Prior to the coup d’état, the Freikorps carried out various outrages, such as burning down the Leipzig Peoples’ Hall, killing three hundred people. There were also pitched battles throughout the rest of Saxony, in Thuringia, and especially in the Ruhr.

The coup was totally successful only in Bavaria. The Hoffmann ministry—the Bavarian Ebert (cf. Chapter 7)—was overthrown: the diet was replaced by a right wing ministry led by von Kahr. The central government returned to Berlin, where it hastened to call an end to the strike and disarm the workers. The strike committee, however, under the leadership of Legien, who was undoubtedly using the rank and file’s militancy to bolster his position in his personal rivalry with the leaders of the SPD, attempted to form a “workers government”. The communists of the KPD, “prisoners of their leftistism”, distrust this government almost as much as Noske’s government. This “workers government” was to be composed of the SPD, the USPD and the KPD, along with the trade unions. The USPD rejected the proposal in order to preserve its leftist reputation: its own left wing had grown since December 1919 under Däumig’s leadership. The representatives of the KPD (among others, Pieck) accepted the proposal and later had their authority to negotiate revoked by the KPD leadership.

The KPD, however, later declared its support for a policy of “loyal opposition”, defined as “the renunciation of preparations for any violent action” against a socialist government. Since the proletarian dictatorship was impossible, it was necessary to create “a situation in which bourgeois democracy cannot act as the dictatorship of capital”. A perfect definition of anti-fascism: preventing capitalist democracy from becoming a capitalist dictatorship, without revolutionary action, of course. The entire party (including Levi, who had just been released from prison) was outraged by this proposal. A short time later, however, Levi resuscitated the same theme with his suggestion of a possible gradual transformation of the bourgeois republic into a soviet republic. It was thus in Germany that the slogan of a “purely working class” government, that is, one composed of parties which “represent” the working class, first arose. Everything which the Communist International would impose upon the young Communist Parties came from Europe: the united front, for example, and the Spartacist tactic of “conquering the majority”, and the idea of the majority of the workers acquiring socialist consciousness before the revolution; or the cult of the worker, combined with bolshevization after 1924–1925 (factory cell organization). At the KAPD’s Congress, one delegate’s assertion that “here, there are no intellectuals, there are only workers”, was greeted with a burst of “lively applause” according to the official minutes. The same is true of anti-fascism. Germany, the most modern country, not from the point of view of technology but from that of the development of the class struggle (on both sides) and of
the forms of capitalist rule, was the cradle of all the essential weapons of the counterrevolution which still plague the proletariat so many decades later.

Lenin criticized the right-wing leadership of the KPD in his *Infantile Disorder*: the formula of “loyal opposition to a government composed solely of socialists” is not correct because a government composed of “social traitors” cannot be called “socialist”. Otherwise, this was a good example of a “Bolshevik-style compromise”. The left, faced with this policy of the central committee, drew the opposite conclusion, and realized that it had no interest whatsoever in availing itself of its rights within the party. Understanding that an abyss separated it from the KPD and that any discussion was superfluous, it founded the KAPD in early April (cf. Chapter 14).

**The Red Army of the Ruhr**

During this period, the Ruhr was the stronghold of the revolution in Germany. It was there that the influence of the Left and of the revolutionary trade unions was strongest. But no one group was strong enough to unleash a movement on its own, and the insurrection was a spontaneous offensive of the proletariat (it was the first and next-to-last proletarian offensive during the German revolution until March 1921). At the time of the Kapp Putsch, “numerous regions such as the Ruhr and central Germany had not yet undergone the great defeats suffered by the workers during the previous years. . . .” Instead, the organization of the revolutionary movement in the Ruhr had suffered from the split in the KPD, so the unionen were not well-established there and their weakness worked to the advantage of the anarchosyndicalists, who were opposed to political action, which, by definition, they identified with anything which transcended the framework of the workplace. The General Union of Miners had, however, organized one-third of the Ruhr miners, whose principle region, Rhineland-Westphalia, was a union bastion. The USPD’s split and its lack of interest in the unionen facilitated the growth of anarchosyndicalist influence.

The military and Freikorps troops stationed in the Ruhr did not oppose Kapp and some even supported him. It was the general uncertainty concerning the real position of the Army which caused the most concern, and it was an officer’s pro-Kapp declarations which would provide the immediate pretext for the insurrection. Starting on March 14, the workers attacked the Army and formed a “red army”, putting into practice, in a way which went far beyond its wildest hopes, the watchword of the Left.

The workers armed themselves on two separate occasions, before and after the commencement of hostilities. The workers still possessed arms which they had concealed at the end of the war and during the “revolution”, but these would comprise but a small part of their arsenal. During the first few days after the putsch, the workers seized weapons from the Einwohnerwehren, legal organizations created after 1918 to keep order and protect property. Its members served as volunteers on a part-time basis: they came from a wide range of professional backgrounds. The radical workers went in groups to the homes of the members of this auxiliary police force and by fair means or foul, and sometimes by fraud and deceit, they made them hand over their weapons. Thus, for example, in one locality, where the Einwohnerwehren were composed of
peasants who had little sympathy for the workers, the proletarians went to the peasants and proposed that they have a meeting to discuss the issue of the weapons. The workers’ speakers made long speeches to keep the peasants away from their homes as long as possible and adjourned the meeting as soon as they knew that all the arms had been collected. In addition, despite the obligation of these volunteers to take an oath swearing loyalty to the Weimar constitution, there were many USPD members among them.

Then, after the first battles, the workers seized the armories, munitions and equipment of the regular Army units which had surrendered or fled, and thus equipped themselves with all the gear necessary to field an authentic army. The insurrection snowballed, “liberating” all of the Ruhr, from east (Hagen-Dortmund) to west (Essen, Duisberg, and Düsseldorf), and then the front lines stabilized: the western limit was the Rhine, defended by the French.

The insurrection began on Monday, the 15th, as a result of the convergence of two separate events: a large demonstration of armed workers in Hagen (convoked by the parties, especially by the USPD, it had no military purpose at all, and was only supposed to be a peaceful show of workers’ power) on the one hand, and on the other, a relatively serious skirmish in Wetter, a small city not far from Hagen.

In Wetter, after the first days of the Putsch, an action committee had been formed by representatives of various workers parties. During a popular assembly, unambiguous threats having been issued against individuals who were “particularly hated by the working class” (Colm), the committee ordered that these individuals were to be arrested to protect them as well as to satisfy the wishes of the crowd: this was the origin of the rumor that “the council republic” had been proclaimed in Wetter.

The military commanders of the Ruhr then issued the order to intervene and disarm the workers at various locations in the Ruhr and especially those in Wetter where, on the 15th, a company of soldiers arrived by train. During a discussion at the train station with the action committee and the mayor, the unit’s captain declared that the Army in the Ruhr supported Kapp. The committee then broke off all discussion; in the meantime, the workers had convinced 20 or 30 soldiers to desert with their arms and equipment.

The battle began: the soldiers were barricaded in the train station, while the workers took up positions in the neighboring streets. The armed workers from the other cities in the region, who were supposed to meet in Hagen, upon being informed that hostilities had broken out in Wetter, headed there en masse (despite the opposition of the workers parties) and, streaming into Wetter in ever greater numbers, assured the workers’ victory over the soldiers, who were annihilated.

A company of regular soldiers also went to a neighboring city. The Freikorps had sought refuge in Dortmund on the 16th, but on the following day this city was taken by the rebels, who seized a significant quantity of war materiel. All of the cities of the Ruhr
were taken during the next few days. The *Reichswehr* abandoned the Ruhr; the workers sometimes cut off its retreat, taking numerous prisoners and hastening its departure.

The rebels came from all social layers, but there were only a few intellectuals among them, and most of these were teachers. On this occasion, the regrouping was carried out upon a totally *geographical* basis: neighborhood, town, city, and region. The factories did not constitute, except on rare occasions, the site for concentration and action. The “red army” had between 80,000 and 100,000 men, as well as artillery and a small air force. It was organized around three centers: Hagen (in the hands of the USPD), Essen (KPD and USPD Left) and Mülheim (revolutionary syndicalists and the KPD’s excluded left: the KAPD would be founded shortly afterwards). Hagen was recognized as the central leadership of the army: after the government’s ultimatum imposing a ceasefire and threatening recalcitrants with military repression, Hagen would announce “the quite ambiguous directive of resuming the general strike (when the workers were armed and engaged in battle)”.10

**The Forms Assumed by Workers Power in the Ruhr**

The three “workers” parties (SPD-USPD-KPD) considered the workers’ actions to be “adventurist” and did not accept the violent intervention of the proletarians except as a force in support of the jeopardized democracy. In Chemnitz (Saxony) where the KPD, led by the rightist Brandler, was dominant, the party restricted itself to arming the workers, awaiting Ebert’s return to power, and opposed the efforts of various groups, such as that under the command of Max Hötz, to arm themselves and act independently.11 Germany invented *anti-fascism*, a policy which consists of defending capitalist democracy (with arms if necessary) against capitalist dictatorship, and in repressing any subversive tendencies which go beyond democracy, as if one led to the other; as if there was a “choice” between the two which would depend upon the workers.12

Throughout the Ruhr, “executive committees” formed by the three workers parties took power. They restricted their activities to controlling, and sometimes purging, the existing government bodies. In most cases, they maintained contacts with local administrative offices.

In Duisberg, the KPD left deposed the tripartite executive (SPD, USPD, KPD) and replaced it with an “executive commission” (left KPD and FAU) which took power by “demagogically” (Colm) relying upon the armed workers, and arrested various “bonzes” from the workers parties and trade unions. These parties would also retaliate against the members of the Duisberg “executive commission” after the end of the movement, accusing them of having used the movement as a means of personal enrichment and characterizing them as “armed gangs”, “armed hordes” and “irresponsible elements”. In fact, the workers of Duisberg had indeed conceived of the insurrection as the beginning of the “second revolution”, and had requisitioned money from the banks and provisions from the stores and warehouses, and organized free distribution of many goods. But the bulk of the movement remained legalist and respected the democracy. On the 17th, in
Dortmund, the rebels allowed the installation of a right wing, SPD-USPD-KPD local government. This error would spell their downfall.

**Defeat**

On the 20th the trade unions declared the end of the strike, but the entire German side of the Ruhr was still outside the control of the authorities. The government and the workers parties (including the KPD) met in Bielefeld and on the 25th signed an agreement calling for the following: the *Reichswehr* was to stay out of the Ruhr (as the terms of the Versailles Treaty had stipulated, the region was to remain neutral: but the practical outcome was that the region was to be occupied by two armies instead of by one); punishment and purging of the putschists; nationalization of large industry. But the surrender of the workers’ arms was the precondition for all of these concessions.

A large part of the red army, evidently, did not recognize the terms of this agreement. The members of the AAUs, the future KAPists and the anarchosyndicalist rank and file acted in opposition to the views of the Berlin central committee of the FAUD. According to Angress, the KPD’s militant groups formed only “an insignificant contingent compared to the anarchosyndicalist rebels, the unaffiliated, or the members of the KAPD, the USPD and even the SPD”. On the 30th, the radical workers also rejected an ultimatum. The KPD leadership was in favor of abiding by the Bielefeld agreement: it was necessary to follow the SPD-USPD directives, since these two parties represented the majority of the workers. This stance was an indication of the KPD’s extreme weakness after Heidelberg. The workers were unmoved. The Reichswehr would no longer “keep out of the Ruhr” and, from the 3rd to the 6th of April, easily defeated a red army weakened by negotiations.

The Ruhr insurrection and its repression had immediate international ramifications. The mining basin of the Ruhr provided, during that period, 70% of German coal production, and was of vital importance for all European industry, since the French mining regions were still in ruins as a result of the war. The interruption of coal production in the Ruhr very rapidly shut down economic activity in Germany, and would soon have an impact on other countries as well. The military occupation of the Ruhr by the *Reichswehr*, in order to repress the rebellion, would, of course, constitute a violation of the terms of the Versailles Treaty. In response, the French occupied Frankfurt, cutting off economic traffic between northern and southern Germany, and posing yet more difficulties for the German economy at the very moment when it was threatened by the revolutionary movement. Immediately afterwards, the English, aware of what was at stake (saving German capitalism and English capitalism at the same time) lodged a protest against the French, and, putting inter-capitalist solidarity above disputes over restitution, revealed the universal revolutionary importance of the Ruhr insurrection. The ensuing massacre would keep the Ruhr subdued until 1923.

The proletarians were victorious as long as they relied upon their social functions, utilizing the productive apparatus for supplies, arms and transport, without, however, remaining within the boundaries of production. The rebel cities united and sent help to the workers in other cities. But even in this respect the movement displayed its weak
points, which characterized the whole epoch. After having emerged victorious from its clash with the Army, using the Army’s own methods and fighting on its own terrain, the proletarians, in their immense majority, thought that their job was done and handed over their power to the parties and the democracy. The red army expelled the military and then transformed itself into the classical workers movement. The workers had mobilized for democracy, and those who wanted to go further were mowed down by the same military force which had supported the anti-democratic putsch and to which the State rapidly turned. As the *Communist International*\(^\text{16}\) recognized, there existed both a “republican guard” and a “red army” at the same time: formed by a coalition of organizations (SPD-USPD-KPD), the first undertook to preserve order and guard the stores and warehouses. As in Bavaria and Hungary, the workers, rather than going on the offensive, had occupied a vacuum. They had occupied the social space without transforming it in a communist sense.

The June 1920 elections legitimized the power which had been supported at the crucial moment by the workers. The right having reappeared on the political scene with the putsch, the political center of gravity moved rightward. The SPD relinquished power. Its electoral count fell from 12 to 6 million. The new government was composed of a *centrist* majority, with the participation of “populists” (pre-war “national-liberals”), the traditional representatives of big capital. The USPD vote grew from 2.5 to 5 million. The KPD, free to practice revolutionary parliamentarism, obtained a few hundred thousand votes. The Communist International would do everything in its power to precipitate the fusion of the USPD and the KPD.

In order to understand the reality of the anti-parliamentary current among the communists, it must be seen as the expression of a real and numerically important movement within the proletarian masses. Even the adversaries of the left admitted the scale of working class abstentionism in the German elections. Bela Kun made the following observation concerning the 1920 legislative elections:

“It is hard to precisely calculate the number of workers who have abstained, following the party of revolutionary confusion (the KAPD) or the national bolsheviks. The data from the various large cities and industrial regions, however, allow the assertion that abstention has by no means been insignificant and that many workers have expressed their revolutionary point of view through the boycott of the elections.”\(^\text{17}\)

The same thing happened in the elections for the Prussian legislative assembly (at least half of Germany) in 1921:

“It can be stated that in all likelihood the majority of the votes lost by the USPD in the last elections *did not go to any other party*. The proletariat’s “electoral weariness” was a characteristic feature of the political situation. In Berlin, according to *Freiheit* (the USPD newspaper), the rate of voter participation among the bourgeoisie was between 80 and 85%, while it was only 60 to 65% among the workers. Scheidemann and Hilferding interpreted this abstentionism in the same way: as a consequence of party disputes, of the splits caused by the communists, etc.
"The abstention of such a large proportion of the proletariat, however, such as took place in these elections, could not be schematized by virtue of such simplistic formulas; the crude reality expressed by such terms as “electoral weariness” and “abstention” masks two phenomena. If one part of the abstentionist phenomenon must be understood as a symptom of the proletariat’s lack of ideological maturity, the other part, on the contrary, indicates that a whole sector of the conscious proletariat had rejected the parliamentary electoral struggle, perceiving it as a phase of the revolutionary class struggle which had been superseded. We do not believe we are mistaken in asserting that the extreme exacerbation of the situation in Germany led many convinced communists (and not just the members of the KAPD) to accept the idea that participation in parliamentary activity could only be prejudicial to the development and maturation of revolutionary consciousness." 18

At the beginning of August, the parliament passed a “disarmament” law which triggered isolated reactions from the extreme left (cf. Chapter 14). On this front the State would have to act slowly and with caution, despite the absence of any reaction on the part of the SPD and the KPD. The decision to seize arms stockpiles in central Germany would be the detonator of the “March Action” of 1921. The extreme right was assassinating leftist and even centrist figures. The “workers organizations” demanded that the government respect legality. The government would pass a law for the “protection of the Reich”: between 1920 and 1933 the law would be invoked 5 times against the right and 822 times against the left. 19

1. IC, No. 10.
3. PC, No. 58, p. 110 et seq.
5. Rote Fahne, March 26, 1920.
6. La maladie infantile, 10/18, p. 169.
8. Ibid., pp. 9 and 14.
10. La question syndicale…., p. 25.
12. Engels had opposed one of the first examples of anti-fascism, in relation to the issue of boulangisme: cf. PC, No. 56, p. 12.
16. No. 5.