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THE THIRD REVOLUTION

POPULAR MOVEMENTS IN THE
REVOLUTIONARY ERA

VOLUME FOUR

Murray Bookchin



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For my granddaughter

Katya

Preface

The publication of this book completes my four-volume historical account of popular movements in the revolutionary era. It traces the thread of the narrative to the German revolution and to uprisings in Bavaria, Hungary, and Austria; and concludes with an account of the Spanish revolution.

In the German Revolution of 1918, I find that Rosa Luxemburg's intentions may have been among the noblest, and I wear a flower in my lapel in her memory. But for German revolutionary socialism, her strategy was a disaster. Given the conservative nature of the German working class—as well as the European working class generally—her mystification of the proletariat's alleged revolutionary impulses defies understanding. It is difficult to understand how this immensely gifted leader could have failed to comprehend how integrated into its hierarchical society the German working class was—a fact that was cannily exploited by her social democratic opponents.

As for the Spanish Revolution, to this day, from a distance of some 70 years, it still tugs at the heart of an aged man whose memories of its unfolding remain so vivid as to dim his recollections of more recent events. No working class in revolutionary history compares with the class consciousness of the Spanish proletariat and even of the Spanish peasantry. No population was more deserving of able revolutionary leadership than the Spanish working class—which knew it was much in need of leadership and was eager to accept guidance. Spain gave the world a utopian vision of the proletariat that revolutionary thinkers had long found only in moments of wildest fantasy.

Potential leaders existed, but they needed more time than they had to earn the proletariat's respect. Lacking able leaders, the Spanish proletariat instead got ones who were painfully ill equipped. Federica Montseny, Juan García Oliver, and Diego Abad de Santillán were, to be sure,

idealistic and sometimes noble, but they were badly in want of historical understanding, theoretical commitment, and strategic abilities. The results of their leadership were disastrous: during the nonrevolutionary early 1930s these "influential militants" clamored for insurrections and acted as if every strike were the beginning of one. But when a revolutionary situation finally did arise in 1936–37, they lacked the courage to cross the thorny boundary that separated capitalism from libertarian communism. Confused about the nature of power—believing that it could somehow be abolished, when it can no more be abolished than air and water—these leaders were unprepared to use power when the masses finally thrust it into their hands. Instead, they allowed events to transform them into little more than liberals.

The Spanish Revolution was the culminating event of the twentieth-century revolutionary cycles—and in many respects of the revolutionary era that began in the seventeenth century. Despite my strong feelings about many of these events, I have tried to be ruthlessly objective in dealing with my subject matter—especially when historical evidence belies views that I once held to be sacrosanct. Time has generously allowed me the privilege of testing and reexamining ideas that, when I was a young man, seemed to me to be unquestionable.

The Third Revolution will have served an invaluable role if it provides a recognition that in Western Europe the proletariat was by no means the stellar revolutionary force imputed to it by radical, largely intellectual, theorists. To be militant is by no means to be revolutionary. Until the end of the Second World War—a highly significant turning point in world history—proletarians may have been militant and insurrectionary, but their vision of "socialism" or a "free society" seldom extended beyond notions of a "welfare society", even when they had recourse to arms and waved red or red-and-black flags. Often it was intellectuals who appointed themselves as surrogates for the workers in whose interests they professed to speak—and whom they often repressed with ruthless savagery when in power.

It is my hope that *The Third Revolution* will remove the muddled language that obscured the realities of the revolutionary era. The words "socialist", "communist", "anarchist", and "syndicalist" meant very different things and described very different events over the past two centuries. Nor were all violent popular uprisings revolutions. Moreover, the insurrections that swept over Western, Central and Eastern Europe in 1848 and from 1917 to 1950 were not similar events. We need a meticulous understanding of what these terms and events mean if we are to have the faintest idea of what constitutes the history of the past two centuries and what place they occupy

in a meaningful account of history itself. "Socialists" were by no means "communists" and "anarchists" were by no means "syndicalists". The differences between the strategies and methods were sufficiently at odds with each other to produce bitter "civil wars" between radicals and almost certain defeat at the hands of well-organized counterrevolutionary forces, as the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 was to show.

Again, I extend my deepest thanks to Janet Biehl, who provided the same indispensable assistance for this volume that she did for the previous three. The Kate Sharpley Library was good enough to send me parts of the English translation of José Peirats' historical account of the CNT–FAI, while Barry Pateman furnished me with a pamphlet of excerpts from García Oliver's *Ecos de los pasos*.

I owe a great debt to José Peirats, the indisputable historian of the CNT–FAI, as well as to Gaston Leval, the outstanding historian of the CNT collectives during the revolution. During my visits to Paris and Toulouse in August 1967, both men gave me hours of their time and provided me with a wealth of detail that only full participants in the Spanish anarchosyndicalist movement could have known. They were kind enough to share not only their recollections of their movement but also a friendship that went beyond the interviews. I also owe a great deal to Pablo Ruiz, the leader of the military branch of the Friends of Durruti, who kept up a correspondence with me after I visited him in Paris in 1967. Pablo and his colleagues in the Friends, in my view, have not been well treated by many historians of Spanish anarchosyndicalism.

I owe a profound debt of gratitude for several scholarly works that were sent to me: notably, Ian Grimmer's study of the Bavarian Council Republic, and Myrna Breitbart's massive (and alas still unpublished) study, "The Theory and Practice of Anarchist Decentralism in Spain: 1936 to 1939." Peter Zegers, in the Netherlands, supplied me with books and papers that were not available to me in the United States.

As always, I am grateful to Wesley Eldred and June Treyah of the Bailey-Howe Library at the University of Vermont and to Fred G. Hill of the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington.

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CHAPTER 53 Germany and the Antiwar Left

THE RISE OF THE GERMAN ANTIWAR MOVEMENT

Scattered pacifists and independent leftists publicly raised their voices against the First World War at its outset. But it was not until four months later, when the Kaiser's forces collided with the Allies in Belgium and Prussia, that a handful of prominent German Marxists publicly denounced the war as imperialist in a new periodical, provocatively entitled *Die Internationale*, in open defiance of the nationalist views that had come to dominate social democracy in Western Europe. Edited from prison by Rosa Luxemburg, who had been confined for a political offense committed before the war, it was immediately banned. The issue, however, was widely circulated in clandestine socialist circles, and an informal international group (Gruppe Internationale) was created to advance the journal's militant ideas.

Around much the same time, in April 1915, Rosa Luxemburg wrote (again from prison) *The Crisis in the German Social Democracy*, a highly provocative pamphlet that forcefully demolished Germany's claim to be fighting a strictly defensive war. The war, Luxemburg argued, was entirely imperialist, and neither side in the conflict deserved the workers' support. The pamphlet went on to analyze the reasons for the collapse of the international socialist movement at the outbreak of hostilities. Luxemburg signed the pamphlet with the pseudonym "Junius" (the name used by an eighteenth-century British polemicist defending the English Constitution against George III). Appended to the Junius Pamphlet, as it came to be widely known, was a list of pithy "Theses on the Tasks of International Social Democracy," which Luxemburg wrote as a position statement for the upcoming Zimmerwald conference in

Switzerland. Since the Second International was irremediably compromised because of its capitulation to the war, a "new workers' international" was needed, Luxemburg wrote, one that would "take into its own hands the leadership and coordination of the revolutionary class struggle against world imperialism."

In contrast to the Second International, which had been structured federally, Luxemburg called for a new international that would be centrally organized; its different national components would be subject to strict discipline in carrying out the organization's decisions: "The obligation [by members of this new International] to carry out the decisions of the International takes precedence over all else," she emphasized, contrary to the anarchistic views that have sometimes been imputed to her. "National sections which do not conform with this place themselves outside the International."¹ Seldom had this view come closer, in Luxemburg's writings, to Lenin's ideas. The pamphlet was not published until 1916, due to the difficulty of finding a printer who was willing to risk imprisonment. In the interim, however, it circulated privately in manuscript among the growing number of socialists who supported Luxemburg's courageous stance on the war.

Another leading German opponent of the war, Karl Liebknecht, was an SPD deputy in the Reichstag. The son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, he vigorously denounced the conflict in December 1914, and thereafter his principled antiwar stance gained him considerable support among Berlin workers as well as other antiwar oppositionists within the SPD. In June 1915 a small group of Internationalists convened in Liebknecht's apartment, including Luxemburg (who had briefly been freed from confinement) and prepared an open letter to the SPD's executive, protesting the party leadership's pro-war and class-collaborationist policies. The dissidents also sent the letter—which was widely distributed as a leaflet—to as many trade union and party functionaries as they could reach.

Buoyed by the favorable popular response to the letter and by the Zimmerwald conference in September, the rift within the SPD increased to the point that on December 29, in another Reichstag vote on war credits, twenty SPD delegates voted no, and another 22 abstained. Liebknecht and his associates, in turn, called a conference of antiwar delegates on January 1, 1916. Convening in Liebknecht's law office, the conference set itself the goal of forming a new organization and preparing a new party program. The conference was secret and included not only those who had signed the open letter but also representatives from Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Dresden, Leipzig, and other cities. For

security reasons, no notes or minutes were taken; but later comments by those present confirm that the meeting discussed Luxemburg's "theses" in the Junius Pamphlet as a possible program for their socialist organization.

Liebknecht, who initially held strong moral libertarian views, objected to the high degree of centralization that was advocated in the "theses," arguing that such strict international discipline would preclude popular spontaneity. Not only was Liebknecht committed to a notion of working-class spontaneity, but he also believed that a proletarian party should seek only to educate the proletariat, not to lead it. The proletariat, he believed, had the calling to seek humanity's spiritual regeneration and had to make its revolution guided by moral considerations. Luxemburg objected adamantly to this neo-Kantian motif, and the group adopted the "theses" as its program.

The new organization went on to publish an illegal antiwar newsletter, under the pseudonym "Spartacus" (after the leader of a large slave revolt in ancient Rome). These *Spartakusbriefe* (Spartacus letters) denounced the imperialist war and the SPD for supporting it—and at the same time provided news of the growing antiwar sentiment within the SPD. Liebknecht, who wrote the first letter, was followed by Luxemburg, and after both were incarcerated, other Spartacus members took their place. Once the group found a bold enough press, its newsletter reached ever more SPD dissidents and other opponents of the war.

Finally, to overcome its isolation from the German proletariat, Spartacus held an explicitly antiwar protest at Berlin's Potsdamer Platz on May Day 1916. (To its disgrace, the official SPD leadership had suspended the May Day celebrations during the war in the interest of "civil peace.") The rally nonetheless attracted some 10,000 supporters—a huge number, under the circumstances—who eagerly listened to Liebknecht and other speakers vigorously denounce working-class fratricide and call for proletarian internationalism. Police broke up the protest, arrested Liebknecht, and dragged him away as he shouted, "Down with the war! Down with the government!" The SPD Reichstag caucus, in turn, lifted his parliamentary immunity, leaving him open to prosecution.

If anything made the German public aware of Spartacus, it was Liebknecht's trial and his conviction for "high treason and treason in war." The trial, which began on June 28, 1916, occurred before a secret military court, making it impossible for his denunciatory speeches to reach a broad public. He was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, which a higher military court increased to four years and one month. To

protest his conviction, his sympathizers in several industrial cities organized Germany's first large-scale political strike against the war.

Arrests of other Spartacus leaders quickly followed. On July 10 Luxemburg, who had been released the previous January, was placed in indefinite "protective custody." The arrest and detention of the group's leaders, however, proved very costly. Although its literature still circulated among the more class-conscious workers and soldiers, Spartacus was relatively inactive for the rest of 1916 and the greater part of 1917.

SPLITS IN GERMAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

As casualties mounted along the front, the prospect of a short conflict gave way to the reality of prolonged trench warfare at the front and growing hunger at home. By 1915 and 1916 the SPD began to splinter on the war issue. Publicly the party still maintained a nearly unified pro-war stance, and when the time came for the SPD *Fraktion* (caucus) in the Reichstag to cast its ballots on war credits, it always maintained party discipline and voted unanimously in support of the government. (Liebknecht, Otto Ruhle, and Eduard Bernstein were the notable exceptions.) But the *Fraktion's* internal votes, which were held to determine the party's position for Reichstag votes, were another matter. On August 3, 1914, its members had favored war credits by 78 to 14. A year later, on August 17, 1915, SPD supporters had declined to 68 in favor, while the number of opponents had increased to 31. On December 14 of the same year the vote tally was 58 to 38. On March 24, 1916—the year the government cracked down on Spartacus—those who favored war credits fell to only 44, while 36 voted in opposition. These internal votes were not made known to the general public, and the mounting internal quarrel was muted; indeed, the tally was reported only by the Spartacus newsletter.

Against the dissidents the SPD majority, which had enormous resources at its disposal, made demagogic appeals to "party unity," and tried to portray the refractory tendencies as apostates from the cause of the working class itself. On March 24, 1916, however, the myth of SPD unity was finally dispelled when eighteen SPD deputies defied party discipline and openly voted against war credits in the Reichstag itself. Aghast at this breach in discipline, the SPD majority expelled the deputies from the parliamentary *Fraktion* (although not from the party). But the

expellees remained Reichstag deputies, and as such they formed a bloc of their own, which they called the Social Democratic Workers' Alliance (Sozialdemokratische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, or SAG). Among SAG's principal figures were Karl Kautsky, Georg Ledebour, and Hugo Haase. These moderates and centrists opposed the war—but they also disapproved of the Spartacists as well, who called for a radical separation of the socialist movement from the Second International. SAG members were by no means revolutionaries—their main concern, as historian A. J. Ryder puts it, was to "salvage as much as they could from the wreck of socialist internationalism."²

The Spartacists, in turn, openly criticized SAG for placing far too much emphasis on parliamentary activity rather than mass action. As Spartacus receded into the background after its repression, however, SAG moved to the foreground as the political home for antiwar socialists. By carrying on an antiwar campaign among the broad mass of the people, the Alliance hoped to win over enough SPD local branches to gain a majority at the next party congress. Significantly, however, most SPD locals decided to remain with the majority, leaving SAG short of its goal.

The intraparty division widened in the fall of 1916, when SAG members and sympathizers gained editorial control over a number of local party periodicals, leading to a decisive clash with the SPD's executive over control of the party press. Regional party executive committees, adhering to the Majority, forced the dissidents to give up editorial control and even urged government censors to remove "objectionable" wording and articles. The conflict reached a climax when *Vorwärts*, the SPD organ, published articles critical of the party's pro-war policy. In October 1916 military authorities suspended the periodical, allowing it to reappear only when the party executive installed a new editor-in-chief.

Many SAG members were reluctant to break with the SPD altogether. A complete split, it was felt, would cut them off from SPD resources and diminish their influence among party members. When the formal split finally did come, ironically, it was not SAG that precipitated it. On January 7, 1917, SAG held a national conference to discuss ideas and strategy, which the Majority Social Democrats labeled a provocation and used as a pretext to expel the SAG faction from the party. On January 16 the SPD announced that any party member who adhered to SAG could no longer be regarded as a party member. This decision applied not only to parliamentarians in the Reichstag but to rank-and-file members throughout Germany.

Following the split, the only realistic alternative open to the SAG was to designate itself as a new party, which the SAG leaders were reluctant to

do. Accordingly, they "continued to conduct their struggle with the supporters of the party executive as though it were still an intraparty matter," as David W. Morgan observes in his history of the Independents.

But presently the SAG had to face the reality that a split had occurred. ... When the party executive expelled the entire Leipzig district organization, when it established its own organizations in one after another of the Berlin constituencies, when it severed relations with the existing organizations in Braunschweig, Bremen, Erfurt, Königsberg, and other major cities, schism was a fact.³

On April 6 and 7, 1917, the expelled SAG deputies and their supporters symbolically met at Gotha and cautiously founded the German Independent Social Democratic Party (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or USPD). Its leaders included not only Kautsky, Haase, and Ledebour but also Bernstein, Kurt Eisner, and Joseph Herzfeld. The party staked out a position opposing the war but otherwise retained all the trappings—ideological as well as organizational—of its parent organization. "The new party began life on the defensive," notes Morgan, "the product as much of expulsion as of the search for an independent path."⁴ With characteristic obtuseness the government subjected the wavering Independents to police harassment and legal persecution, notwithstanding their legal status as a parliamentary *Fraktion*.

The USPD, it should be emphasized, was no inconsequential splinter: it had approximately 100,000 members in March 1917 (compared with about 240,000 for the Majority); and it had majorities in municipal councils in Greater Berlin, Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt, Brunswick, and Frankfurt am Main, with organizations in many other regions and municipalities. Spartacus, by contrast, had at most a few hundred members; most Spartacists who had not been imprisoned in 1916 joined the USPD and became its left-wing faction, in the hope of winning the Independents to their views.

Significantly, the SPD majority held on to most of the party's members, as well as 66 of its 80 daily newspapers, most of its executive and cadres, and its very considerable financial resources. In outlook the Majority's principal leaders were parliamentarians and trade unionists: Friedrich Ebert, a shrewd labor leader and bureaucrat who in 1913 had become party co-chairman (together with Hugo Haase, who later gave up his position to join SAG); Philipp Scheidemann, an organization man who became SPD co-chairman in 1917; and Gustav Noske, a Reichstag deputy

who fancied himself the party's expert in military affairs and strongly identified with the Prussian military elite. All of these men also had working-class backgrounds but typically displayed a singular lack of interest in Marxist theory, basically accepting Bernstein's view that socialism would gradually be achieved by piecemeal reforms, as distinguished from revolution. As the war went on, they became fervent nationalists, even respectful subjects of the monarchy. Finally, their desire to gain a share of governmental power and integrate themselves into German society became increasingly explicit. That these men regarded themselves as socialists—apart from the careers that they found in the party's bureaucracy—reveals the extent to which German socialism had immersed itself in deference to authority.

Indeed, SPD interpretations of Marxism emphasized that objective forces would automatically impel capitalism toward socialism, thereby eliminating the need for the party to generate a proactive revolutionary movement. Nor did Independent leaders like Karl Kautsky dispel this notion of the SPD's lack of function. In his 1918 pamphlet *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* Kautsky contended that Germany was not yet ready for a socialist society because, although it had reached an advanced economic stage, it had not yet become a liberal republic. Once the labor movement acquired *political* power through parliamentary majorities, it could establish a socialist *economy*.⁵ Although the SPD and the USPD quarreled about the war, they shared fealty to this hallowed social democratic notion—and both shared a common fear of Bolshevism, which they saw as alien to German cultural and social conditions.

POPULAR OPPOSITION TO THE WAR

By 1917 the tide of opposition to the war was rising in Germany. On the Western Front the Imperial Army suffered terrible losses, while Britain's naval blockade reduced the food ration of German civilians to a near-starvation level of 1,000 calories daily. The mortality rate among children increased by 50 percent over that of 1913. In April 1917 the United States entered the war, and while the American government was conscripting and training its troops, it shipped immense quantities of food and munitions across the Atlantic and provided financial support to the Allied powers, decisively shifting the balance of the conflict in the Allies' favor.

In the summer of 1917 the Reichstag passed a peace resolution that renounced annexations, but the German Supreme Command blocked it,

as it did all other peace initiatives. In 1916 Erich von Ludendorff, the head of the army, was given dictatorial powers over Germany's economy, domestic affairs, and foreign policy, thereby all but unseating the Kaiser and replacing him with a duumvirate, of himself and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the army chief of staff.

But food shortages, inflation, and increases in the working day gradually convinced German workers that "civil peace" served only to drag out the hopeless conflict. In May and June 1916 food riots had erupted in different parts of the Reich. What had been war weariness in 1916 was now developing into outright opposition. In the spring of 1917 the government cut the bread rations nationwide, and mass protest strikes broke out in Berlin, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Halle, and Brunswick. The strikers called for adequate food rations, an end to martial law, a free and equal franchise (to replace the Prussian three-class suffrage system)—and above all peace. Nothing in these demands had the whiff of an insurrection, although the Leipzig workers conducted their strike under the auspices of a workers' council, Germany's first, emulating the soviets that had sprung up in Russia.

In July 1917 the sailors in Wilhelmshaven, the North Sea port that was home to the Imperial Navy's main base, decided to protest against their miserable rations by electing commissions to distribute food equitably. This action was no simple food protest; it would also be a demand for peace. The Independents, who had acquired considerable influence among the sailors, advised them to act peaceably. On the appointed July day several hundred sailors stopped loading the ships in port and marched through the city. Several sailors were arrested and then courtmartialed as mutineers, including two who were rushed off to Cologne and shot. It is likely that the naval command feared that a public execution would trigger a full-scale uprising.

In the large munitions plants workers began to form a labor opposition to the war. The metalworking trades in particular objected to the industrial truce that the trade union leadership had imposed at the start of the war. In March 1916 the SPD-controlled metallurgical union—the largest union in Germany—had split into two wings, one of which supported the industrial truce and the other opposed it as class collaboration.

Normally, when workers were discontented, trade unions handled their grievances, voicing them and negotiating with the government. However the wartime "civil peace" prevented union leaders from acting on the workers' behalf, which meant that factory discontent fell to the shop stewards (that is, union functionaries at the shop-floor level) to

handle. It was they who now filled the gap opened up by the unions' surrender to the employers. Meeting illegally in the industrial cities, especially in the armaments factories, the shop stewards formed a network that extended to Stuttgart, Bremen, Brunswick, Düsseldorf, Leipzig, Halle—and most prominently Berlin. They were explicitly opposed to the war and commonly identified with the Independents, but in many cases their social views placed them well to the left of the USPD; indeed in Stuttgart, Brunswick, and Düsseldorf they tilted toward the intractable Spartacists.

The Berlin shop stewards in particular formed a movement that designated itself the Revolutionary Shop Stewards of the Large Factories of Greater Berlin (Die revolutionäre Obleute und Vertrauensmänner der Grossbetriebe Gross-Berlins), which began to eclipse the trade unions in influence. Led by an executive committee of carefully structured factory-based cadres, the movement was formed on the initiative of Richard Müller, a USPD member whom the government regarded with such fear that it conscripted him into the army in April 1917. (He had previously been declared physically unfit for military service.) The shop stewards were courted by both the Spartacists and the USPD; but for some time they prudently remained neutral in their political affiliations. Then, apparently concluding that the Spartacists were so unruly that they tended to alienate the ordinary workers on the shop floor, they drew closer to the USPD.

The shop stewards, mostly middle-aged men with families, possessed valuable skills and had been given military deferments to provide vital manpower for the war industries. But their participation in an ostensibly revolutionary movement exposed them to the risk of immediate conscription and frontline duties. Nor could they hope for any assistance from the trade unions, whose leaders were fervently pro-war and supported the Majority Social Democrats. But in the spring of 1918 the Brest-Litovsk negotiations and Bolshevik appeals for proletarian aid from the West heightened the antiwar sentiment that was growing among workers in the Central Powers, who were infuriated by the demands that the German generals were imposing upon the Bolsheviks. They thrilled to Trotsky's acerbic denunciations of the war and its perpetrators. When the Left Communists and SRs—who opposed the Brest-Litovsk treaty—excoriated the German advances into Ukraine, their words resonated throughout Central Europe. During January 14–20 a dramatic antiwar general strike erupted in Austria and Hungary. That same month Richard Müller was released from the army, whereupon he immediately set to work to organize a similar strike in Germany. Working with the

Independents, the shop stewards formed a strike committee composed of eleven workers and three Independents (Ledebour, Haase, and Wilhelm Dittmann). The stewards even invited the Majority SPD to participate on the committee, perhaps in the hope that they would refuse. But shrewdly Ebert, Scheidemann, and Gustav Bauer joined, if only to try to retain their influence with the metalworkers. Everyone ignored the Spartacists.

A leaflet was widely distributed calling on all German workers to strike in support of peace without annexations or indemnities, more adequate food rations, an end to martial law, release of political prisoners, and equal suffrage in Prussia. On January 27, 1918, delegates from all the major industries of Berlin and its environs met and unanimously decided, under Müller's influence, to down tools the next day in a general strike. The following day, a Monday, 400,000 Berlin workers left their factories, as they did in Hamburg, Kiel, Brunswick, Cologne, Breslau, Nuremberg, and other industrial centers. The strike, which the Independents estimated involved a million workers, was strongest in Berlin and the northern shipyard cities. A strike of such magnitude had never been seen in Germany before, let alone during wartime.

The Supreme Command responded on January 31 by imposing military law, rounding up hundreds of strikers, and conscripting them into the army. Thousands of army reserves were ordered to join their active units. *Vorwärts*, which had done such good service for the government, was provocatively suspended. With renewed intransigence, the government flatly refused to meet with the strike committee, let alone negotiate with it. As Arthur Rosenberg notes, a general strike of a political nature "either develops into an open warfare for political power that ends in victory or defeat, or it collapses through the strikers' want of money or food."⁶ While Hugo Haase, of the USPD, urged the strike committee to accept the government's harsh terms, the Spartacists called upon the committee to continue the strike, if only in sheer defiance. The Berlin Military District made it a military offense for strikers not to report to work on the morning of February 4. Faced with this ultimatum, and the waning of the strike outside the capital, the shop stewards (who made up the majority on the strike committee) chose to end the strike on February 3.

The strike was a major demonstration of proletarian antiwar sentiment, but it failed to change the government's war policy. Müller was put back in uniform; to replace him as chairman of their executive committee, the shop stewards chose a militant and astute younger man, Emil Barth, who quite bluntly and simply devoted his energy to organizing an uprising.

THE END OF THE REICH

The spring of 1918 saw the German Imperial Army undertake a historic gamble. On March 21 Ludendorff, now the virtual dictator of Germany and its supreme military commander, launched a massive military offensive to seize Paris—and thereby achieve a decisive victory before a significant number of American troops could arrive in Europe. In its huge offensive the German army succeeded in opening a fourteen-mile bulge in north-central France. By June it had brought Paris within range of its long-range artillery. Inside the Reich these early successes quieted much of the opposition to the war.

But the Allies were far from defeated. Commanded by Marshal Ferdinand Foch, on June 18 Allied armies (including nine American divisions) cut into the German salient. This action was decisive. In September Allied armies launched their final offensive, rolling the half-starved German troops back under its furious impact. The Americans brought fresh men to the Allied trenches and filled Allied military depots with vast quantities of *matériel*. Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria quickly sued for peace, which threatened to open a wide gap in Germany's southern flank and expose the Kaiser's empire to a full-scale Allied invasion. Germany finally lost confidence in its ability to hold back the Allied forces. In all, the Reich suffered 600,000 casualties in the failed offensive. Morale among the surviving soldiers and civilians plummeted, as the soldiers came to realize that the war was definitively lost. The privations suffered by civilians had become intolerable. Germany's exhaustion was complete.

Although the German Supreme Command feared that its troops formerly stationed in the East had been "bolshevized" by the Russians to one degree or another, this fear was largely unfounded. Most frontline German soldiers remained loyal to the Fatherland. The red flag, frequently seen among the troops, was more an expression of protest than a call to revolution. Discipline and patriotism still exercised a strong hold on the ordinary German soldier. Most of the German army, in fact, was not even mutinous—it retreated back across the Rhine in surprisingly good order and, for the most part, retained its discipline and military obedience.

When the Supreme Command saw that Germany could not win the war, Ludendorff and his nominal superior Hindenburg traveled to its headquarters in Spa, Belgium. There they confronted the Kaiser with the stark truth and urged him to seek an armistice with the Allies within 24 hours. Ludendorff, in the hope of securing good peace terms from the

Americans, also insisted that Germany had to become a constitutional monarchy with a sovereign legislature. For whatever reason the Kaiser agreed. On October 3, 1918, he and the Supreme Command appointed Prince Max of Baden to assume the chancellorship. This fairly moderate prince accepted on condition that the Majority Socialists be permitted to enter his cabinet. Baden realized that for his government to survive, it needed the participation of the SPD, with its large popular base. Baden's condition was accepted.

The SPD, in the climax of its long reformist trek, agreed to join this clearly bourgeois government. The coalition formed on October 4 included three Majority Social Democrats—Scheidemann, Gustav Bauer, and Eduard David—along with members of three bourgeois parties, the Progressives, the Center, and the National Liberals. The new government set two chief tasks for itself. Its first task was to reform the German governmental system. A new constitution was drawn up that renounced Ludendorff's dictatorship and abolished the imperial regime in which the Kaiser was the supreme ruler and warlord. It established a parliamentary monarchy, in which the Reichstag had a decisive say in all aspects of domestic and foreign policy. Finally, chancellors and ministers owed their authority to the Reichstag, not to the Kaiser or any monarch. The new constitution went into effect on October 28.

The government's second task was to end the war. Within a few hours of becoming chancellor, Max of Baden sent a note to the American president, Woodrow Wilson, requesting an armistice. Wilson responded by demanding that Germany evacuate France and Belgium. In a third note (dated October 23) Wilson seemed to require the abdication of the Kaiser as a precondition for the armistice; like the other Allies, he saw the Kaiser as the instigator of a catastrophic war that had claimed the lives of many millions, and as the epitome of Prussian militarism.

Most of Germans were ready for peace on almost any terms. Even diehard monarchists realized that the Kaiser had to abdicate before an armistice was possible. Prince Max tried to induce Wilhelm to abdicate voluntarily, in favor of a regency for one of his six sons, but Wilhelm clung tenaciously to power and flatly refused. It was plain to all concerned that if the petulant Kaiser would not abdicate all his titles, he had to be tricked into doing so.

NOTES

1. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in the German Social Democracy" (April 1915), in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 330. The "Theses" were not smuggled out of Luxemburg's prison cell until December, three months after the Zimmerwald conference came to an end.
2. A. J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1918: A Study of German Socialism in War and Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 70.
3. David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party 1917-1922* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 51-2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
5. Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, trans. H. J. Stenning (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 12. Kautsky's thesis interposed an additional "stage" in Germany's march to secularism and thereby rendered its contours more vague and difficult to conceptualize.
6. Arthur Rosenberg, *The Birth of the German Republic, 1871-1918* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 213.

CHAPTER 54 The German Uprisings of 1918

THE KIEL MUTINY AND ITS SEQUELAE

While the new chancellor pleaded with the Kaiser to abdicate, another problem emerged. No sooner had Prince Max sent notes to Wilson soliciting an armistice than General Ludendorff—who had previously insisted upon an armistice—reversed himself. Ludendorff now urged the army to call upon the German people to carry out a desperate act: a mass mobilization in defense of the Fatherland (not unlike the French revolutionary *levée en masse* of 1793). The Supreme Command rejected this reckless proposal and dismissed Ludendorff as head of the army, replacing him with General Wilhelm Groener, the chief of staff of the army of occupation in Russia.

But Ludendorff's defiance was contagious, and his wishes were echoed in the Imperial Navy headquarters, located at the Baltic port of Kiel. For most of the war Germany's huge battleships had remained at anchorage at Kiel, Wilhelmshaven, and Hamburg; they were considered too expensive to waste on a losing battle with Britain's superior naval forces. Moreover, these three northern port cities were home to the navy's largest, most disaffected, and most restless crews.*

The naval commanders at Kiel, sympathetic to Ludendorff's grand

* It is not surprising that the sailors who had been made idle by the naval command's fear of the British fleet were to raise red flags on their vessels. Many of these sailors lived in close contact with workers, who behaved as if they were immune to conscription. By contrast, combat naval forces such as the submariners and destroyer personnel were obedient to their officers throughout the war, despite the grave risks they faced at sea.

gesture, began to make plans to engage the British fleet. Aware that the war was already lost, they knew that any peace agreement dictated by the Allies would require the navy abjectly to surrender its ships to the enemy. Rather than so sully the honor of the Imperial Navy, they were eager to uphold it by doing battle, however hopelessly, with the British enemy, and inasmuch as such a conflict would be suicidal, they kept their plans from the sailors by claiming that ships were being sent into the English Channel to disrupt communication between French and British forces.

This improbable claim did not deceive the sailors, who understood all too well that the mission would be their "death cruise." It was well known, in fact, that the imperial government had been negotiating an armistice for three weeks, and that a ceasefire would likely soon be announced. With their lives at stake, they turned against their irresponsible officers. During the strike of January 1918 they had formed a sailors' council, which lingered in their collective memory as a means of resistance. On October 30, when Admiral von Hipper gave the order for the ships to set sail, the sailors refused to obey, and the stokers put out the fires in their boilers. In the face of this intransigence, the naval command was obliged to rescind its order, but it arrested the mutinous sailors—as many as 800—and imprisoned them pending courts martial on shore.

A few days later, on November 3, the sailors from other naval vessels in the port, led by Karl Altel and Arthur Popp, held a rally on Kiel's exercise field, where the Naval Academy was located. As the sailors listened, joined by local workers, the speakers demanded the immediate release of their imprisoned comrades, a full pardon for their uprising, and an end to officers' humiliating forms of address. They demanded that enlisted men have the authority to approve the officers' operational plans, and adding fuel to the flames, they called for the abdication of the Kaiser, the creation of a German republic, an end to martial law, and equal suffrage for men and women! To push for their demands, the protesters formed a workers' and sailors' council, or *Rat*, then marched through Kiel, singing revolutionary songs and raising red flags.

These German sailors were actually not quite revolutionary in temperament, and their march was dispersed by the rifle fire of a mere officers' patrol, which left behind six dead and 29 wounded. But the shootings elevated the political temperature in Kiel, and on the following day, November 4, sailors broke into the ships' arsenals and sallied forth into Kiel's streets bearing weapons. Lacking an alternative force, the authorities sent ordinary troops against them, with the predictable result that the soldiers not only refused to fire on their naval comrades but went over to their side. While the sailors broke into the prison and freed their

comrades, the Kiel workers went on a general strike, and the city soon found itself in the hands of the workers' and sailors' council. The city's government authorities fled in panic.

Whether these sailors and soldiers identified with any socialist party is difficult to discern with any certainty. They raised the usual red flags, but those flags were just as likely to stand for a bourgeois republic and improved living conditions as for the creation of a vaguely conceived socialist order. What is clear is that the Kiel mutiny of November 1918 was the opening volley in a period of intense social unrest in Central Europe that was to continue well into 1923, during which—in the eyes of many historians—the fate of Europe itself seemed to hang in the balance. Could a successful revolutionary movement sweep across the continent and open an epoch of world revolution?

In Germany the Majority SPD leaders—whose party was now part of the government of Prince Max—showed no willingness to rise to a revolutionary challenge. The SPD leadership, in fact, opposed a proletarian insurrection—in principle as well as practice—and the Kiel mutiny alarmed the party's chairman, Friedrich Ebert, as well as Kautsky and Haase. As the end of the war drew into sight, the old dispute between the right-wing Independents and the Majority Social Democrats—over war credits—had become moot. Around this time, moreover, fleeing Mensheviks and SRs from Russia arrived in Germany and gave accounts of Bolshevik repression that reinforced old fears of insurrection. The idea that the Spartacists might carry out a Bolshevik-type revolution in Germany—creating a "dictatorship" of any kind—struck terror in the hearts of members of the Majority SPD and the USPD right wing alike. German socialists feared that a proletarian revolution would bring to power the insurrectionary elements in the working class—who even as a class formed a minority of the German people. The middle classes, whose technical expertise and experience were indispensable for creating a socialist society, would have no political or administrative role. Germany's political and economic structure, it was argued, should be determined not by a minority proletarian dictatorship, but by a constituent assembly, which would bring about a peaceful transition to a liberal parliamentary government supported by the majority of the German people. Socialism, whatever that word meant to the SPD, would have to be deferred to a less turbulent and more reflective time.

Hence when Ebert heard about the Kiel mutiny, his government dispatched the SPD chieftain, Gustav Noske, to the port to keep the sailors in line. Noske arrived on November 4 and recognized that the rebellion—with 40,000 well-armed if highly confused mutineers—should not be

suppressed by force. Shrewdly, he decided to "join" the rebellion, apparently with the intention of taking control of and taming it. When the sailors greeted him enthusiastically, offering to make him co-chairman of the Kiel sailors' council, he quickly agreed and even permitted himself to be made governor of the city. He helped the sailors and workers form committees to draw up a list of moderate demands (and set aside the more radical ones) to convey to Berlin. When Hugo Haase arrived shortly afterward, at the request of the USPD sailors in Kiel, the Independent chieftain "found no reason to disagree with what Noske was doing," as A. J. Ryder observes. The harmony that reigned between Noske and Haase in Kiel, however, was "possible only because [the mutiny] was not really a political revolution. The sailors were basically concerned only to save their lives and end the war."¹

The Kiel mutiny triggered a series of events that were far too numerous and consequential for the government to moderate. In the next few days, bands of armed sailors left Kiel and moved from city to city, spreading news of the mutiny and inspiring more radical locals to follow suit. On November 4–8, inspired by the example of the Russian soviets, workers and soldiers throughout Germany formed thousands of councils in virtually bloodless uprisings.

The earliest of these uprisings flared up in northern cities such as Bremen, Cuxhaven, and Hamburg, and then swept southward into Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Kassel, Hanover, and Stuttgart, even reaching the front lines. In each city the sequence of events was more or less the same. A naval mutiny or a workers' strike would depose the old bureaucrats by electing insurgent leaders, who would call for an armistice and an end to Ludendorff's military dictatorship. The conservative forces, too frightened or demoralized by the army's military defeat to offer significant resistance, would dissolve into the background. Garrison troops, in turn, would cross over *en masse* to the side of the rebels.* The insurgents would transform preexisting institutions into councils, or *Räte*: sailors' food committees would commonly become sailors' councils; workers' strike committees would become workers' councils. Councils of a relatively combative temper tended to lead the uprisings, but they

* One of the curious paradoxes of the uprisings was the fact that the most restive soldiers were not the combat troops on the Western Front but the men in the rear. Troops that were garrisoned in towns and cities were in contact with civilian revolutionary propagandists, who made a continuous and deliberate effort to spread antiwar literature among the troops or try to reach them when they were on leave.

would soon be superseded by more moderate ones comprising SPD bureaucrats, trade union leaders, former government officials, and even army officers. Workers allowed many *Räte* to speak on their behalf even when they were in no sense radical, let alone revolutionary.

This overall pattern saw many local variations. In Hamburg the Left Radicals established a Red Guard—potentially a momentous act because it gave the workers an armed force to back up their demands—and took over the city's largest newspaper, the *Hamburger Echo*, renaming it *Die rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) and naming as its editor-in-chief a Communist, Paul Frölich. Hamburg's workers' and soldiers' council arose as a result of a general strike, and on November 8 boldly proclaimed itself the sole authority in the city. The local SPD organization bitterly opposed the takeover and demanded that the old municipal government be restored to power in the city. Aided by left-wing Independents, however, the council retained control of Hamburg, even after the old municipal government was partially reinstated a week later. Hamburg was now freighted with a dual power; in time one of the two components would have to give way to the other. In Brunswick, a very radical administration—the council—not only established a Red Guard but purged the courts and even went so far as to expropriate several factories and the landed estates of the local duke.

Perhaps most remarkable was the appearance of a full-scale council government in Munich, a city noted for its conservative politics, and of a council republic in Bavaria as a whole. These changes were led by a Jewish Social Democrat from Berlin, Kurt Eisner, an aesthete and bohemian Independent. But the region's peasants—who ordinarily had no sympathy for Jewish aesthetes—were profoundly disenchanted by the old regime, which had sent their sons in large numbers to be slaughtered in war and extravagantly requisitioned their grain. Eisner, a talented journalist and a charismatic leader, had gained a considerable following in Munich and rallied a modest portion of the peasants around himself.

Württemberg established a council republic on November 7, which the Social Democrats joined only to prevent it from falling under the influence of Eisner and the Spartacists. In Leipzig, on November 8, the Independents formed workers' and soldiers' councils linked by a joint executive, as in the Petrograd Soviet. On November 14 the workers' councils of Dresden, Leipzig, and Chemnitz issued a manifesto announcing that a proletarian revolution had occurred and promising to socialize production, abolish unearned income, arm the people, and replace the existing law courts with more proletarian systems of justice. It was one of the most ambitious attempts during the German upheaval to establish a Communist regime. But it was very shortlived. A week later the Dresden

council called for free elections, with results that were devastating for the revolutionaries. The city's electorate voted 47 Majority SPD members into the council as against only three Independents—a telling illustration of the nonrevolutionary temperament of most German workers in 1918.

BERLIN: NOVEMBER 9

On October 23 a general amnesty for political prisoners had freed the now legendary Karl Liebknecht from prison. Upon his arrival in Berlin that same day, he was greeted joyously by a demonstration of 20,000 people, who pulled his flower-decked wagon to the new Soviet embassy. There he was welcomed personally, in the name of the Russian Revolution, by Adolf Joffe, the first Soviet ambassador to Germany, and by Nikolai Bukharin, both of whom shared Lenin's optimistic expectation that Germany would soon see a revolution comparable to October 1917 in Russia. A message from the Soviet government arrived, signed by Lenin, Sverdlov, and Stalin, declaring: "The liberation from prison of the representative of the revolutionary workers of Germany"—Liebknecht—"is the portent of a new era, the era of victorious socialism, which is now opening up both for Germany and for the whole world."² Bukharin, according to one observer, felt after conversing with Liebknecht that the latter was "in complete agreement with us."³ But as an advocate of revolutionary spontaneity and an opponent of a centralized party, Liebknecht would hardly have been in complete agreement with the Bolsheviks. His support for direct action, shock tactics, and adventurist tactics would have made him more a Bakuninist than a Bolshevik.

Two weeks later, on November 8, the "red tide" of revolution seemed about to engulf the Reich's capital—much to the jubilation of Liebknecht and the other Spartacists, as well as the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the left wing of the Independents. Notwithstanding the radical reputation of the Berlin proletariat, however, it was the SPD that enjoyed the largest following among the capital's working masses. To the dismay of Ebert and Scheidemann (Noske was still in Kiel), Berlin and indeed all of Germany seemed to be teetering perilously on the precipice of Bolshevism. The SPD leaders made a deliberate decision to prevent left radicals from establishing a socialist republic. They agreed with Prince Max that "to combat the Revolution we must conjure up the democratic idea"⁴—that is, establish a bourgeois republic. In effect, the SPD functioned as a liberal party draped in a red flag.

Meanwhile, despite the tumultuous crowds that filled Berlin's streets, Prince Max was still unable to induce the Kaiser to abdicate. Not even the promise of a regency produced the desired effect—in fact, much to Max's chagrin, the monarch was talking publicly of renewing the war effort. On November 7 the chancellor, at his wit's end, decided to depart for Spa to confront the Kaiser face to face. Before leaving, however, he sought the support of the Social Democrats in forming a new government. As he notes in his memoirs, he personally asked Ebert: "If I succeed in convincing the Kaiser [to abdicate], can I count on your support in fighting the Social Revolution?" Ebert's answer was unhesitating and unequivocal: "Unless the Kaiser abdicates, the Social Revolution is inevitable. But I will have none of it; I hate it like sin."⁵ Thus was social revolution anathematized, not by a lowly SPD functionary, but by the chairman of Germany's largest socialist party—and to a German prince! Satisfied with Ebert's reply, Max concluded: "I believed I had concluded not only a Treaty to tide me over a few days but an Alliance backed by a common determination to save the country from revolution."⁶

That same day a caucus of the Social Democrats in Max's cabinet found themselves in an awkward situation. The SPD had planned 26 mass meetings for that night; popular feeling was running very high in favor of the Kaiser's abdication, and those who attended the meetings would surely demand it. To preserve their popular support and keep the masses from shifting their loyalty to the Independents, the Social Democrats had to present themselves as demanding abdication. On November 7, therefore, the SPD caucus drew up a formal ultimatum for Prince Max: if Wilhelm did not abdicate by noon on November 8, the Social Democrats would resign from Max's government—which would immediately fall. This ultimatum was to be read aloud at all 26 of the planned mass meetings. Ebert and Scheidemann delivered the document to Max personally that afternoon, before he had a chance to depart for Spa. Inasmuch as Max knew that he could not induce an abdication by that deadline, he remained in Berlin to plead with the SPD cabinet members for more time. At length the cabinet members agreed to extend their deadline to nine o'clock on the morning of November 9.

On that same November 8 at Compiègne the German armistice commission received the Allied terms for the armistice. At the same time news was pouring into Berlin telling of victorious council "revolutions" in many parts of Germany, presumably led by fiery Bolsheviks or their German equivalents. To spur on the revolution in Berlin, groups of radical sailors stationed in the northern port cities, who called themselves the People's Naval Division, boarded trains bound for the capital. Arriving on

November 8–9, these well-armed men holed up in the Kaiser's Palace and its adjacent stone horse stable, the Marstall, to await further developments.

They did not have to wait long. The next day, November 9, the general strike finally reached the German capital, forcing the question of the republic. Tens of thousands of gaunt Berlin workers, preceded by women and children, left their homes and factories in every part of Greater Berlin and arranged themselves in columns. Carrying red flags and placards addressed to the garrison troops pleading, "Brothers, no shooting!" they marched toward the city's center, where they surrounded the main government buildings, particularly the Reichstag and the Palace, filling the great avenues and squares. The garrison soldiers, upon whom the government was relying to repel the crowds, went over to the side of the demonstrators, many riding on trucks bedecked with red flags. They cheered and were cheered by the masses, but the cheers lacked jubilation, given the fact that Germany had lost a war and was suffering extreme hardships. Neither the USPD nor the Spartacists had played a decisive role in organizing the strike or the demonstration; rather, Emil Barth and his fellow shop stewards were most responsible for the popular uprising.

At 9 a.m., as no abdication had been announced, the Majority Social Democrats acted on their ultimatum and resigned from the government (which conveniently created the illusion that they had helped bring about the general strike and that the masses were loyally following their guidance). Meanwhile at Spa the Supreme Command finally succeeded in persuading the Kaiser that no German troops would follow him into a new military offensive—let alone defend his claim to the throne. Although the Kaiser became subdued, he still did not abdicate: even if he were no longer Kaiser, he said, he would retain his other title, King of Prussia. In Berlin, at around noon, Max, who had not heard from Spa, decided to force the situation: he publicly announced that "the Kaiser and King has resolved to renounce the throne"—which was actually only half true. Although the Kaiser's "abdication" never officially took place, it became a *de facto* reality as soon as Max announced it. The German Reich had come to an end. The chancellor "intends to propose," Max added, "... the appointment of Herr Ebert to the Chancellorship and the bringing of a bill ... for a German Constituent National Assembly."⁷

No sooner had Max made his noontime announcement than Ebert, accompanied by a delegation of Social Democrats, descended upon the Chancellery to arrange for the takeover of the government. But Max first asked him a few questions: Would his government maintain order? Would he call for a constituent assembly? Ebert replied satisfactorily to

both questions, and Max thereupon designated him chancellor. Later that afternoon, as Max prepared to return to Baden, he bade farewell to Chancellor Ebert, saying that he was placing the German Empire in his hands. Ebert, the "socialist," replied by affirming that he had given two sons for the Reich in the war.

But Ebert's chancellorship now faced the problem of gaining legitimacy. Max had had no right to name his successor; according to the old constitution, only the Kaiser could make such an appointment. The ministers had all resigned, and the Reichstag—like the Duma in Petrograd in February 1917—had all but disbanded. With the Chancellery and the Reichstag building empty, institutional power was in a vacuum. Ebert was more than ready to fill this vacuum, but as in Russia in February 1917, his would-be government first had to find a way to gain legitimacy.

As mass meetings and demonstrations swept over Berlin, the generals repeatedly tried to deploy line troops and even elite units to repress them. But these attempts invariably failed: almost every military unit, even those that the monarchy had pampered, now refused to fire on the people, and the soldiers either demobilized themselves or went over to the people's side, donating their weapons to the uprising.

The left radical tendencies, in turn, were addressing the problem of the political vacuum in their own various ways. The Spartacists took up the demand for workers' and soldiers' councils: on November 8 they published a pamphlet calling for the election of councils in all factory and military units in the country. Following the Bolsheviks, they demanded "all power" to the councils, insisting that they assume all governmental authority. On the afternoon of November 9 Spartacists invaded the offices of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*, a local newspaper, drove out the editors, and established their own daily newspaper, *Die rote Fahne*. Rosa Luxemburg, who had just been freed from jail in Breslau, arrived in Berlin that day and hurried to the newspaper offices, where she was made editor. The first issue of *Die rote Fahne* appeared that evening, demanding that revolutionary socialists boycott any government that contained the SPD. But the Spartacists—who may have numbered about 50 committed people in Berlin—lacked both the personnel and the military force to be regarded as a significant influence on the events of November 9.

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards shared the goal of empowering the councils—and had genuine influence. That same afternoon Emil Barth and other shop stewards met in the Reichstag building and constituted themselves as the "Provisional Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Berlin." They proceeded to organize a congress of left-oriented workers' and

soldiers' council delegates to be held the next day, on the premises of the Zirkus Busch. Together with the Spartacists and the left Independents, they worked throughout the night to help the councils elect delegates to the congress—who, they hoped, would create a new government that excluded the SPD.

The insurgents even had some armed forces potentially at their disposal. Emil Eichhorn, a left USPD militant, led a group of workers to the Berlin police headquarters, entered the building, and proclaimed himself the capital's new police president. The demonstrators commandeered a large cache of weapons, and Eichhorn set about creating a proletarian security guard or *Sicherheitswehr*. Another potential force was the People's Naval Division, which installed itself in the Palace and the adjacent Marstall. Comprising between 3,500 and 4,000 men, it constituted the single largest armed revolutionary force in the city. The Division proceeded to appoint itself the military guard of the new republic.

Meanwhile the Majority Social Democrats took over the Reichstag building and the old state's main office buildings. At around two o'clock in the afternoon Scheidemann was lunching in the Reichstag's restaurant, when a group of social democratic workers and soldiers rushed in to tell him that Liebknecht intended very soon to proclaim a soviet republic. With great deliberation Scheidemann (as he tells the story) put down his spoon and walked upstairs to a balcony, where he strode out and addressed an immense crowd. Chancellor Ebert, he said, was in the process of forming a republic. After concluding with the cry "Long live the German republic!" he returned to his table and finished his meal. When Ebert learned what Scheidemann had done, the SPD chieftain approached him, simmering with anger, and gave vent to his fury by banging his fist on the table and exclaiming, "You have no right to proclaim the republic! What becomes of Germany—whether she becomes a republic or something else [*sic*—is for the constituent assembly to decide."⁸ But Scheidemann's announcement was percolating throughout Berlin and turning from an airy slogan into a hard fact.

Two hours later, at around 4 p.m., Karl Liebknecht entered the Palace, the symbol of imperial authority, and strode to the balcony. There he made a proclamation of his own, which stated in part: "The day of the revolution has come. We have forced them to make a peace. As of this moment, peace is achieved. The old order is no more. The reign of the Hohenzollerns, who lived in this palace for centuries, is finished. We now proclaim the free socialist republic of Germany."⁹ But Liebknecht's proclamation was vacuous. The Spartacists were only a minuscule group,

and Liebknecht had only his personal reputation upon which to base his statements. By contrast, Ebert had not only the will but also a tangible organization with which to take power. On the morning of November 9 he had quickly invited the USPD to join the SPD in forming a provisional coalition government. Negotiations continued into the next day. The USPD Left opposed any collaboration with its parent organization, whose sycophantic behavior during the war years had stained it with class collaboration. The USPD Left still found that it was a minority: the party as a whole agreed to the SPD's invitation by setting six conditions for its participation in a coalition government.

1. Germany should be a socialist republic.
2. In this republic, all executive, legislative, and judicial power should rest exclusively in the hands of elected representatives of the entire toiling population and the soldiers [i.e., the workers' and soldiers' councils].
3. Exclusion of all bourgeois members from the government.
4. The USPD shall participate for only three days, as a temporary measure in order to form a government that can conclude an armistice.
5. The departmental ministers shall serve only as technical assistants to the cabinet itself, which shall make the decisions.
6. The two cabinet heads shall have equal rights.¹⁰

The SPD responded to the USPD's conditions one by one:

1. This demand is the goal of our own policy. However, the people must decide on this through the constituent assembly.
2. If by this demand you mean the dictatorship of one class, which does not have the support of the majority of the people, then we must reject this condition, because it contradicts our democratic principles.
3. We must reject this condition, because fulfilling it would seriously jeopardize our capacity to feed the people, if not make that task impossible.
4. We consider the collaboration of the socialist currents necessary at least until the convening of a constituent assembly.
5. We agree to this condition.
6. We favor all cabinet members having the same status. However, the constituent assembly must decide this.¹¹

By referring all the crucial decisions to a constituent assembly, the SPD

leaders were patently aware that they could effectively undermine any radical goals that resulted from a largely political revolution. Indeed, by the time a constituent assembly could be called, they knew, the radical tide of November would likely have receded, and the bourgeois parties would be able to mobilize their forces to strike back at the insurgents.

Had the USPD broken off negotiations then and there, refusing any collaboration with the SPD, events might have taken a more auspicious turn for the radicals and for Germany. But the USPD failed to take so revolutionary a turn. On the night of November 9–10, in fact, Hugo Haase returned from Kiel and Hamburg, and the popular groundswell that the USPD chairman now encountered so unnerved him that he veered—without difficulty—toward the rapid formation of a stable government. Upon his arrival at the negotiating table, he promptly reversed the USPD's position (without consulting the party membership) and agreed to participate in Ebert's government on several highly conciliatory conditions. First: "The cabinet must be composed only of Social Democrats . . . This restriction does not apply to the departmental ministers. They are only technical assistants for the cabinet, which makes the decisions." This strategic concession made it possible for members of bourgeois parties to remain departmental ministers, leaving the old governmental apparatus in the hands of bourgeois bureaucrats and guaranteeing that the German republic would not be socialist. Nor would the participation of the USPD in the government be temporary; the three-day limitation was abandoned, allowing the right wing of the USPD to outmaneuver the left wing. And the demand that "political power [must lie] in the hands of the workers and soldiers' councils" was reduced to a vague statement about council power, vitiated by Haase's allowance for a constituent assembly: "The constituent assembly question shall be posed only after the gains of the revolution have been consolidated; it is therefore reserved for further discussion."¹² Once a constituent assembly was convoked, it would almost certainly exclude the possibility of a workers' and soldiers' council government. Besides, after military demobilization, a soldiers' adjunct to a workers' government would become meaningless.

Having conceded, or shelved, their most important conditions, the USPD proceeded to form a government with the SPD. The six-person cabinet would consist of three members from each party: Ebert (co-chairman), Scheidemann, and Otto Landsberg would represent the SPD, while Haase (co-chairman), Barth, and Dittmann would represent the USPD. Barth agreed to join, so he said, to keep an eye on the SPD members.

All six of the new cabinet members professed to be Marxists, yet they

did nothing to heed Marx's stern warning that the old state machinery had to be smashed. As Arthur Rosenberg points out, "the individual Ministries each with its Secretary of State remained in existence. Among these Secretaries of State were to be found middle-class politicians belonging to the Centre and Liberal Parties."¹³ The Junker caste, the army officers, and the big capitalists still dominated German society. But the popular uprising surging through the streets outside had to be acknowledged, if only rhetorically. Accordingly, the two social democratic parties agreed to call their cabinet by a new name, one with Bolshevik overtones: the Council of People's Commissars (*Volksbeauftragte*).* The Council, however, would be conspicuously hostile to its Russian counterpoint.

THE EBERT-GROENER PACT

The outbreak of the war profoundly changed the German political landscape. Prior to the war the SPD had appeared to loathe Prussian militarism and the army's officer corps, although respect for the leadership principle and for order permeated all features of party life. This antipathy seemed beyond any resolution. In November 1918, however, the SPD leaders and the German officers developed a more amiable relationship. Each side viewed their collaboration as the keystone to assuring that Germany would not become Bolshevik, and their amiability soared to the level of outright collaboration.

On the evening of November 10, after all the contending voices in the Reichstag building had stilled, departing for the night, the new chancellor and people's commissar, Ebert, found himself alone in the darkened office recently occupied by his predecessor, Prince Max of Baden. Suddenly, as he surveyed his unfamiliar surroundings, a telephone rang. When he picked it up, General Groener was on the other end of the line. It was in fact a secret telephone, connecting the Chancellery with the army's Supreme Command at Spa. Its existence was unknown to anyone but the chancellor and the top generals.

* Most English books on the German Revolution denote the council members as "commissars." But the German *Beauftragte* should actually be translated as "delegates"; "commissar" would be *Kommissar*. Having stated this caveat, I will follow the convention and use "commissar" to avoid confusion.

Groener was an amiable man who was comfortable rubbing elbows with commoners and Kaiser alike. As Richard Watt tells the story, he informed Ebert that the Kaiser, asleep in his railroad car, was soon to exile himself to Holland, leaving General Hindenburg in full command of the army. "Without actually saying it, Groener indicated that he and Hindenburg would recognize the new [SPD-USPD] government as legitimate. They had even given instructions that the new soldiers' councils were to be dealt with in 'a friendly spirit.'" Ebert may well have been pleased by this news; but quite practically he seems to have asked Groener what the Supreme Command expected from his government in return. According to Watt, Groener replied: "The Field Marshal [Hindenburg] expects the government to support the officer corps in maintaining discipline and strict order in the Army. He expects that the Army's food supplies will be safeguarded and that any disruption of rail traffic will be prevented." Moreover, Groener expected the people's commissars to fight Bolshevism, and he offered to place the officers' corps at the government's disposal in that common struggle. Watt concludes: "So great was Ebert's relief that he could only ask Groener to 'convey the thanks of the government to the Field Marshal.' And then the conversation was over. The ultimate compromise had been secretly concluded."¹⁴

It is unlikely that Ebert and Groener said much more in this conversation; the two men were to hold regular private conversations thereafter, at around eleven o'clock each night for some time to come. But in this first conversation Chancellor Ebert colluded with General Groener in what was later to be called the Ebert-Groener pact: the agreement to rein in popular unrest and keep it under control. Nevertheless, although the SPD enjoyed strong support among the workers, Ebert's hold on the reins of power was uncertain and remained so for several weeks. His party might well lose power if it made a serious mistake. The continued existence of his government, he knew, depended upon his ability to retain the support of the working masses, and to this end the coalition with the wavering USPD was especially crucial.

If Ebert considered the uprising over, however, left radicals and revolutionary socialists throughout Germany believed that a revolution had just begun. In fact, they regarded the accession of the SPD to power as the result of a partial revolution that could easily be aborted. Trotsky, who had a better grasp of the events in Germany than most Bolsheviks, was to describe the German events as a "creeping revolution," one that, as we shall see, would have several peaks before collapsing in 1923.

NOTES

1. A. J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1918: A Study of German Socialism in War and Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 142.
2. Lenin, "Telephone Message to A.A. Joffe" (Oct. 23, 1918), in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1963), Vol. 35, p. 371.
3. Karl Radek, quoted in J. P. Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 2:710.
4. Prince Max[milian] of Baden, *The Memoirs of Prince Max of Baden*, trans. W. M. Calder and C. W. H. Sutton (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), Vol. 2, p. 310.
5. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 312.
6. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 313.
7. Quoted in *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 353.
8. See Philipp Scheidemann, *The Making of the New Germany* (New York: D. Appleton, 1929), Vol. 2, pp. 261–2.
9. *Vossische Zeitung* (Nov. 10, 1919); reprinted in John Riddell (ed.), *German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents 1918–1919: Preparing the Founding Congress* (New York: Pathfinder, 1986), pp. 42–3.
10. The USPD's demands are listed in *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin: Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag, 1929), p. 210.
11. Executive Committee of the SPD, "SPD Reply to USPD Conditions for Coalition Government" (November 9, 1918), in Riddell, *German Revolution*, pp. 45–6.
12. The Executive Committee of the Independent Social Democratic Party, "USPD Enters Government" (November 10, 1918), in Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 47.
13. Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of the German Republic*, trans. Ian F. D. Morrow and L. Marie Sieveking (London: Methuen, 1936), p. 1.
14. Richard M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), pp. 199–200. The date of the first conversation between Ebert and Groener is uncertain: some historians place it on the 9th, others on the 10th; it may have occurred at midnight.

 CHAPTER 55 Councils or Republic?

GERMAN AND RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS COMPARED

The formation of councils throughout Germany in November 1918 was redolent of the formation of soviets throughout Russia in February and March 1917. But the German revolutionaries were never in the same strategic position to guide events as their Russian counterparts had been in 1917. Despite superficial resemblances, Lenin and Trotsky in 1917—unlike Liebknecht, who enjoyed great personal popularity, and Luxemburg in 1918—enjoyed great political advantages, as well as a solid organization and the support of a large number of councils and troops.

The councils themselves had very different meanings to Russian and German workers. Ever since the 1905 Revolution, Russian workers had gained important experience with councils as specifically revolutionary institutions. Workers had learned how to create them and work through them on every political level. In 1917 Russian workers, soldiers, and peasants used them not merely as strike committees but as potential governmental institutions. The soviets were endowed with democratic policy-making functions at village, town, neighborhood, district, and provincial levels.

This was not the case in Germany. Here the workers had had no such previous experience, and although they formed *Räte* in 1918 in conscious imitation of the Russian soviets, they saw them mainly as instruments for coping with *ad hoc* problems. While the Spartacists, left Independents, and shop stewards considered them institutional substitutes for the bourgeois state, most German workers seem to have regarded the *Räte* as transitional, *ad hoc* bodies that would be replaced by a conventional legislature. To reformist German Social Democrats, the *Rat* was simply a borrowed form that was meant to serve as an instrument for achieving a transition from an imperial state to a bourgeois republic.

Nor were the *Räte* of 1918 inherently revolutionary: they usually lacked the strong class basis of the Russian soviets. Some German councils, to be sure, carried out very radical measures, but the SPD held the majority of seats in most of them, with the USPD as the minority opposition. In only a few places, like Stuttgart, did the USPD control the local council. The German trade unions, which were essentially conservative in their social outlook, were also very influential in the councils, and later not only professionals but even capitalists and army officers participated in them. In the front lines the soldiers' councils commonly included officers, even high-ranking ones. As Werner T. Angress observes,

The majority of councils was composed of moderates, including not only Social Democrats and Independent Socialists, but also middle-class representatives. The objectives of the councils were predominantly of a practical, immediate nature. While they varied locally with respect to specific objectives, their principal concerns were the maintenance of order, regulation of food supplies, and direction of the transportation system. In short, they took over the functions of local government, and in general tried to fill the administrative gap created by the collapse of the Empire. Only a minority of councils was controlled by radicals who wanted to emulate the Russian example by demanding that all political power be vested in the council system (*Räte System*). Thus, whereas the overwhelming majority of the councils considered their existence temporary, pending an eventual return to legally established political authority, the radical minority wanted the councils to become and remain this political authority. The radical viewpoint was, of course, propagated and shared by the Spartacist leaders.¹

The German development was less revolutionary than the Russian for other reasons as well. Unlike the Russian workers, for whom labor parties were outlawed, the German workers had a legal party long before their uprising, one to which they had been devoted for decades and whose pragmatic goals they regarded as their own. The SPD provided the German working class with a political culture unmatched by that of any other socialist party in Europe (as we have seen in Vol. 2)—and its approach to effecting social change was essentially electoral and legislative rather than insurrectionary and combative. In the minds of most SPD leaders, and even most workers, the party and the state were interchangeable conceptually; hence the job of the SPD was to *use* the state, not to *replace* it structurally, as Marx had insisted. A socialist society,

which they conceived as centralized, planned, and endowed with a nationalized economy, would resemble a liberal republic but might be much more authoritarian due to the economic functions it would have to undertake. When a revolutionary situation did arise in November 1918, the Social Democrats seemed to regard it primarily as the annoying outcome of a military defeat—a temporary crisis that would soon be overcome without profoundly altering German society.

In the factories, Russian workers had formed factory committees; German workers, by contrast, already possessed strong bureaucratic trade unions as their primary workplace institution. These unions went hand in glove with the SPD. The well-established Free Trade Union movement exercised enormous influence over the workers, enjoying much larger memberships than the party and mobilizing workers more effectively. German workers were thus accustomed to think of power in terms of hierarchical parties and trade unions, not councils and militias. Socialism, in their eyes, meant a continuation of the steady improvements in living and working conditions that they had acquired under the guidance of the SPD and the trade unions before the war.

Nor were German workers educated into the differences among the various socialist tendencies that existed in their country. While Russian workers had had about eight months, between late February and late October 1917, to sort out the serious differences that pitted socialist parties against each other and to familiarize themselves with their various programs, most German workers in November 1918 knew only that the SPD and the USPD were both socialists and shared common goals. Their dispute was seen as a family quarrel that could be disregarded. (As for the Spartacists, they were viewed as disruptive elements whose provocative behavior and language threatened the very existence of social democracy—or else as errant children or anarchists who had to be taken in hand by their more experienced elders.) The events in Germany in 1918–19 unfolded at such a breakneck pace that the workers had insufficient time to absorb the differences among the parties: only two months would pass between the onset of the uprising in November and the murder of their ablest leaders by counter-revolutionary thugs the following January.

Russian and German social revolutionaries also differed crucially in their attitudes toward organization. The Bolsheviks believed strongly in the importance of organization and, both in the underground and in exile, had created a fairly well-coordinated vanguard decades before the February Revolution erupted in Petrograd. In Germany, by contrast, the one group that might have played the role of the Bolsheviks was

Spartacus, which on November 9 was mainly a small faction of dissident intellectuals ensconced within the fold of the wavering USPD.

Spartacus's lack of organization was the result of its own conscious policy. In November the Spartacists, as we have seen, deliberately decided against attempting to create and mobilize a vanguard organization; rather, they gave priority to agitation and education. Rejecting the need for a disciplined movement, in fact, Liebknecht believed strongly in the anarchistic notion of spontaneous revolutionary activity, as opposed to firm and disciplined leadership; Luxemburg was equally convinced that revolutionaries were obliged not to lead the masses but to advise them, to raise their socialist consciousness through propaganda and agitation, and ultimately, in some vague sense, to merge with them.

Nor was it the aim of Spartacus to seize governmental power after a successful insurrection: "The Spartacus League will never take over the power of government except by the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian masses in all Germany," wrote Luxemburg on December 14.² Once the socialist militancy of the masses was awakened, the two main leaders asserted, it would inexorably sweep away the old order. While this approach had the salutary effect of precluding the development of a centralized authority within Spartacus, it left the group entirely unprepared for the political crisis of November 1918. These views and practices prevented Spartacus from exercising any significant influence among the workers—precisely at the moment when they were eagerly looking for organization and leadership. On the day Liebknecht proclaimed a "socialist republic" from the balcony of the Palace, he had nowhere to send the rejoicing masses. His speech was mere rhetoric and had little effect on the course of events.

Finally, in contrast to Lenin, Luxemburg was not inclined to split with her factional opponents. In retrospect, it could be argued that she and Leo Jogiches (her close and gifted comrade since their days together in prewar Poland) should have split from the SPD as soon as its reformism became visibly entrenched. Indeed long before 1914 they refused to create a separate organization with their potential supporters, one that was decidedly revolutionary. Had they done so, they would have had years to organize or influence militant workers long before November 1918. Instead, fearful of becoming isolated from the masses, they remained within the SPD—which in fact did nothing to enhance their public support or enlarge their base. Had they developed an organized movement in these years and preserved a resolute identity, it could have taken their place while they were in prison.

In any case, loosening the loyalty of German workers to the SPD would

have taken a great deal more than abstract criticisms of the party. As it was, the workers were suspicious of Spartacus: after November 9 the group's unstinting criticisms of the provisional government seemed disloyal and even downright spiteful. Worse, after a number of volatile ultraleftists and anarchosyndicalists entered Spartacus and infused it with a propensity for adventurist putschist tactics, the group gained an image as a disorderly and irresponsible sect.

If the German revolutionaries were disorganized, however, their opponents were decidedly organized. In this respect, German revolutionaries faced a far different situation from the one their comrades in Russia faced. In Russia, after the Mensheviks and SRs gained control of the soviets in February 1917, they had been very awkward organizationally, blundering for months from one crisis to another. In Germany, by contrast, the SPD had spent decades carefully cultivating the loyalty of the workers. Ebert in particular was a formidable leader. This preparation bore fruit in 1918, when the SPD leaders manipulated the German proletariat and kept it largely under their control.

Most fundamental, however, was the conservative nature of the German proletariat itself. The German working class was the most industrialized on the European continent. The country's railway system was the best organized in the world; the output of her steel plants was second only to that of the United States, and her chemical plants had no peer. Marxist doctrine held that Germany's working class should have been highly committed to revolutionary socialist ideas. In fact, notwithstanding the size of the SPD and the Free Trade Unions, the very opposite proved to be the case. Modern industry had created a proletariat that was not only large but also relatively domesticated, subservient to labor bureaucrats and reformist political parties. For the most part German industrial workers accepted their rationalized, hierarchical, and orderly methods of work with a large measure of pride. Obedience to authority, where it was not too heavy-handed, was actually admired as evidence of discipline. This ethos of obedience and discipline extended from the factory into the unions and parties, and ultimately into everyday life as well.

With such an outlook, the working class in the Reich tended to follow orders almost as a sacrosanct duty. There were always rebellious exceptions to this rule, but during the war German soldiers seldom mutinied against unreasonable orders, and they continued to mount bloody offensives well into the summer of 1918. The factory, with its hierarchies and its cult of efficiency, had not only created a "classical" proletariat, as Marx had conceived it; it had enveloped the workers spiritually, psychologically, and ideologically, making it an integral part of

the very system that Marxists and syndicalists expected it to overthrow. Paradoxically, the more capitalistic an economy became, the more its proletariat absorbed bourgeois norms and behavioral traits—until life on the front lines or behind them became absolutely ghastly.

The SPD and its bourgeois allies in fact had little to fear from the radical Left in 1918–19. “Mass demonstrations and the formation of workers’ and soldiers’ councils gave the impression that Germany had reached a decisive political turning point,” observes Angress. But:

Behind the tumult and the shouting, the red flags, and the *ad hoc* revolutionary committees existed strong sentiments for a return to normal conditions. When Friedrich Ebert’s Provisional Government of Social Democrats and Independents promised to restore order, most Germans were prepared to support it. For the moment, at least, political likes and dislikes receded into the background, and a stunned and confused nation rallied unenthusiastically behind a few Socialist leaders who had become the chief source of authority.³

THE GROWING CRISIS

While Ebert was jockeying for power on the afternoon of November 9, Emil Barth of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards was planning to convene a meeting of delegates representing the workers and soldiers of Greater Berlin, to be held the following day at the Zirkus Busch. He and other left radicals were persuading the workers to elect delegates who would not only create an alternative provisional government but would be willing to exclude the SPD.

The leaders of the SPD, which was allowed to participate, planned to turn the meeting to their own purposes: they organized a counter-mobilization, urging the workers to elect delegates who would support the legitimization of the Council of People’s Commissars (CPC) and a call for a constituent assembly. Shrewdly, the SPD leadership sought to produce a large showing of soldiers, who could be counted on to vote against any group they perceived as fomenting socialist disunity.

The early morning of November 10 saw industrial workers and garrison soldiers gather at barracks and factories to elect their representatives. Representation was based on one delegate for every thousand workers and one for every army battalion. After the elections the newly elected delegates made their way *en masse* to the Zirkus Busch, which by midday

was packed with 3,000 people, mostly soldiers with little or no political experience. Emil Barth chaired the meeting, and the first speakers were Ebert and Haase. The delegates, especially the soldiers, received their remarks warmly. Liebknecht, who was not an official delegate, was nonetheless allowed to deliver a speech. With great vehemence and a naïve faith in the revolutionary proclivity of his hearers, he warned that the danger to the revolution lay not only with the reactionaries—the Junkers, big landowners, capitalists, and nobility—but also with those “who today support the revolution, but were still opposing it the day before yesterday.” He singled out Ebert as representing such a danger and as personifying the “counterrevolution.” This was not what the delegates wanted to hear. Ebert, they were convinced, served the SPD well. Thus Liebknecht’s remarks, with their ominous warnings, seemed to confirm the SPD leaders’ claim that he was divisive, even provocative. They interrupted him with raucous catcalls and cries of “Unity!”⁴ Then against all the efforts of the radicals, the congress voted overwhelmingly to approve the CPC as the provisional government and to make it the repository of all executive power in Germany.

Having suffered this defeat, the left radicals (that is, Spartacus, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the left Independents, and their supporters) came up with a new proposal, which Emil Barth introduced, namely, that the congress should create an Executive Council (Vollzugsrat) of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils; it would be the controlling authority over the CPC. Members of the SPD, Barth proposed, would be excluded from this council. Ebert slyly replied that in his view such a committee was unnecessary, but if it were to be formed, the SPD should not only be allowed to sit on it but should have parity—equal membership—with the left radical groups. In reply, Barth simply repeated his proposal: no SPD members on the Vollzugsrat. At that point the congress erupted into pandemonium. Soldiers shouted “Unity!” and “Parity!” in support of Ebert; a group of them strode onto the stage and announced that if the SPD were not permitted to sit on the Vollzugsrat with equal representation to the other groups, they—the soldiers—would form a military dictatorship.

It is difficult to believe that the behavior of the soldiers—especially the group that occupied the stage—was not orchestrated by the SPD. In any event this show of potential physical force effectively induced the leftists to drop their insistence on excluding the SPD. The Zirkus Busch assembly voted to form a Vollzugsrat as the supreme authority over the CPC. (Few seemed to notice or care that a meeting of people drawn exclusively from Greater Berlin was creating and electing a body that staked out a claim to

govern the entire nation.) The Zirkus Busch assembly then proceeded to elect members to the new council. Fourteen workers were initially chosen: seven from the USPD and the Shop Stewards and seven from the SPD—thereby establishing parity between the SPD and its opponents. The soldiers then demanded representation on the council for themselves, with the result that a group of fourteen soldiers was chosen, bringing the council's total membership to fourteen workers and fourteen soldiers. The soldiers claimed to be nonpartisan, but most of them were patently controlled by the SPD. With its membership weighted heavily in favor of the SPD, the Vollzugsrat, far from countervailing the CPC, seemed well on its way to becoming a rubber stamp for the SPD.

Thereafter the contest among the rival socialist parties and factions was fought out over the issue of a parliamentary government versus council government. As far as the SPD leaders were concerned, the revolution had ended on November 9; the provisional government led by Ebert *et al.* had as its main task to call for elections to a constituent assembly, based on universal suffrage. Only universal suffrage, argued Karl Kautsky (among others), would give the constituent assembly the moral authority to constitute a new political order for Germany. "Our party has always . . . advocated universal, equal suffrage, as a weapon of the proletariat," he wrote in *Freiheit*, and universal suffrage "shows more clearly than any other method where the majority of the people stand." There is no guarantee, Kautsky conceded, that such suffrage would produce a socialist majority. "But it surely follows that this entails the bounden duty to exert all forces in the election campaign to win the majority."⁵ Whatever its composition, the constituent assembly had to create a German republic, a parliamentary state in which all parties—including bourgeois parties—could freely participate. The new bourgeois-democratic state would diminish the power of the army, the bureaucracy, and the Junkers and open the way to the nationalization of basic industries.

In opposition, the radicals—Spartacus, the left Independents, and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards—argued that the workers' and soldiers' councils were the very essence of the revolution and hence should constitute the structure of the new political and social order. The revolution of November 9, which had overturned the monarchy, was only a beginning—a liberal bourgeois "first revolution," so to speak. A government of workers' and soldiers' councils, on the other hand, might bring about the triumph of the working class over capitalism and create a socialist economy and society. On November 10 in *Die rote Fahne* Spartacus called for the abolition of the Reichstag and all parliaments in Germany, the establishment of a nationwide network of workers' and

soldiers' councils, the transfer of all legislative and executive power to the councils, a nationalized economy, the arming of the people, the appropriation of all weapons' stores by the councils, and—based on the councils—the creation of a unified socialist German republic.⁶ This program, the Spartacists urged, would constitute the next phase of the revolution. In November and December they agitated ceaselessly for a council republic, leading many strikes, conducting public meetings, and organizing often riotous demonstrations—which further alienated them from many SPD workers. Liebknecht in particular appeared everywhere, denouncing the SPD and orating indefatigably on behalf of a council republic, the arming of the working class, and the replacement of capitalism with a socialist economy.

On November 12 the CPC issued a docket of liberal reforms. It ended the military rule, removed martial law and censorship, and restored the prewar labor laws. Henceforth, said its proclamation, all voting would be universal, equal, secret, and direct; basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and assembly would be guaranteed; and the eight-hour day, unemployment insurance, and expanded health insurance would be established. In passing, it mentioned that a constituent assembly would be convened to determine Germany's future governmental structure.

The radicals swung into action immediately. On the very next day, November 13, Ernst Däumig (a member of the Shop Stewards and the USPD) wrote a draft program for the Vollzugsrat that denounced the plan for a constituent assembly as an act of theft: "The efforts of bourgeois circles to convoke a national assembly as soon as possible are intended to rob the workers of the fruits of their revolution." What was needed, Däumig argued, was a congress of workers' councils that should produce a new constitution "in accordance with the principles of proletarian democracy."⁷ On November 18 Luxemburg weighed in, insisting that instead of a constituent assembly, "a national parliament of the workers and soldiers" must be convened immediately, in order "to organize all of Germany's proletariat as a class, a solid political power, the bulwark and driving force of the revolution."⁸ Two days later, she ripped into the supporters of a constituent assembly:

The entire "people," the entire "nation" is to be called upon to decide the subsequent fate of the revolution by majority vote . . . [The SPD leaders] imagine that the course of the mightiest social revolution in the history of humanity will take the form of the various social classes coming together and cultivating a nice, peaceful, and "dignified" discussion with each other, and then staging a vote—perhaps by filing

through the parliamentary doors as of old . . . These profound Marxists have forgotten the ABCs of socialism. They have forgotten that the bourgeoisie is not a parliamentary party, but a ruling class in possession of all the economic and social instruments of power . . . The "civil war" that they are anxiously trying to banish from the revolution cannot be banished. For civil war is just another word for class struggle, and the idea of trying to introduce socialism without class struggle, by parliamentary majority decision, is a ridiculous petty-bourgeois illusion.⁹

But neither the workers nor the petty bourgeoisie were eager to ignite a civil war, least of all one that could devastate Germany as the Russian civil war had laid waste that country, as Russian émigrés warned.

On November 25, to the radicals' dismay, a conference of the prime ministers of the German states (*Länder*), which had just convened in Berlin, passed a resolution calling for a constituent assembly. The issue was decided; all that remained was to determine when the elections for delegates would be held. The radicals wanted to delay the elections for several months, in order to educate the masses about the importance of councils and socialism. Most German workers, they knew, were by no means clear about the differences between parliamentary government and council government. But the SPD demanded early elections, doubtless to bring the present upheaval to an end.

At the meeting of the CPC on November 29, the Independents demanded that the date be delayed, but in the end Ebert *et al.* prevailed: the majority on the council (with Barth absurdly abstaining) decided on February 16 as the date for assembly elections. The next step was for the all-German congress of workers' and soldiers' councils to ratify the date; it agreed to meet in Berlin on December 16. Ebert understood, as Kerensky had not, that he must move toward a permanent republican system as rapidly as possible.

THE DECEMBER CRISES

Fears of a "Bolshevik-style revolution" and civil war were rife in Germany, especially on the aristocratic and militaristic Right. The SPD leaders and publicists who followed Ebert were not averse to exploiting these fears by joining with the Right in portraying the councils as a sinister attempt to turn Germany into an authoritarian "war communist"

regime similar to the one the Bolsheviks were then creating in Russia. The radicals inadvertently helped them by creating the impression that a Bolshevik-type takeover was in the air: Liebknecht's speeches in particular left this impression, which was heightened when *Rote Fahne* called on November 18 for the formation of a Red Guard.

In fact, the SPD's and the army's fears of a Bolshevik-style revolution in Germany had little foundation. German left radicals were highly disorganized, and the Spartacus leaders were adamantly opposed to putsches. All the Berlin revolutionaries were militarily weak—indeed, few were trained and disciplined sufficiently to challenge, let alone defeat, an organized military force. The two main exceptions were the People's Naval Division, whose 3,000 sailors were ostensibly radical and at times friendly even to the Spartacists, especially Liebknecht; and the Security Force (*Sicherheitswehr*), the small contingent of young leftists established by the USPD leader Emil Eichhorn after he made himself Berlin's police chief on November 9. Taken together, the People's Naval Division and Eichhorn's *Sicherheitswehr* created the illusion that the Spartacists and left Independents had at their disposal a new Red Guard for use in an uprising. In fact, neither of these units was dangerous. The People's Naval Division was increasingly populated with nonsailors who did not share the unit's original ideals, while most of Eichhorn's force, although enthusiastic, were poorly trained and of dubious military value.

What might have been potentially dangerous to Ebert's government was the people themselves—and the people were steadily arming. On November 9 the various arms depots had been plundered, and rebellious troops had distributed thousands of rifles and pistols among the masses. In nearly every encounter with troops the restive crowds gained rifles, machine guns, and grenades, creating the rudiments of what could have been a revolutionary militia. By the end of November, Berlin's population was a people in arms. Had they been resolutely led and carefully drilled, they could have constituted a formidable fighting force capable of vanquishing the counterrevolution.

And the counterrevolution's forces were still limited: Ebert had no organized military force at his disposal that he could count on. General Groener had assured Ebert that the army would support him in suppressing rebellious workers' and soldiers' councils and especially the radical Left. But the army was undergoing rapid dissolution; even once-loyal regiments simply melted away once they reached their home barracks. Demobilizing troops were giving their arms to the people. Those who had arrived from the front were provocatively discourteous, even menacing, toward their officers, cutting off their epaulets and removing

their insignias of rank. Groener's pledge of aid was thus meaningless: in December the Supreme Command had no army whatever to throw against the revolutionaries.

But if the troops were melting away, the professional and noncommissioned officer corps remained intact. Ebert's government could have eliminated it, thereby ridding Germany and indeed Europe of this dangerous and reactionary stratum. Indeed, it remains one of the most heinous betrayals even of conventional social democratic principles that Ebert *et al.* preserved the officer corps and was even eager to stabilize it. When the Supreme Command requested that the CPC restore the officers' authority, the council complied: in a letter dated November 12 the CPC not only restored to the officers their full powers of command and supreme authority in the army, but it also assigned to the soldiers' councils the role of placating the soldiers and preventing mutiny in the ranks.

Barth, stunned by Ebert's amazing concession to the Command, initially denounced it. He had joined the provisional government, after all, to ensure that power resided in the workers' and soldiers' councils. The USPD, however, ended up voting in favor of the measure, echoing the SPD's contrived justification that the officers' expertise was needed for demobilizing the troops. A few days later, on November 16, the Supreme Command, acting on its own initiative, advised officers still in the field that when their troops re-entered Germany, they were to cooperate with the civil servants of the imperial regime rather than with the councils. Officers stationed in France and elsewhere proceeded to deliver blatantly counterrevolutionary speeches to their soldiers and gave them a grossly distorted picture of conditions back home. In fact, this was the only source of information that many soldiers had about the uprising upon returning home to Germany. When they arrived in the Rhineland and encountered local revolutionary authorities, they sometimes came into direct conflict with them and pulled down the red flags flying over the town halls. As their encounters with civilians taught them more about the actual situation, however, they often became radicalized and threw their support to the popular movement.

On December 1 at Ems, General Groener and the Supreme Command convened a "Congress of Soldiers' Councils of the Field Army," comprising delegates from the field troops. Groener introduced a resolution to the congress that called for the suppression of all workers' and soldiers' councils and the dissolution of all popular armed forces. While the Ems congress was discussing the resolution, Emil Barth suddenly burst in and openly challenged the officers' dissimulation. The

generals, he declared, had wantonly distorted the situation to the congress and demonized the councils in order to be able to use the troops to restore the monarchy. After listening to Barth intently, the soldiers resoundingly rejected Groener's resolution. The meeting was a fiasco for the generals, who now had to issue a statement affirming that the workers' and soldiers' councils were "the immediate and unquestioned representatives of the will of the people and the vehicle of political power."¹⁰

The officers, however, did not relent. A few days later, on December 5, the Supreme Command established a new military command on the outskirts of Berlin, under the leadership of one General von Lequis. The ostensible purpose of this command was to help with the demobilization of returning field troops, but its real purpose was to single out the returning troops who did not accept the revolution and then mobilize them against the radicals. Lequis was secretly ordered to do whatever he had to do—even if it contradicted the wishes of the provisional government—to eliminate the various revolutionary organizations in the capital.

On the afternoon of December 6 a group of approximately 30 reactionary soldiers entered and occupied the Prussian parliament building, where the Vollzugsrat met. A sergeant stepped forward and declared that the council members were under arrest. Again, Barth suddenly appeared and, as a member of the CPC, ordered the soldiers to desist from their action; they did so, and the Vollzugsrat had them arrested. A few hours later another detachment—this one comprising several hundred soldiers—appeared at the Chancellery and proclaimed Ebert the "president" of Germany. Ebert prudently informed the soldiers that he could not accept that position—staging a coup—without consulting others, and the soldiers withdrew peacefully.

That same evening, Spartacus was holding a rally in Wedding, a northern suburb of Berlin, to protest against the calling of the constituent assembly and to demand a proletarian dictatorship. The crowd heard a rumor that the Vollzugsrat had been arrested and that Ebert had been "declared" president. Outraged, they turned on their heels and marched toward the city's center. Quite needlessly, soldiers under the control of Otto Wels, the SPD governor of the Berlin garrison, intercepted the demonstrators. During the *mêlée* a shot was fired—by whom is unknown—and the soldiers opened fire with a machine gun, killing sixteen Spartacists and wounding fourteen. There is no evidence that the Spartacists were armed.

Few workers could have believed it coincidental that all these events occurred on a single day. Fed by suspicions that Ebert himself had

secretly colluded with the troops who had tried to make him president, the Left erupted in a storm of wrath. On December 7 Liebknecht, addressing a large political meeting, demanded the removal of Ebert and Scheidemann from office. That same day, in a long, agonizing meeting, the Vollzugsrat insisted to the CPC that it must take strong measures to restrict the activities of the growing political Right, which was clearly becoming more and more dangerous by the day. But the people's commissars refused to take any action. The Vollzugsrat members left the meeting convinced that the commissars were, intentionally or not, aiding the counterrevolution. The next day, December 8, Liebknecht addressed a huge crowd in front of the Chancellery, where he denounced the commissars as traitors, all six of whom were nervously watching the demonstration from a darkened window just above. Recklessly bluffing that Spartacus had the power to take over the government, he called for a putsch, which met with cheers from the crowd. But all of this was provocative oratory, not action.

Surely the most uncomfortable CPC members that day were the three Independents, who were now deeply compromised by their association with Ebert and their participation in the provisional government. At an assembly of the Berlin USPD on December 15 the Spartacists (who were still a faction within the Independents and therefore had the right to be present) demanded that the three USPD people's commissars resign from the council, oppose the convening of a constituent assembly, and refrain from participating in its elections. Haase rejected these demands and proceeded to introduce a resolution that called upon the party to prepare actively for elections to the constituent assembly. The assembled Independents accepted Haase's resolution by a vote of 485 to 195, thereby playing into Ebert's hands. Outvoted by more than two to one, Spartacus seriously began to consider breaking away from the USPD and forming a party of its own. But even after some six weeks of furious agitation, the Spartacists were still a woeful minority within the working class.

Meanwhile, on December 8 Hindenburg called for a reduction in the power of the soldiers' councils and the abolition of council government. Three days later General von Lequis marched nine field divisions, who had lately assembled for "demobilization," toward Berlin, hoping to take it over. Lequis' virtual invasion of the capital could not have been undertaken without the consent of the Supreme Command. As the soldiers marched along Unter den Linden to the Brandenburg Gate, only scattered groups of people appeared to welcome them. The parade went on, intermittently, for three days, while the welcoming populace became

ever sparser. The troops, in turn, became even more demoralized, and when they arrived in the center of the city, the local soldiers' council advised them to demobilize. They followed the advice. As this farcical attempt at a coup began to fall apart, soldiers turned on their officers, ripping off their epaulets and insignias. As the garrison soldiers had done in early November, these returning field soldiers handed their weapons over to the civilians. It was now painfully evident to the Supreme Command that the old army was not only useless against the general population but a threat to their own dwindling authority. Germany, it was plain, needed a new army.

THE CONGRESS OF WORKERS' AND SOLDIERS' COUNCILS

The showdown over the nature of Germany's new political institutions took place during December 16–20, when delegates to the all-German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils assembled in Berlin. This was the "council parliament" for which the Left had been agitating for weeks, in the fervent hope that it would establish a council republic. Ebert's followers, for their part, planned once again to try to persuade the congress to create a parliamentary state. Both sides vigorously mobilized their forces to elect sympathetic delegates.

Unfortunately for the Left, the various provincial SPD organizations had an immense superiority over their opponents, not only in organization and ability to turn out their electorate but in outright chicanery. Technically, one civilian delegate was supposed to represent 200,000 voters, and one military delegate 100,000 soldiers. But as John Riddell observes:

The selection procedure was weighted to favor sectors where the SPD was strong. Of the 489 delegates, only 187 were wage or salaried workers. No less than 195 delegates were party and trade union full-time functionaries, the vast majority aligned with the SPD. Economists, writers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals made up 71 of the delegates. Thirteen delegates were officers. Only 2 delegates were women.¹¹

In party affiliation fully 60 percent of the delegates belonged to the SPD, and only 20 percent to the USPD; the remainder belonged to small radical

groups or were unaffiliated. Only 2 percent were Spartacists. The Spartacists were probably correct in their claim that the SPD had rigged the delegate elections in order to achieve so stunning a majority, but even in a fair election it is doubtful that the Independents and Spartacists could have gained a majority of delegates in December 1918. Most of the working class voted for the SPD routinely, as it had done for years. Once the delegates—many of whom had served the Kaiser as good patriots during the war—were assembled, they refused to seat Liebknecht and Luxemburg as honorary delegates or even observers.

As the congress convened in the Prussian parliament building, a quarter of a million Berlin workers gathered outside to appeal for a council republic. On the first day, the delegates sat down to address the main item on the congress's agenda: the date for elections to the coming constituent assembly. But before they could do so, a contingent of radicals, in the name of the estimated 250,000 demonstrators outside, broke in and demanded that the congress delegates vest all power in the workers' and soldiers' councils; declare the Vollzugsrat the supreme executive and legislative power in Germany; remove the "Ebertist" Council of People's Commissars; and create a Central Council (Zentralrat) to "disarm the counterrevolution, arm the proletariat, and organize a Red Guard."¹²

Ebert responded by calling for a parliamentary structure and criticizing the Vollzugsrat. Outraged, Richard Müller leaped to the defense of the Vollzugsrat and denounced the CPC as counterrevolutionary, associating its members with the right-wing putschists of December 6. Däumig then intervened to make a final appeal on behalf of the Left. Councils were necessary for proletarian democracy, he said, since the working class might not necessarily elect socialist delegates to a constituent assembly. A new congress of councils, he demanded, should be elected to draw up a German constitution that would vest supreme power in the council system. He proposed that the delegates retain "the workers' council system as the basis of the constitution."¹³ The resolution was overwhelmingly defeated (344:98). The delegates were not interested in a socialist constitution; they and their constituents wanted stability, order, and a republic.

The SPD introduced a competing resolution that would hand all legislative and executive power over to the CPC until the constituent assembly should meet; a new Central Council (Zentralrat) was to be established to "oversee" the CPC¹⁴—that is, to replace the more radical and proletarian Vollzugsrat. This resolution was adopted by the congress without difficulty. What powers would the Zentralrat have? The left

Independents at the congress, still desperately looking for some way to rein in the CPC, insisted it should at least be a parliament, with the exclusive power to legislate and the power to veto actions of the people's commissars. But this step did not satisfy Haase, who proposed, against the sentiments of his own party, that the Zentralrat should have only consultative powers, and in case of a disagreement, the CPC should have the upper hand. Haase's resolution was passed easily (290:115), effectively reducing the Zentralrat to a mere ornament. All of Haase's fellow Independent delegates voted against the resolution of their principal leader.

Max Cohen-Reuss, a right-wing SPD member, then introduced a resolution proposing that elections for constituent assembly delegates be held even sooner than had been suggested, namely on January 19. This was a strategic move to counter the left radicals, who still wanted more time to propagandize the German workers. Cohen's resolution was passed overwhelmingly (400:50). The Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, in effect, had done everything that Ebert had wanted it to do.

As Däumig spat out, the delegates had signed the "death warrant" for the very council structure that they professed to represent. In reality, however, the congress more likely than not reflected what the councils really wanted. The majority of German workers in December 1918 expected them to function as tentative municipal organs to hold the country together until such time as they were replaced by republican institutions. Fuming at the councils' self-annihilation, the Independent delegates boycotted the elections to the Zentralrat—which did nothing to alter the course of events. The result was that of that body's 27 members, all were either SPD members or soldiers. Like the reckless boycotts of the Mensheviks in Russia, this German boycott was a great miscalculation for the Independents: the Zentralrat now became not only an ornament but a rubber-stamp for the people's commissars.

The second day of the congress gave the radical leftists some reason for hope: a deputation of soldiers from the Hamburg and Berlin garrisons, the People's Naval Division, and Eichhorn's Security Force interrupted the proceedings to voice a series of demands for the democratization of the military. Known as the Hamburg Points, these demands, backed by Berlin's ordinary army and navy rankers, called for joint jurisdiction over the entire army and navy to a Supreme Soldiers' Council, which (oddly!) would coexist with the Supreme Command, and also over individual garrisons and local soldiers' councils. Soldiers would henceforth be free to elect their own officers (renamed "leaders"). All insignias of rank were to be eliminated, and the carrying of weapons while out of uniform was to

be prohibited. A militia was to replace the standing army as soon as possible.*

How these measures could have been implemented is difficult to see. In any case, a motion was then made to adjourn the meeting and consider the Hamburg Points the next day. The soldiers exploded in indignation and adamantly insisted that they be voted on that very day. The unnerved congress thereupon voted overwhelmingly to accept the Hamburg Points. It was the only revolutionary measure that the congress adopted. Their adoption would have accomplished much of what Order Number One had done in Russia, abolishing the military elite that had plagued the Reich. But unlike the Russian soviets, the council congress did not have the power to enact this democratization of the army into law; only the CPC could have done that, and that council was controlled by Ebert *et al.*, who had no intention of disempowering the very generals with whom he was colluding.

Shortly after the congress accepted the Hamburg Points, the Supreme Command, the War Ministry, the Admiralty, and the Armistice Commission all threatened to resign. Hindenburg, as head of the army, sent a secret telegram to all army officers instructing them to disregard the resolution. When Groener protested to Ebert about the Points, Ebert suggested that Groener come to Berlin himself to present the officers' case. Thus on December 20 Groener, together with Major Kurt von Schleicher, arrived in Berlin in full dress uniform (laden with epaulets, stripes and medals—in defiance of the Hamburg Points), where they attended a joint meeting of the CPC and the Zentralrat. The Points, they emphatically demanded, must be rescinded.

The three SPD members on the council would have been happy to accommodate them, but the three USPD members refused to permit it. In fact, Barth wanted to arrest the two officers then and there. The government was deadlocked. Then Ebert shrewdly proposed a "compromise": the Hamburg Points, he declared, would apply only to the garrison

* The Hamburg Points were an astonishing mixture of extreme radicalism and naïve reliance on the military expertise of the hated officers. A Supreme Soldiers' Council, had it come into existence, would not have had a chance of coexisting with the scheming High Command. The soldiers' councils were simply incapable of administering an army from which generals like Hindenburg and Groener were trying to filter out radical troops and create what ultimately became the reactionary infrastructure of the Weimar Republic's military force. The Hamburg Points, in effect, reveal a great deal about what was uneven and confused about the so-called German Revolution, and what was so lacking in the council movement among German troops as well as civilians.

troops, not to the field army. Over Barth's protests the government decided to agree to this selective application of the Points, which left the Supreme Command free to define all units as field units if it so chose, and effectively neutralized the Points altogether. Barth excoriated Ebert, saying that the congress had made a definitive, unanimous decision to support the Hamburg Points, and that Ebert had no right to jettison them. After the vote he and Dittmann went from council to council, explaining to all of them how Ebert had betrayed not only the revolution but the council congress.

Meanwhile the People's Naval Division, the self-proclaimed defenders of the Revolution, had been occupying the Royal Palace and adjoining Marstall (or horse stable) since November 9. The government had been paying their wages, ostensibly for their services in guarding the Palace but actually out of fear of their armed power. Ebert and his cronies advised them to move from the Palace into the more modest Marstall. On December 23, as they were beginning to move from the Palace, the sailors—among whom were a number of mercenary individuals—demanded a "Christmas bonus" of 80,000 marks. For reasons that remain unclear, the government refused to give them the extra payment until they had completely left the Palace. In fact, they had handed over the keys to the Palace to the Berlin military commander, the SPD leader Otto Wels.

The sailors found this state of affairs unacceptable and sent out a detachment to surround and occupy the Chancellery, where Wels's office was located. They shut down the switchboard, locked the doors, and refused to allow anyone to enter or leave the building. In effect, they had taken the entire provisional government hostage. Another contingent of sailors took Wels and two of his assistants prisoner, roughing them up and confining him to the Palace's cellar. Ebert, ensconced in his Chancellery office, picked up his secret telephone (which was not routed through the switchboard) and called the Supreme Command, asking it to make good its promise to support the government and to rescue Wels into the bargain. The officers were only too eager to oblige. It was the call they had been waiting for—a golden opportunity to destroy the People's Naval Division. General Lequis, still stationed just outside Berlin, was ordered to send in his Horse Guards, a unit of the Imperial Army, to free Wels. With some 2,000 soldiers and cavalry under his command, he entered Berlin, ready to clean out what he saw as the naval rabble in the Palace.

Meanwhile Ebert made it known to the sailors that they would get the 80,000 marks if they left the Chancellery—which these sterling "protectors of the revolution" proceeded to do. He then called Groener

and told him that he had reached an agreement with the sailors and asked that the troops be withdrawn. But the generals refused. Like Lequis, they seemed to believe that a whiff of grapeshot would make the brewing rebellion disappear before it could get under way. During the night the Horse Guards arrived at the square in front of the Palace and ringed it with machine guns. The People's Naval Division, armed only with rifles and little ammunition, realized it could not defeat Lequis' troops and at 5 a.m. released Wels and the other two hostages, in the hope of making peace. At 7 a.m., puffed up by this evidence of weakness, Lequis demanded that the Division surrender within ten minutes. No answer came from the Palace, whereupon the Horse Guards proceeded to bombard the building, killing 30 sailors. The remaining sailors fled through an underground passage to the Marstall, where at 9.30 a.m. they waved a white flag, asking for a 20-minute truce.

All that morning the Spartacists had been agitating feverishly among the workers, raising the alarm that a monarchist counterrevolution was in progress at the Palace. Neither the proletariat nor even the middle classes were prepared to countenance a return to military rule. Accordingly, masses of people rushed to the square during the interval of the truce, and in defense of the sailors they formed a huge crowd. These mostly unarmed civilians mingled with the Horse Guards, imploring them to stop attacking the sailors. The mobbed Guards were helpless. Unwilling to shoot unarmed civilians, they threw their rifles to the ground. Although someone shot an officer, the troops did not respond and disappeared into the crowd. The fearful officers hurried from the square in protective groups. Once again the cream of the Imperial Army had proved to be unreliable against an uprising. Clearly what remained of the German Imperial Army could not be used to suppress a resolute popular movement.

To the Left, the confrontation at the Palace proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that Ebert was conspiring with the counterrevolution. By his own admission (in an article in the SPD's organ, *Vorwärts*, on December 27) the SPD leader had given the order to use force against the sailors. The workers found his actions an unconscionable assault on the proletariat by a chancellor who professed to be working peacefully for a socialist society.

Nor did Ebert dare to act alone. He had consulted the two other SPD people's commissars about the operation, but he had not mentioned it to his USPD colleagues. When this partiality came out into the open, all confidence in the integrity of the SPD-USPD coalition evaporated, and further cooperation was impossible. The coalition collapsed on December

29, when the three Independents—Dittmann, Barth, and even Haase—resigned from the Council of People's Commissars. Their seats were promptly filled by SPD members, including the archmilitarist Gustav Noske, who assumed the post of defense councilor.

The next phase of the German uprising would test the mettle of the left radicals—Spartacus, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and the Left Independents—and reveal the nature of the German proletariat, which Marx had long ago identified as the agent that could transform society.

NOTES

1. Werner T. Angress, *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921–1923* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 18.
2. Quoted in David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 131. Luxemburg was a virtual pacifist in practice.
3. Angress, *Stillborn Revolution*, pp. 13–14.
4. Karl Liebknecht, "Enemies Surround Us," in John Riddell (ed.), *The German Revolution*, pp. 48, 50.
5. Karl Kautsky, "National Assembly and Council Assembly" (December 5–6, 1918); in Riddell (ed.), *German Revolution*, pp. 94–105.
6. See Eric Waldman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1958), pp. 102–4.
7. Däumig is quoted in Morgan, *Socialist Left*, p. 133. The presumably radical Vollzugsrat rejected Däumig's draft program.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Beginning" (November 18, 1918), in Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 80.
9. Rosa Luxemburg, "The National Assembly" (November 20, 1918), *ibid.*, p. 91.
10. Quoted in Richard M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 209.
11. Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 141.
12. The demands are listed in *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin: Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag, 1929), p. 251.
13. Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 144.
14. The resolution appears as "SPD Resolution to the Congress of Councils," in Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 143, and in *Illustrierte Geschichte*, p. 251.

CHAPTER 56 From "Spartacus Week" to the Kapp Putsch

FORMATION OF THE GERMAN COMMUNIST PARTY

Ever since November 29, when the USPD had agreed to support the convocation of a constituent assembly, Rosa Luxemburg had openly attacked the leadership's compromises with the SPD. "Independent Social Democracy," she wrote of the party to which Spartacus still belonged, "has been a child of weakness from the beginning."¹ Thereafter she and her supporters had escalated their public attacks. Convinced that the majority of the USPD's membership would support them against the leadership, Luxemburg demanded that the executive call a party congress; there they hoped to rally the radical forces throughout Germany that were opposed to a constituent assembly and favored a council government. The USPD executive refused, either because it knew that the party membership would support Spartacus's position or because it feared putting the issue to a test. Haase and the other party leaders knew well that Spartacus had grown rapidly, both in militancy and in numbers, since the fall of the monarchy on November 9. On December 15 the USPD leader Hugo Haase called on the Spartacists to follow through on the logic of their own program and depart from the party altogether. On December 22 the executive refused the Spartacists' final demand for a party congress.

Thereafter the Spartacists concentrated on organizing their own congress, whose purpose would be to explore the formation of a new party independent of the USPD, one guided by an expressly revolutionary program. The congress opened its proceedings on December 29 in the Prussian Landtag building, with representatives from a total of 46 localities. The delegates were in fact sharply divided over the wisdom of

divorcing the USPD. Liebknecht spoke in favor of a split, but Luxemburg and her close comrade, Leo Jogiches, had considerable misgivings. Luxemburg, who had resisted breaking with the SPD during the war years, once again feared isolation from the many radical workers in the USPD who increasingly agreed with the Spartacus program. Eventually she agreed to a split, but Paul Levi, a brilliant young attorney, and Richard Müller, of the Shop Stewards, joined Jogiches in their opposition to the formation of a separate party, fearful that it would be premature and isolate them from the mass movement.

They also had doubts about the nature of the new party. These Marxist-trained Spartacists had long argued the necessity of winning the majority of the population over to their position before making any attempt to gain power. Since the November insurgency, however, Spartacus had been inundated with ultraradicals, revolutionary romantics, hot-blooded youths, unemployed deserters, putschists, and other dubious elements. In December, much to the consternation of the Spartacus old guard, the "ultras" had recklessly seized the *Vorwärts* offices—only to be forced to relinquish them later. To Jogiches and his supporters, the new rank-and-file Spartacists seemed woefully immature, and too partial to anarchistic putschism.

The newcomers, however, outnumbered the Spartacus founders, and the congress's delegates voted overwhelmingly to split from the USPD and form a new party. The next day, December 30, the congress officially founded the Communist Party of Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, or KPD). The delegates voted to retain the old Spartacus leadership and formed a Central Committee that consisted of Liebknecht, Luxemburg, Jogiches, and Levi, among others. The congress also adopted the Spartacist daily newspaper, *Die rote Fahne*, as the official organ of the KPD.

The first question facing the new party was whether to participate in the coming elections to the constituent assembly. All the members opposed the assembly itself as a counterrevolutionary institution, but the impetuous elements in the party insisted that the KPD should boycott the elections. The old guard—particularly Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Jogiches, and Levi—demurred, viewing the KPD's participation as an absolute necessity. The constituent assembly, they argued, would be the primary focus of political life for the next months: the party must use both the elections and the assembly itself as propaganda forums to mobilize the masses against the government. Boycotting the elections, they warned, would serve only to isolate the KPD and would leave the assembly in the hands of the SPD and the USPD. When the vote came, however, the

ultraradical abstentionists prevailed (62:23) over the party leadership. The KPD was now obliged to abstain from elections to the coming constituent assembly.

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards had been invited to join the new party, but at this point they decided not to do so. Although they agreed with most of the KPD's program, they believed that the party should participate in the assembly elections. They even regretted that Spartacus had broken with the USPD, the leftist members of which seemed ripe for the picking; and they feared that the new members' putschist outlook would lead to adventurism. Accordingly, the stewards' refusal to join the KPD was a matter of profound concern to the old guard; it meant that the party would be isolated from the most significant radical elements within the working class.

The congress devoted some discussion to the question of party organization. In sharp reaction to the centralization that prevailed in the SPD, the ultraleftist Hugo Eberlein insisted that the KPD should have a decentralized structure. Local councils and factory committees, he insisted, should have autonomy from the party center, including the right to initiate actions on their own, without the Central Committee's prior approval or even knowledge. "Individual localities," declared Eberlein, "must retain complete freedom in the selection of their own organization. It is not permissible to dictate from above."² As a result of these differences, the congress made no decision on organization and turned the question over to a committee for further study.

Rosa Luxemburg's address to the congress on December 31—the last major speech she would ever give—necessarily celebrated the KPD's newfound separation from the compromises and betrayals of social democracy. But her remarks could not conceal her deep concern about the impatience that prevailed among the new party members. Socialism would be made, she asserted, not by a government or by a minority taking power, but by the majority of the masses: "We do not conquer political power from above, but from below"—through the councils and through mass strikes. If the councils were not yet revolutionary, and if the workers were not yet prepared to institute a socialist council republic, she warned, then revolutionaries must wait for them: "our comrades and the proletariat need education." The process of overthrowing capitalism, she declared to her zealous young listeners, "will not be a one-time operation"—by a minority conducting an uprising—"but an ongoing process."³

The old guard was deeply concerned about the KPD's prospects for gaining support within the German proletariat, which they knew would not accept the party's parliamentary boycott, its organizational looseness,

or its disposition for putsches. The workers were likely to look with even less favor on the party's stand-offish attitude toward trade unions. In the next weeks, as Jogiches *et al.* had feared, the KPD's appeal among the working class steadily diminished. To German workers, the party's behavior seemed provocative and senseless, especially as the SPD and USPD also continued to mouth revolutionary appeals, however empty they were of content. Perhaps no proletariat in Europe was more disposed to respond to appeals for "unity" and "order" than the German, and Ebert and his allies used that disposition with great effect to isolate the KPD.

THE FORMATION OF THE FREIKORPS

While the Spartacus League was transforming itself into the KPD (Spartakus), the army and the government were coming to grips with the failure of the Horse Guards to suppress the People's Naval Division. None of the military forces inherited from the Imperial Army, the generals understood, could be relied upon to quell a leftist rising or a "Bolshevik" (Spartacist) takeover. Fear of a takeover, to be sure, was based on a highly exaggerated perception of the German workers, who were considerably less revolutionary than the bourgeoisie and the reactionaries realized. But in their minds the fear became intense. If the provisional government hoped to prevent such an event, as we have seen, it had to create an entirely new military force. The SPD, the only party now remaining in the provisional government, shared this belief with the military and civilian reactionaries.

On the night of December 26 Groener, over the private telephone line, demanded of Ebert that the provisional government install a "strong man" to subdue the radicals. Ebert suggested Noske, who had successfully neutralized the Kiel mutiny and kept the sailors under control. Groener agreed, and Noske was recalled from Kiel. An overt nationalist and militarist who had inexplicably made his home in the SPD rather than in the army he so deeply loved, Noske reappeared in Berlin the next day. (As will be recalled, the withdrawal of the Independents on December 29 created a vacancy for him to fill on the CPC.)

Meanwhile, starting in mid-December, one General Georg von Maercker, who had been a divisional commander during the war, had been combing Berlin's barracks for reactionary officers and troops to create a force that would not cave in to civilians. His labors soon bore

fruit. Among the demobilized troops he found professional soldiers of all ranks who were ready for combat, and whose outlook had been formed by life in the barracks and action on the front. In the wake of military defeat, they were not only unemployed but resentful of the uprising. They were the officers and NCOs who had lost their sense of social place after the November uprising—young men without families, whose zealous patriotism and frontline experience made them suitable only for combat and the comradeship of battle. Von Maercker collected these men into a special elite force called storm-troopers, who would be paid by government and business to restore "order." By late December they numbered 4,000 well-trained and hardened men.

On the cold afternoon of January 4 General von Maercker invited Noske and Ebert to Zossen, a garrison town some 30 miles from Berlin, to review these "Volunteer Rifles." As the two SPD leaders stood on the snow-covered parade ground, bundled in their civilian coats, they were astonished to see a parade of meticulously groomed troops in polished boots, crisp gray uniforms, and battle helmets, marching under the traditional flag of red, black, and yellow, in perfect step to a brass band. The soldiers were fully equipped with rifles, machine guns, and artillery. Such troops were supposedly nowhere to be found in the Berlin Military District.

The force the SPD leaders were reviewing was in fact one of the first units of the so-called Freikorps, which were forming in various parts of Germany to repel the "Bolshevik" menace and stabilize the provisional government. Officially, they were being formed to guard the Reich against Polish incursions in the east. Maercker, the very soul of discretion, cordially advised the people's commissars that his troops were at their disposal should they be needed. Here was the counter-revolution with arms in hand. Ebert and Noske could now feel confident, for the first time, that they could finally remove the revolutionary pest once and for all.

THE JANUARY UPRISING

Meanwhile, Emil Eichhorn, the self-proclaimed police president, had built up his Sicherheitswehr into a force of 2,000 socialist workers, many of whom were sympathetic to the Spartacists' views, if not to the KPD itself. Eichhorn, a Left Independent, was especially popular with the radical workers, and as long as the Independents were in the government, Ebert

was obliged to tolerate him. But as soon as they resigned, beginning on January 1, the government opened up a press campaign—spearheaded by *Vorwärts*—on the last Independent to hold an important office. On January 4 the SPD decided to move: the Prussian state government, which exercised control over Berlin's police, issued an order removing Eichhorn from his post, on charges of engaging in antigovernment activities (during the People's Naval Division affair), and to replace him with Eugen Ernst, a member of the SPD executive.

Eichhorn responded by flatly refusing to leave his office. The USPD leadership, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and the KPD's Central Committee issued a joint manifesto that demanded Eichhorn's reinstatement and called upon the Berlin workers to protest against his dismissal in a mass demonstration the next day—Sunday, January 5—in front of the police headquarters. To their utter amazement, the workers responded in massive numbers: a crowd of around 300,000 filled the Alexanderplatz, where the police headquarters was located, and flooded the adjacent streets and avenues as far as the eye could see. From a balcony on the police headquarters Liebknecht, Däumig, and Ledebour, among others, delivered passionate speeches, while the crowd in turn shouted back its enthusiastic approval. When Eichhorn appeared on the balcony, they cheered him wildly. The workers below could not get enough of the speeches and remained in place well into the evening.

Meanwhile, inside the police headquarters, about 70 Shop Steward, USPD, and Communist leaders were meeting to decide on their next step. Should they attempt to turn the protest against Eichhorn's dismissal into an uprising? The Shop Stewards proposed that the assembled leaders declare a general strike and ensure, by force if necessary, that Eichhorn remained in office; then if the reinstatement attempt created an opportunity to overthrow the government, the radicals would seize it. Exactly what this vague strategy meant was not clear. Liebknecht, for his part, spoke strongly in favor of fomenting an insurrection—in flat contradiction to the KPD's policies. But caught up in the enthusiasm of the demonstration and "away from the moderating influence of his party associates," notes Richard M. Watt, he "was free to commit the KPD to the ultimate move."⁴ The Shop Stewards Däumig and Müller angrily opposed the proposal, regarding it as politically and militarily premature. But significantly, most of the stewards voted for it. Only the Berlin chapter of the USPD participated in the decision to overthrow the government; the USPD party executive had nothing to do with it and did not authorize it. Later, on January 6, members of the USPD executive offered to mediate between the government and the revolutionaries—

evidence of a defensive posture—but the negotiations failed on January 8, owing to the intransigence of both sides.

During the afternoon discussion the leaders failed to agree on a course of action. Eventually the huge crowd, after waiting patiently for guidance, melted away. As the leaders continued to discuss their options, reports arrived that groups of militants had occupied the offices of *Vorwärts* and several bourgeois newspapers. Heinrich Dorrenbach, the leader of the People's Naval Division, flush with enthusiasm, arrived on the scene and effusively pledged the support of his sailors, albeit without having consulted them. Other intimations of military support filtered in: the Berlin garrison was said to be ready to back a coup; and troops in Spandau and Frankfurt were said to be ready to come to the aid of a workers' insurrection.

Later that evening the leaders finally voted (64:6) to call for a general strike the next day, Monday, January 6. Together with the Shop Stewards, they pledged to resist Eichhorn's dismissal by force if necessary; and to try to overthrow the Ebert government and replace it with a left-radical one. To lead the strike and coordinate the takeover of power, the leaders created a Revolutionary Committee of 53 people, again mostly shop stewards. Three chairmen, one representing each of the parties, were chosen as formal heads of the Revolutionary Committee: Paul Scholze for the shop stewards; George Ledebour for the Independents; and Karl Liebknecht for the Communists.

At midnight the Revolutionary Committee emerged from the police headquarters and made their way to the barracks of the People's Naval Division at the Marstall, where they set up the committee headquarters and drafted a leaflet summoning the workers to close down their factories on Monday, January 6, and return to the police headquarters at the Alexanderplatz at 11 a.m. "Eichhorn's firing was a provocation directed against the revolutionary workers," the leaflet declared. "Disarm the counterrevolution! Arm the proletariat! Consolidate all troops that are true to the revolution! ... Down with Ebert-Scheidemann!"⁵ The committee also drafted a communiqué, to be issued after the uprising succeeded, that declared the Ebert government deposed.

When Luxemburg learned of the decision to undertake an insurrection, she was shaken. "We must not cling to ... the illusion," she had warned the founding congress of the KPD only days before, "that a socialist revolution can be made by overthrowing the capitalist government and replacing it with a different one."⁶ She and Jogiches were convinced that the Berlin proletariat was not ready. But they were also aware that their party over the previous weeks had tried to incite the

workers to a condition of insurrectionary fervor, and they felt that the KPD had a moral obligation to stand by any proletarian insurrection.

On the rainy Monday morning of January 6, the Berlin proletariat appeared in even greater force than they had the day before, probably numbering around half a million. Again the workers massed in the plaza and adjacent boulevards. Trucks full of garrison soldiers, armed with rifles and machine guns, came with the workers, who brought their own weapons. To all appearances, what had once seemed impossible—a revolution establishing a council republic in Berlin—now seemed eminently possible. From the balcony Liebknecht and other radical orators stirred up the crowd's emotions and issued rhetorical calls to revolution that, from all reports, brought the masses to a fever-pitch.

Once again the people awaited concrete directions. But none were forthcoming. Some militants used the delay to act on their own: they seized the government printing office and took over more newspaper offices. Over the next two days other groups of militants captured railway stations and several more government buildings, even placing riflemen on top of the strategic Brandenburg Gate.

But apart from these actions, the uprising did not materialize. The general strike never became sufficiently general. While the metalworking factories were shut down, workers at the electric utilities stayed on their jobs, the telephones still worked, and even the theaters and restaurants remained open. None of the troops from other cities that had supposedly pledged to aid the uprising arrived. Even the Berlin garrison, despite impassioned pleas from Liebknecht, declared its neutrality. Finally, the People's Naval Division—outraged that Dorrenbach had committed them to the uprising without their consent—declared their neutrality and evicted the Revolutionary Committee from its headquarters in the Marstall.

The greatest single reason for the failure of the uprising, however, was the lack of an effective insurrectionary leadership. The situation on January 5–6 demanded rigorous and unwavering leadership, of a kind that Spartacus and its allies could not provide. To carry out an insurrection, the Revolutionary Committee would have had to have fashioned the workers into a strong and well-structured proletarian army. It would have had to develop and implement a strategic plan for coordinated military action; swiftly arrest the government and the military leaders; and take them into custody in secure command centers. It would have had to systematically seize and occupy strategic points in the city such as the Chancellery and the War Ministry. Revolutionary contingents were needed to maintain surveillance over counterrevolu-

tionary elements and to face troops such as the Freikorps. An insurrection, once undertaken, could not remain a mere political manifestation, marked by the massing of a formless crowd; it had to be a military operation and had to be treated as such. Although competent leadership would not have guaranteed victory for the Berlin workers, the lack of it was a certain guarantee of their defeat.

The Revolutionary Committee, however, seemed to lack any clear idea that an insurrection needed forceful leadership. It proved amazingly incompetent. Its 53 members had made no preparations to seize power and had no strategy at hand; they were totally incapable of making firm decisions. They created a few commissions, which never became functional, and issued a few proclamations, but they made only a few feeble attempts to seize the War Ministry and the central bank. The groups of militants who seized buildings and set up barricades in different parts of the city did so in isolation from one another, without any coordination. Instead of seizing bastions of power, the revolutionaries took over newspaper offices and railway stations—which were of relatively little strategic significance. Once the insurgents captured a given place, they received no further orders from the Revolutionary Committee; on the contrary, they were left to wait in isolation and defend their position against an inevitable government counterattack.

Writing on January 7, Luxemburg reproached the Revolutionary Committee for its abysmal failures:

Act! Act! Courageously, decisively, consistently—that is the bounden duty of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and honest Socialist party members. Disarm the counterrevolution, arm the masses, occupy all strategic positions. Act quickly! The revolution requires it. In world history, the revolution's hours count for months and its days for years.⁷

Few words could have been more pertinent. Again, on January 8 she implored the Revolutionary Committee: "When the masses are called into the streets in a state of alert, they must be told clearly and plainly what they have to do, or at least what is happening, what friend and foe are doing and planning."⁸ Instead both the Berlin leadership and the masses drifted aimlessly. As a later Communist account observed acidly:

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards . . . declared themselves the general staff of the revolutionary upheaval. In these days, impetuously, innumerable masses filled the streets from the Siegesallee to the Alexanderplatz, yearning for leadership, arms, goals, and instruction.

Now the leaders were there, and they established a high purpose. But then what did they do? In the moment of their dream, they recoiled from doing the deeds that were needed to achieve that goal.⁹

On January 8 the Revolutionary Committee enjoined the insurgents to "fight!" But after the next day it no longer even bothered to convene. Its members had scattered in fear and disappeared.

A year and a half later *Die rote Fahne*, the organ of the KPD, emphasized the enormity of the tragedy:

What happened on Monday [January 6] in Berlin was perhaps the greatest proletarian mass action in history. We do believe that not even in Russia were there mass demonstrations of this size. From Roland to Viktoria [two monuments in the Alexanderplatz], proletarians were standing shoulder to shoulder. Deep into the Tiergarten they were standing. They had brought along their weapons, they had their red flags. They were ready to do anything, to give everything, even their lives. They were an army of 200,000 such as no Ludendorff had ever seen.

Then the inconceivable happened. The masses were standing from 9 in the morning in the cold and fog. Somewhere their leaders were sitting and conferring. The fog lifted and the masses were still standing. Their leaders conferred. Noon came and in addition to the cold, hunger came. And the leaders conferred. The masses were feverish with excitement: they wanted one deed, even one word to calm their excitement. But nobody knew what to say. Because the leaders were conferring. The fog came again and with it the dusk. The masses went home sad. They wanted great things, but they had done nothing. Because their leaders conferred . . . They conferred, conferred, conferred.¹⁰

By contrast, the Ebert government counterattacked swiftly. Throwing political scruples to the winds, it sought support from everyone it could: socialist, liberal, bourgeois, monarchist, conservative, and outright counterrevolutionary.

On the night of January 5–6, the SPD issued a leaflet appealing to its supporters to come to the Chancellery to protect it against revolutionary assault by "the armed bandits of the Spartacus League."¹¹ This was a falsehood—Spartacus did not initiate the events. Nevertheless, tens of thousands answered the SPD's call and assembled before the building. Over the next two days the government formed and armed a corps of

5,000 civil service workers, known as the Social Democratic Auxiliary Service, to be aided by several units of the Berlin garrison. By January 8 Ebert had a respectable force at his disposal, made up in part of civilians, including loyal SPD workers.

Meanwhile, on January 6, at a secret government meeting, War Minister Noske unhesitatingly accepted his appointment to become commander in chief for Berlin, remarking, "Somebody will have to be the bloodhound—I will not shirk the responsibility."¹² On that very day he left Berlin and improvised a headquarters at a girls' school in the suburb of Dahlem, where he assiduously mobilized the counterrevolutionary forces at his disposal. Telephoning Maercker at Zossen, he took up his offer to march on the capital with his Volunteer Rifles. Finding officers was not difficult: they voluntarily made their way to him at Dahlem. Noske, abandoning all socialist pretensions, enlisted all competent officers, including outright monarchists who were eager to get their hands on the "red" insurrectionaries.

On January 8 the government began its offensive against the insurgents by deploying the Social Democratic Auxiliary Service to protect the Chancellery and Reichstag buildings against the "reds." Garrison units were dispatched to attack the occupied government buildings and dislodge insurgents from the Government Printing Office, the railroad stations, and most of the newspaper printing plants.

On January 9–10 a Freikorps battalion known as the Potsdam Regiment set up artillery pieces outside the *Vorwärts* building. Its commander, Major von Stephani, demanded that the insurgents surrender and, receiving no reply, opened fire with trench mortars. Howitzers were soon brought in, followed by a tank to assault the building. The 350 people inside, equipped only with small arms, waved a white flag, but the Freikorps ignored their attempt to surrender and continued to pound the building. They subsequently entered it and took 300 prisoners, shooting some of them despite the white flag. That same night, military contingents cleared Berlin's newspaper offices of insurgents. Other units drove them from the Brandenburg Gate and installed in their place troops with machine guns.

On January 11 Noske entered central Berlin at the head of 3,000 Freikorps troops, but by then the capital was already largely subdued. The defenders of the police headquarters held out as long as they could, as did a few other pockets of resistance. But the Freikorps systematically went from building to building, ruthlessly flushing out all armed individuals and those who might have been involved in the uprising. Their artillery bombarded the police headquarters, captured the building with assault

forces, and executed its defenders on the spot even after they surrendered.

Noske's aim was not only to defeat the uprising but to destroy the left radical groups and seize all weapons in the workers' possession. Berlin was occupied, like a conquered city, and all public gatherings were prohibited. As Richard M. Watt observes:

Whenever even a small group of civilians gathered in a street, an armored car appeared almost instantly, and under the threat of its machine guns the crowd would disperse. Anyone attempting to cross one of the bridges over the Spree was searched and interrogated. At night searchlight beams from the patrolling armored cars were flung down various streets to detect any demonstrations being organized.¹³

On January 11 *Die rote Fahne* acknowledged that the uprising had failed, and on the 13th the Shop Stewards called off what remained of the general strike. Berlin was now in the hands of the Freikorps.

Although the January uprising came to be known as "Spartacus Week," it was initiated, as we have seen, not by the Spartacists but by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. As the government hunted down the revolutionary leaders, it was apparently unaware of the role played by the Shop Stewards; at any rate, it held the KPD entirely responsible. The newly restored police rounded up Communists wherever they could find them. Jogiches and Eberlein of the KPD, as well as Ledebour and Meyer of the USPD, were arrested, but it was Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg that the government wanted most. Had the two KPD leaders been as prudent as Lenin had been during the July Days in Petrograd and accepted the offers from comrades to smuggle them out of Berlin, they might have survived the counterrevolution. But it was not in their nature to flee the Berlin "battlefield" where their comrades were being arrested and shot. Having thrown in their lot with the masses, they refused to flee.

The two Spartacus leaders eluded the police for several days by moving from one apartment to another, but on the evening of January 15 a "citizen guard" patrol found them in an apartment in the Wilmersdorf neighborhood. They were taken to the Eden Hotel—headquarters of the Horse Guards Division of the Freikorps—where they were questioned separately and physically abused.

Liebknecht was led out of the building under escort, presumably to be taken to prison. Suddenly a blow to his head with a rifle butt stunned him, and he was pushed into a car. After a few minutes of driving the car stopped, and he was released. As he stumbled forward, he was shot in the

back. Later his murderers alleged that they had shot him while he was "trying to escape." His body was dropped off anonymously at a mortuary. Shortly afterward Luxemburg was escorted out of the same hotel, beaten up and brutally forced into a car. Barely alive, she was shot in the head. Her body was dumped in the icy Landwehr Canal, from which it was not recovered until the end of May.

The cost of the January 1919 uprising to the KPD was enormous: it lost not only its two most important spokespeople but those who would have been best able to oppose the Bolshevization, and ultimately the Stalinization, of the German Communist Party during the 1920s and its ideological impoverishment in the crucial 1930s. The "socialist" Ebert government, allied with the army, had decisively defeated the radical Left.

A number of observers have asserted that the government deliberately provoked the January 1919 uprising: it dismissed Eichhorn, the argument goes, precisely to lure the Berlin Left into a hopeless rising, so that it could definitively eliminate it. "The people in the government who orchestrated Eichhorn's dismissal," wrote the Communist authors of *Illustrierte Geschichte* in the 1920s, "knew that it would present an unprecedented provocation to the Berlin working class. They wanted this provocation . . . in order to push the working class into battle, in order to defeat and disarm it."¹⁴ The January fighting, wrote Paul Frölich, Luxemburg's biographer, "was cautiously and deliberately prepared and cunningly provoked by the leaders of the counter-revolution."¹⁵

In my view, however, it seems highly unlikely that Eichhorn's dismissal was a provocation. The provisional government had as yet no police force of its own at its disposal, and the formation of the Freikorps was still localized. Noske and Ebert's review at Zossen took place on January 4, the day before the demonstrations began. In January 1919 a significant revolutionary potential existed in Berlin, and the workers' show of force and solidarity during those demonstrations was enormous. However moderate their conscious political views may have been, they were clamoring for guidance and could easily have been carried further by a well-planned strategy; indeed they might have been educated by the revolutionary process itself. "There is general agreement among contemporaneous observers that a determined leadership could have seized political power in Berlin either on January 5 or 6," says Eric Waldman.¹⁶ Even Noske acknowledged that a seizure of power by the Left was within the realms of possibility. He later recalled:

Great masses of workers . . . answered the call to struggle. Their favorite slogan "Down, down, down" [with the government] resounded once

more . . . Many marchers were armed. Several trucks with machine guns stood at the Siegessäule . . . If the crowds had had determined conscious leaders, instead of windbags, by noon that day Berlin would have been in their hands.¹⁷

Noske, in effect, held that the Left's leadership failed to act resolutely to turn the demonstration into a real uprising.

The Berlin workers were in a state of revolt, and, despite not being conscious revolutionaries, might even have taken over the capital. But as Lenin knew, revolutionary situations do not last for months or even weeks, and the consummation of an insurrection depends on the swiftness and resolution of its leaders. An insurrection whose leaders are not decisive can lead to a crushing defeat in a matter of days. The Revolutionary Committee, principally the Shop Stewards, discovered by the evening of January 6 that they had no stomach for an insurrection. Lacking resolute leadership, the Berlin workers reluctantly but understandably retreated to their homes.

THE UPHEAVALS OF 1919

The uprising in Berlin was not an isolated event—it ignited uprisings in at least a dozen cities, principally in the north and the central heartland. On January 7 in Brunswick, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, and Nuremberg, young radicals occupied newspaper offices, as did their counterparts in Hamburg and Wolfenbüttel on the 9th. In Brunswick, Halle, and Leipzig, armed sailors prevented government military transports from passing *en route* to Berlin.

Bremen, a self-governing industrial city near the North Sea, was home to an outright insurrection. In the previous weeks the Bremen workers' and soldiers' council had succeeded in accumulating considerable power; the outbreak of the Berlin uprising was thereupon taken as a signal to seize power. On January 10, supported by the workers' and soldiers' council, the radicals proclaimed a Bremen Soviet Republic and a "dictatorship of the proletariat." The insurgents expropriated the SPD's local bank accounts, distributed arms to the workers, and proclaimed a general strike. Bremen's successful uprising touched off further uprisings in Hamburg, Cuxhaven, and Wilhelmshaven, creating a seemingly formidable red belt along the North Sea coast. But on January 13, after learning that the Berlin uprising had been crushed, the workers in

Bremen and other port cities realized that all was lost. Lacking any alternative, the council revoked the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and allowed the Constituent Assembly elections to take place. On February 2 approximately 3,500 heavily armed Freikorps troops occupied the city and scattered the workers' and soldiers' council, setting up an SPD-dominated government in its stead. In numerous cities and towns during these momentous weeks, the same pathetic scenario unfolded: a general strike or an uprising of sorts would erupt and create a council government; then the Freikorps would march in and destroy it with relatively little difficulty.

Meanwhile, on January 19, elections to the Constituent Assembly were held through all of Germany. The republican parties gained a large majority. On February 6 the new Constituent Assembly met at Weimar (at a discreet distance from radical Berlin) and adopted a constitution based on liberal republican principles. The CPC and the Zentralrat surrendered their powers to the Assembly, which elected Ebert president and created a broad coalition government that included bourgeois parties.

Appalled by the bourgeois-parliamentary nature of the new regime, left radicals throughout Germany rallied to the workers' and soldiers' councils as their sole alternative. Some naïvely demanded that the new constitution provide a role for the councils to play within the new republican regime; others demanded that the new constitution be scrapped and replaced with one establishing a council republic. By late February this discontent was sufficiently intense to fuel a wave of political strikes that lasted for several months.

Perhaps the most dramatic occurred in Halle, a major industrial city and railroad hub near Weimar. In late February the Halle workers, led by Left Independents, formed a revolutionary council, declared a general strike in support of a council republic, disarmed the police, and distributed weapons among the proletariat. Workers in all branches of industry downed their tools. Railroad workers spread the strike into Saxony and Thuringia, inspiring the Leipzig workers to down tools as well. The Halle insurgents were in a position to cut off the rail link between Weimar and Berlin, potentially isolating the Constituent Assembly in Weimar. But the new government responded to the events vigorously: on March 1 it sent in a brigade of Maercker's Volunteer Rifles, who were able to bring the Halle strike to an end four days later.

It was not long before the general strike movement, after passing through a multitude of towns and cities in central Germany, swept northward again and returned to Berlin. Here the KPD, illegal and persecuted since "Spartacus Week," realized that if there were to be a

Communist revolution in Germany, the party would have to make it quickly, before the Freikorps extinguished all hope. On March 3 the Vollzugsrat (which remained alive as a local Berlin council) called upon the Berlin workers to mount a general strike, principally around demands that the workers' and soldiers' councils be given a major governmental role in the new constitution; that the Hamburg Points be implemented; that a workers' defense force be created; that all units of the Freikorps be dissolved; and that diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia be restored. These demands, which accepted the framework of a republican constitution, were aimed at ridding Germany of her privileged military stratum, which was now the battering ram of reaction.

The Berlin strike was not led by the KPD. In fact, the Communists provided only a small fraction of its leadership, which consisted primarily of Independents and Shop Stewards; nor was it revolutionary. But its supporters characterized it as "Communist" and designated Moscow as the herald of the "world revolution." Given the superior military force of the Freikorps, the mature and experienced Communists cautioned the workers to refrain from responding to government provocations with violence. Leo Jogiches, who now headed the KPD, knew he had to rein in the anarchic element in his party. Accordingly, the conduct prescribed for the strike was very specific:

Remain quietly in the factories. Don't let them take the factories away from you. Gather in the factories! Explain things to those who want to hesitate and hang back. *Don't let yourselves be drawn into pointless shooting. Noske is only waiting for you to do that as an excuse for spilling more blood.*¹⁸

Many workers did in fact remain in their factories. But the anarchic element among the strikers was spoiling for a fight—doubtless to awaken the workers' supposedly innate revolutionary instincts. These "hyenas of the revolution"¹⁹ (as a KPD leaflet angrily called them) went into action with a vengeance, plundering shops and attacking police stations with rifles. Noske could not have hoped for more. He proclaimed martial law on March 3, and in a series of street battles his troops dislodged the "Spartacists" (as all the insurgents were now generically called) from the Alexanderplatz, the Berlin subway, and the Marstall. To reclaim the police headquarters, the Freikorps used airplanes, mortars, heavy machine guns, and even howitzers.

On March 8 the general strike was called off, and the strike committee tried to negotiate an end to the whole affair. But Berlin was soon flooded

with allegations that during the fighting the "Spartacists" had perpetrated grisly massacres. In fact only one soldier, as Rudolf Coper notes, was lynched by an enraged mob.

But Noske was out for blood. On March 9 he issued an order giving the Freikorps free rein to shoot anyone who took up arms against government troops. That day the Freikorps descended on the Lichtenberg district—where the last insurgents were holed up—with tanks, flame throwers, and mortars, savagely crushing the last resistance of real or imagined "Spartacists." The following day, a Freikorps order gave the troops the right to shoot anyone who even possessed arms. Equipped with the extraordinary power to execute whoever they chose, the Freikorps freely indulged in the wholesale slaughter of Berliners. In all, an estimated 3,000 Berliners were killed. By March 13 the battle for Berlin came to its definitive end.

Toward the end of the fighting the government also decided to eliminate the People's Naval Division. On March 10 the sailors were instructed to go to their divisional headquarters between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. the next day, to claim their demobilization certificates and their pay. Several hundred sailors showed up, of whom 29 were arbitrarily massacred by machine-gun fire. Thus ended the notorious "Week of Bloodshed." Among its earliest casualties was the irreplaceable Leo Jogiches, who was arrested and cold-bloodedly murdered by a police thug. The KPD leadership then passed to Paul Levi, who was determined to cleanse the party's membership of its anarchistic putschists—for whom a mere rifle shot was a mindless call to "spontaneous revolution."

In Russia in 1917 Lenin had driven the October Revolution forward in the expectation that his comrades in Germany would soon carry out a comparable revolution. The uprisings of late December 1918 and early January 1919 were the last chances for the German proletariat to create an authentic council government based on socialist principles. Had the German Left been sufficiently organized and experienced, it might have succeeded in taking and holding power in Berlin. "Had the strikes in the early months of 1919 in the Ruhr, central Germany and Berlin occurred simultaneously," observes A. J. Ryder, "the government would have found it difficult to survive."²⁰ But overthrowing the government would have required a degree of coordination, discipline, and organization that was alien to most German radicals at the time.

Basic to Spartacus's failure, however, was the radicals' overestimation of the "spontaneous revolutionary will" of the proletariat. The main reason the German workers as a whole made no revolution was that they did not want to make one. A product of continental Europe's greatest

capitalist economy, they had been significantly integrated into it. They would doubtless have agreed to a governmental program that nationalized industry and large enterprises, accepted working-class co-management of industry, and expanded benefits for the ill, aged, unemployed, and infirm. In short, they identified socialism with a generous social welfare state and greater political freedom. Having just undergone four wartime years of senseless bloodletting, they were loath to embark upon anything resembling a civil war like the one raging in Russia. Most of all, German workers were unwilling to place their trust in Spartacus, with its propensity for putschist behavior, its overheated rhetoric, and its close association with deserters and the unemployed. The two-day period of near-insurgency in January was one of those golden moments where hours count as months and one must "Act! Act!"

The insurgency's leaders failed to act quickly or even much at all. But they were faced with a formidable obstacle: the majority of the German working class did not regard socialism as the product of revolutionary violence. What little they knew of socialism came from "revisionists" like Eduard Bernstein, pragmatists like August Bebel, and compromisers like Karl Kautsky. Schooled for years in the value of piecemeal parliamentary reforms, they thought that in December they had already attained socialism. As Rudolf Coper observes:

The officers of the workers' political and industrial organizations had, in the course of five decades or so, become administrators and beneficiaries of these vested interests [i.e., the institutions of the Social Democratic Party]. A revolution involved risks (it might not succeed) and the workers' institutions might be threatened by failure. A revolution involved risks for the individual worker, too; he might have to fight for socialism. The German workers abhorred this idea. To the extent of not wanting to fight a civil war there existed indeed in the rank and file a predisposition towards being betrayed.²¹

THE TRAGIC END

After the March 1919 general strike and the murder of Leo Jogiches, Paul Levi took over the leadership of the KPD. Levi had been Rosa Luxemburg's protégé and enjoyed a great deal of respect within Spartacus for his political acumen. He was acutely wary of the authoritarian practices and revolutionary zeal that "the Russians" tried to bring to the

KPD, which he understood was singularly ill-suited for a Bolshevik diet of insurrections and doomed confrontations. An intellectual, even an aesthete, Levi realized that the German working class as a whole veered towards gradualism, and he regarded the mystique that surrounded the proletariat as a potentially dangerous illusion. Accordingly, he rejected the anarchic putschism that had turned the strikes of March 1919 into a bloody insurrection, and as head of the KPD, he decided to transform the party into a more responsible organization.

At the second congress of the KPD at Heidelberg in October 1919, Levi submitted a set of theses demanding that the KPD's earlier decisions to participate neither in parliamentary elections nor trade unions should be overturned. Not only should the party participate in elections, he urged, but all its members should join trade unions. Levi demanded that these theses be accepted without modification, and those individuals or factions who objected should consider themselves expelled from the party. The congress adopted the theses, and the putschists departed. In all the KPD lost half its membership, including its large Berlin section and much of northern Germany.*

Meanwhile, the German social crisis was intensifying. Economic conditions were worsening, and popular resentment of the Versailles treaty soared. The Allies demanded a reduction in the size of the Reichswehr (or army), and the Ebert government had to accede—which some reactionary elements found intolerable. The more extreme members of the officer corps used the opportunity to plot the overthrow of the SPD-led republic by military force—in short, to initiate a putsch. The principal military leaders of the conspiracy were Lieutenant-General Walther Freiherr von Lüttwitz and a Freikorps chieftain, Lieutenant-Commander Hermann Ehrhardt. Lüttwitz was (as Harold J. Gordon Jr puts it) a man “of narrow mind and vast self-righteousness,” on whose shoulders rested the Prussian traditions of honor, warrior service, and extreme nationalism. Ehrhardt, by contrast, “was an example of the new war-bred front officer,” forged in the crucible of trench warfare and military defeat. Their

* On April 4–5, 1920, the former KPD members whom Levi had expelled met in Berlin and formed the German Communist Workers' Party (Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands, or KAPD). Its outlook was decidedly putschist: it called for immediate revolution and emphasized the use of violence. Presenting itself as the alternative to the KPD, which had “betrayed” the revolutionary movement, the KAPD sought affiliation with the Third International, but the request was rejected on the basis that individual acts of sabotage and terror would harm the revolutionary movement.

conspiracy gained the patronage of Ludendorff and some other deactivated generals. To make the putsch seem like something more than a military coup, the conspirators chose a reactionary Prussian bureaucrat, Dr Wolfgang Kapp, to be its nominal head.

The attempted putsch began during the late evening hours of March 12, 1920, when 5,000 battle-hardened troops of the Ehrhardt Brigade began the 25-kilometer march from their billets in Döberitz to Berlin. The government had only 3,000 troops in the capital and 9,000 security police, who were not only incapable of resisting the putschist troops but quickly went over to them. Meeting with no armed opposition—the War Ministry was virtually deserted—the Ehrhardt Brigade proceeded to take over the capital. While the existing republican government sheepishly fled to republic-friendly Stuttgart, the conspirators proclaimed a new government headed by Kapp and Lüttwitz, voided the Weimar Constitution, and dissolved the National Assembly. To all appearances, the Kapp putsch had succeeded.

But the counterattack against the putsch was not long in coming, and it was led not by the KPD or the USPD but by the German trade unions, headed by Carl Legien, the longtime chief of the SPD-oriented Free Trade Unions and a major right-wing SPD leader. Legien, it will be recalled, had supported the war with patriotic fervor and resolutely opposed the party's left wing. He had repeatedly tried to obstruct attempts by leftists and worker-militants to engage in extralegal or illegal actions. He had placed all his hopes on the new Weimar Republic to stabilize the country, and in recent months believed that a new era of social welfare was opening for Germany's workers. But in March 1920 he was elderly and ill, with only a year left to live.

The Kapp putsch seemed to bring all of Legien's hopes for a stable republic to an end. In despair, he resolved that the military elite had to be crushed once and for all. His long-established policy of compromise, he now saw, was defunct and had to be abandoned. Despite his advanced age he essentially discarded his long-held policies of accommodation, and together with the support of the nonsocialist unions, he called upon the German proletariat to undertake a general strike against the putschists. A call for a general strike with union approval was unprecedented in Germany. It demanded an end to the Kapp putsch; the establishment of a workers' government (albeit one preserving the parliamentary republic rather than creating a council republic), to be jointly headed by the SPD and USPD; and a purge of all counterrevolutionaries in the Reichswehr, the economy, and the bureaucracy (including Noske). All troops were to be removed from

Berlin; the proletariat was to be armed; advanced industrial enterprises were to be immediately socialized (i.e. nationalized); and there was to be greater union influence over government appointments and policies.

For Legien and the trade union leaders to voice such demands and to use syndicalist methods to implement them was nothing less than astonishing. The general strike went into effect immediately—and the workers responded enthusiastically. It was the most sweeping general strike that Germany had ever seen, and the strongest mass movement that its proletariat ever created. All production and transportation came abruptly to a halt, as did mining, public services, and publishing. Even the theaters closed down. The strike effectively froze the Kappists—their troops could not move anywhere, nor replenish their supplies, nor even find a precise target against which to direct their military might—and so rendered their would-be regime nonfunctional.

The Independents and most of the Left supported the strike. As for the KPD, Paul Levi was in prison and hence absent from the scene, so his lieutenants were left to formulate the Communist response without him. And they responded like true sectarians: they opposed the strike because it meant coming to the aid of the republic, or what they called the “Noske government.” The workers entirely ignored this admonition. On the second day of the strike, the party reversed its position and supported the strike, mainly because most of its members were participating in it.

In many parts of Germany radical workers rose with demands that went beyond the republican goals of the general strike. In the industrial Ruhr, most notably, working-class support for the council system was widespread. Here workers’ councils took power in several places and formed a “Red Army” or workers’ militia that drove the army and the Freikorps out of the region. Although most of the German working class was vaguely reformist, its resistance to the Kappists evoked widespread fear within the German bourgeoisie.

Four days after the general strike began, the Kapp government fell, and the German power structure was restored. Except in the Ruhr and a few other localities, the strike came to an abrupt end. Legien formally requested that the USPD fulfill the strike’s demand for a joint USPD–SPD workers’ government, but the USPD—which had been moving ever farther to the left in the previous year—refused to collaborate with the SPD, and the SPD reciprocated in kind. Once it was back in power, the SPD used the army to suppress the Ruhr’s council system—an action that enraged the workers in the region, who deserted the SPD in droves and flocked into the other parties, especially the USPD. By June, the USPD was a mass party, the second largest workers’ party in Germany: in October

1920 its membership numbered between 800,000 and 900,000. Yet the party was as divided as ever by internal tensions, and its sizable left wing—with members like Ernst Däumig—was drifting toward the Communists.

Meanwhile Levi, to compensate for the KPD’s earlier loss of membership (his purge had reduced it to about 78,000), set out to try to win over the USPD’s left wing. If he could win the Left Independents over to the KPD, he apparently hoped, he could transform his party into a mass movement. The Comintern (Communist International), to which the KPD had adhered, also looked covetously at the USPD’s leftist membership: it worked assiduously to exacerbate the split between the USPD rank-and-file and its more conservative leadership, condemning the latter as nonrevolutionary “Kautskyans” and competing with the conventional SPD for USPD members who favored a parliamentary strategy.

This rivalry between the Communists and the conventional Social Democrats occurred primarily at the local level and came to a climax in October at the USPD’s party congress at Halle, where the Independents convened for the purpose of deciding whether to accept the 21 Conditions (or “points”) for membership in the Third International. Here Zinoviev attempted to induce the Independents to join the Bolsheviks, while Martov, who was now racked by illness, warned the USPD members against allying with the Comintern. Martov’s warnings could not sway the party’s radicalized membership, and by a vote of 237 to 156 the congress voted to accept the 21 Conditions, clearing the way for the party to merge with the KPD. In December the USPD formally merged with the KPD (hereafter still known as the KPD), but tens of thousands of Independents were so distraught by the vote that they refused to abide by the decision. Nonetheless the KPD for the first time gained a large mass base (which included trade union support and parliamentarians), totaling at least 350,000 members.

Instead of learning from this experience and adapting their methods to suit German conditions, the KPD’s action-oriented Communists, encouraged by Moscow and the inept Zinoviev, embarked upon a series of insurrectionary escapades that would have failed even in Russia. One of its most irresponsible, known as the March Action of 1921, occurred in Mansfeld, an important copper-mining district located in the Halle region and a party stronghold, most of whose population was Communist. To reduce the KPD’s influence in the area, the SPD government early in 1921 sent police into the mines, on the flimsy pretext that they had to be protected from thieving miners. Whether this move was the result of a calculated provocation or of stupidity is arguable, but as might be expected, the copper miners rose up, and for about a week, using

weapons left over from the war, engaged in pitched battles with the police and the Reichswehr.

The Communists tried to build on the rising by extending it to other districts. Near Halle some of the chemical workers at the nearby Leuna factory responded, but as in so many insurrectionary actions in these years, most workers did not. For the most part, German workers were hungry and suffering from postwar economic conditions; they had little hope that a revolutionary adventure could improve their lot. But the excitable Béla Kun—a Comintern agent who had previously led the Hungarian soviet republic in 1919 (see Chapter 57)—called a revolutionary general strike. Again there was no response—the workers ignored the appeal. Stymied, groups of Communists showed up at various factories and tried to physically prevent the workers from entering. The workers actually had to drive the Communists away with clubs in order to enter their workplaces. The would-be Communist-led proletarian offensive had become a fight between the Communists and the workers. Finally the KPD resorted to an absurd provocation: blaming the police, they tried to blow up their own party offices, in the hope that they would gain widespread working-class support against their class enemies. But once again the workers refused to respond. Meanwhile the Reichswehr used its substantial firepower—including artillery—to suppress the insurrectionary Communists. Only after nearly 150 workers were killed did the KPD leadership finally call off the action.

The March Action thoroughly discredited the KPD, and Communist-influenced workers in large numbers dissociated themselves from it in disgust. Before the uprising the party had boasted a membership of 450,000, but, by the summer of 1921 its membership had fallen to 180,000. Indeed, after the March Action, the KPD ceased to be a mass party. Paul Levi publicly criticized the fiasco—for which pains the KPD's central committee rewarded him by expelling him from the party.

The KPD's putschism culminated in the so-called "German October" of 1923, which marked the end of almost a decade of Russian hopes for a proletarian revolution in Germany. To Russian eyes the year 1923 seemed particularly ripe for a successful German—and ultimately a world—revolution. The SPD-led republican government had proved to be totally incapable of paying its crushing war reparations, with the result that in January France occupied the highly industrial Ruhr region, threatening to hold it hostage until the Germans fulfilled their obligations. Refusing to accede to the occupation, the German government on January 10 called upon all Germans to respond with passive resistance. The people rallied to the appeal, bringing all economic activity in the Ruhr to a standstill.

Meanwhile a massive inflation of the German mark led to high unemployment and widespread hunger. Plunged into a deep social, political, and psychological crisis, Germans began to shift their support away from the moderate parties to the extremes of left and right. Communist and nationalist forces alike saw rapid upsurges in their respective memberships, while Ebert's SPD, in turn, lost strength, as did the once-powerful trade unions.

Many Bolshevik leaders leaped to the conclusion that the German proletariat was finally ready to abandon the SPD and agree to a Communist-led proletarian revolution. Once again the KPD girded itself for an armed insurrection. In late July 1923 the Comintern summoned the KPD leader, Heinrich Brandler, to Russia to plan an uprising. On August 23, based on a typically gross overestimation of the German proletariat's propensity for revolution, the Russian Politburo committed itself, the Comintern, and the KPD to insurrectionary action.

The launching-pad of the revolution, it was expected, would be Saxony and Thuringia, the two provinces where the Communists and the left-wing Social Democrats who supported them seemed to have the strongest labor support. Here left-wing Social Democrats held majorities in the provincial governments and depended upon Communist votes to remain in power. Saxony's premier, Erich Zeigner, was a left Social Democrat; he was very popular with the workers, and his government had cooperated with the Communists for months. Zeigner was eager to unite with the Communists in a common front against the increasingly powerful nationalist right, and most crucially he was open to the formation of a coalition government with the KPD.

According to a Russian-prepared plan, the KPD was to enter the Saxon and Thuringian governments and accept ministerial positions. This move would signal a general armed uprising, which was expected to spread to the rest of the country. Although the German government would doubtless attack, the left SPD and the KPD would defend their provincial regimes with the aid of armed militias. Having secured their position at home, the Saxon and Thuringian Communists would then send all the forces they could spare to Berlin, there to fight the conclusive battle that would finally yield a German "workers' state."

The plan reflected the Bolsheviks' wishful thinking—and their attempt to transpose Russian strategies to German conditions. Brandler himself knew that the German workers were neither politically nor psychologically prepared to support a revolutionary uprising. But the sheer force of the Russians' desire to act out their dream of "world revolution" so overpowered Brandler's doubts that he agreed to play his assigned role.

"Overawed by the enthusiasm which he encountered in Moscow," observes Werner T. Angress, "Brandler set aside his own misgivings, and even became affected by the spirit of optimism which reigned among the Bolshevik leaders."²²

By now the KPD, as Luxemburg had feared, was wholly under the sway of the Russians—and consequently completely out of touch with the masses. The party leaders failed to notice, as Angress observes, that "throughout the preceding months the German masses, restless and irritated as they were, had at no time given any clear indication that they were prepared to follow the lead of the KPD."²³ The party's preparations gave less attention to organizing the workers than to planning a military strategy. The Comintern appointed a four-man "high command," including the irascible Karl Radek, to supervise every detail of the revolution. Germany was divided into six regional districts, each of which was led by a party leader and aided by a Russian military adviser. A proletarian militia was to be trained, and supply caches were to be created. In fact, the military planning existed more on paper than in reality. When Brandler and his colleagues returned from Moscow on October 8, 1923, with instructions to stage the uprising, they found that the KPD had only 600 rifles at its disposal in all of Saxony.

Since arms were in such short supply, Brandler decided that the KPD should enter the Saxon government at once, in order to collect the arms of the police force for its militia. Accordingly, on October 12, after several days of negotiations, three Communist ministers—including Brandler himself—entered Zeigner's Saxon cabinet. (Zeigner, it should be added, was entirely unaware of the reasons for the KPD's entry into his government.) The next day two Communists followed suit in Thuringia.

On October 13 General Alfred Müller, who commanded the Reichswehr in Saxony, banned all paramilitary units in the province. Zeigner's government refused to carry out the ban, and on the next day the KPD called on all German workers to arm themselves and prepare for battle. Surprising only the Communists, the workers simply ignored the call. On October 15 Müller led the Reichswehr into Saxony, where the utterly indifferent workers offered them no spontaneous resistance. On the 16th, Müller placed the Saxon provincial police under his command—thereby depriving the Saxon government of all means of violence and in effect carrying out a military coup. Shortly afterward, on October 20, he warned Zeigner that the Reichswehr would soon move into Dresden, the provincial capital.

The next day, the Reichswehr occupied Dresden and unseated the leftist ministers. The whole effort came to a sudden and ignominious end.

In Hamburg the Communists rose up and fought resolutely against the police, but the Hamburg workers did not join the fight, and three days later the uprising was put down. The KPD was definitively defeated, as were all dreams of a proletarian revolution in Germany—as well as Europe. In a sense, the failure of the German October in 1923 prepared the Russian Communists to accept Stalin's thesis that "socialism" could be constructed in a single country, inadvertently paving the way to a totalitarian state. After nearly a decade of thinking that a German revolution could open Europe to a world revolution, the German October finally laid those hopes to rest.

Moreover, after October 1923 German industrialists purged the factories of all militants and Communists, leaving most KPD members unemployed. The party, in effect, was physically expelled from the factories of Europe's industrial heartland. Unemployed Communists were now confined to organizing among their fellow unemployed. The KPD then "became dependent on the sporadic activism of the unemployed, whose discontents the party was more than ready to channel into a kind of pseudo-revolutionary strategy composed of street fights and demonstrations."²⁴ The KPD became a "street party" of transient unemployed more than an "industrial party" of stable workers. For a time this shift gave the party the appearance of radicalism, engaging in street fighting with Nazi storm-troopers and the like, but the menace it posed to the social order was illusory. Germany, in effect, was withdrawing from the era of proletarian revolutions and would soon be submerged in a decade-long period of fascism and war.

NOTES

1. Quoted in David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917–1922* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 206.
2. Eberlein, quoted in Eric Waldman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919 and the Crisis of the German Socialist Movement: A Study of the Relation of Political Theory and Party Practice* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1958), p. 156. In 1919 the KPD adopted organizational statutes that reflected Eberlein's anarchistic views.
3. Rosa Luxemburg, "Report on our Program and the Political Situation" (December 31, 1918); in John Riddell (ed.), *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents 1918–1919* (New York: Pathfinder, 1986), pp. 195, 196.
4. Richard M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 257.
5. Quoted in Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 246.

6. Luxemburg, "Report on our Program," p. 194.
7. Rosa Luxemburg, "What are the Leaders Doing?" (January 7, 1919), in Riddell, *German Revolution*, pp. 250–51.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, "Neglect of Duty" (January 8, 1919), in Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 255.
9. *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin: Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag, 1929), p. 276.
10. *Die rote Fahne* (September 25, 1920), quoted in Waldman, *Spartacist Uprising of 1919*, pp. 177–8. The figure 200,000 is almost certainly inaccurate; half a million is more likely.
11. Waldman, *Spartacist Uprising*, p. 179.
12. "Meinetwegen! Einer muss der Bluthund werden, ich scheue die Verantwortung nicht!" Recalled by Gustav Noske in *Von Kiel bis Kapp* (Berlin: Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft, 1920), p. 69; quoted in *Illustrierte Geschichte*, p. 279.
13. Watt, *Kings Depart*, p. 269.
14. *Illustrierte Geschichte*, p. 270.
15. Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, trans. Johanna Hoornweg (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 285.
16. Waldman, *Spartacist Uprising*, p. 184.
17. Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp*, quoted in Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 248.
18. "Workers! Proletarians!" (March 3, 1919), in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany, 1918–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 69–70, emphasis added.
19. Quoted in Waite, *Vanguard*, p. 71.
20. A. J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1918: A Study of German Socialism in War and Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 201.
21. Rudolf Coper, *Failure of a Revolution: Germany in 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 160.
22. Werner T. Angress, *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921–1923* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 404.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
24. Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 159.

CHAPTER 57 The Danubian Revolutions

INTERWAR PARADOXES

Few of the European leftist movements that issued from the Bolshevik Revolution could have imagined in 1917 that only two years later revolutionary Marxist organizations would have exhausted their potential to overthrow capitalism. Contrary to all their prognoses that capitalism was "moribund" and faced imminent extinction at the hands of a proletarian revolution (as Engels, Lenin, and Luxemburg insisted), the opposite was true. Capitalism, far from being moribund, was still in a formative stage of development and had yet to fully come into its own, let alone mature historically. The First World War, far from being bourgeois society's "death agony," was actually an eruption of conflicting dynastic, territorial, and militaristic ambitions of a persistent quasi-feudal stratum. Western society had yet fully to experience secularization and modernity, let alone commodification and the export of capital (the creation of a globalized economy, as it is called today).

This is not to say that new capitalist traits did not intertwine with old feudal ones. The Russian tsar and the German Kaiser were not indifferent either to the growth of trade or to the expansion of the market; nor did traditional aristocracies that dominated the political life of their respective empires cease to invest in corporate enterprises in the hopes of reaping high profits. It was not until the aftermath of the *Second* World War that capitalism was sufficiently developed to assert its hegemony in the world's key economic centers, and even then its level of "maturity" remains highly obscure to the present day.

Nor was it clear, prior to the Second World War, that the proletariat would actually fulfill the revolutionary role imputed to it by Marxism and syndicalism. The economic "imperatives" that Marx formulated—and that his conventional social democratic acolytes so eagerly embraced—

taught that socialism was "inevitable," irrespective of human agency. Certainly if capitalism was "dying" as a result of "the tendency of the rate of profit to decline" (which Marxists expected would produce a chronic and ultimately permanent revolutionary crisis) and if the unending mechanization of industry and agriculture yielded a proletariat and peasantry that finally encompassed the vast majority of humanity, a workers' party had a clear role to play.

In the meantime did such a party have only to propagate its social ideals and leave it up to historical forces to do the rest? Or should such a party become an active vanguard, taking the initiative to change the course of history? That is, would history be made by a passive, largely educational bureaucracy or by the efforts of a proactive vanguard workers' party? From the answers that Marxist theorists gave to these questions arose the bitter conflicts between reformist and revolutionary approaches that plagued social democracy.

If history has shown anything since the interwar period (1919–39), it is the compelling fact that the many crises that marked that period were less the death-throes of capitalism than its birth-pangs. In a profound sense, the socialists of that era were little more than midwives of Europe's development toward capitalism. For German Social Democrats, who saw themselves as the guardians of parliamentary republicanism against "Asiatic Bolshevism," their commitment to socialism stood in tension with their patriotic loyalty to the officer caste and preserved in them a servile affinity with the aristocracy. Did the general public want the old quasi-feudal castes or the new businessmen? Socialists' uncertainty on this question expresses the political paralysis into which Europe descended in the 1920s and 1930s. This paralysis was not so much cured as eased, like an old-time therapeutic bloodletting that left the disease still present, until 1939, when a pedestrian mediocrity—one Adolf Hitler—replaced the ongoing continental bloodletting with a brief but terrifying bloodbath.

The interwar period's paralysis, however, was political rather than technological in nature. New York City's 1939 World Fair invited visitors to see the extraordinary advances that were already under way in electronics, automated machinery, and medicine, during and shortly after the war when nuclear physics and molecular biology revealed the "secrets" of matter and life, while rockets bolted beyond the limits of the solar system, and machines were developed that might well eliminate the need for human labor altogether. These near-daily innovations produced by capitalism challenged the validity of Marx's own basic notion of historical materialism: "No social formation is ever destroyed before all

the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society."¹ Clearly the productive forces of capitalism have even today not yet been fully developed, let alone in the interwar period; indeed, capitalism's very law of life consists in its inexhaustible capacity to nourish new technological developments. But if capitalism's very existence is premised on continual technological innovation, and if its capacity to innovate technology is all but infinite, then how and by what alternative social order can it ever be replaced? This dilemma, which Marx and his followers never confronted, haunts the socialist project to this very day. The simple fact is that during the interwar period capitalism was not even "mature" technologically, let alone "moribund." Once the First World War swept over Europe and America, the seemingly powerful labor movement proved to be powerless to overthrow capitalism and went into full retreat as the Second World War approached.

Thus, in the immediate wake of the October Revolution, the only "proletarian revolutions" that emerged were tragicomedies, notably the Bavarian and Hungarian "soviet republics" of 1919. Their tragic element lay in the loss of life they claimed—and in the absence of the opportunistic leadership of Lenin and his party, they also became comic attempts to imitate the Bolsheviks.

THE BAVARIAN "SOVIET REPUBLIC"

Bavaria was hardly the epitome of the industrialized society that Marxists regarded as most susceptible to socialist revolution. It was devoutly Catholic, predominantly agrarian, and culturally doltish. But here as in the rest of Germany, the population grew weary of the First World War, and strikes broke out in Munich and other Bavarian cities, demanding an end to the war and the abdication of the Kaiser. On November 7, 1918, in the wake of the Kiel mutiny, the Independent Social Democrat Kurt Eisner (an able essayist and journalist who founded the Bavarian branch of the USPD) carried out a putsch in Munich that toppled, without opposition, the old rulers of the region, the Wittelsbach dynasty.

Eisner, who became prime minister in the provisional government, aimed to establish Bavaria as a democratic republic—embodied in the provincial parliament, the Landtag—that could coexist with the now-proliferating workers' and soldiers' councils. While the Landtag would

represent the interests of the middle class, he believed, the popular councils would involve workers and peasants in the processes of government. Eisner's ideal was thus a permanent dual power, harmonizing the broad political interests of the middle class with those of the working class and peasantry. But the Landtag, instead of embodying a "universal interest" in the name of "the people," represented little more than the assortment of interests that emerge in any parliamentary regime. The councils, guided primarily by the labor movement, were intended to be a class institution, but the middle classes as well as the conventional Social Democrats did not want them to exist because they entailed rule by a minority of the population.

Eisner's ideals came up against an even harsher reality on January 12, 1919, when the Bavarians went to the polls to elect a new Landtag. Although Eisner was personally well liked and a consistent democrat, the Bavarians gave the Catholic Center Party and the SPD the largest share of their votes. Eisner's own party, the USPD, acquired only about 2 percent of the return. Bavarian politics was noted for its ironies: the Independents had probably been defeated by their own democratic reform of instituting universal suffrage—thereby extending the vote to the uneducated and the devoutly Catholic, especially female, part of the population.

As a consistent democrat, Eisner realized he would have to resign. On February 21, while the newly elected Landtag representatives were assembling for their first session in Munich, he was assassinated outside the Landtag building by a half-crazed reactionary. Although Eisner had been a Jew and a socialist in one of the most conservative regions of Germany, his assassination turned him overnight into a popular martyr.

After this point the tragedy began to turn into a comedy. The Landtag representatives decided that it was the better part of valor to depart from Munich and escape a potential popular uprising. Before they could realize their mistake and return, the city's local councils took power into their own hands and formed a new government. On April 7 this council government was taken over by Munich's radical bohemians—a set of "café anarchists" (ranging from fire-breathing anarchists to mild anarcho-pacifists), Independents, Communists, and left-wing Social Democrats. This group issued many exuberant manifestos but held power only briefly, during April 7–13, after which the Communist Eugen Leviné carried out a putsch and changed the color of Bavaria's council republic from anarchist black to Bolshevik red. Leviné proclaimed that Bavaria was now a "soviet republic." This "Bolshevik" regime was marked, in Allan Mitchell's words, by "ridiculous confusion" in which "pronouncements, proclamations, orders and counter-

orders were drafted, printed, and distributed in hectic tempo," all promising the workers a "new order."²

The SPD government in Berlin resolved to take the situation into its own hands. On May 1 Noske sent Freikorps forces to assault Munich, and after a two-day struggle they succeeded in subduing the city. The dead, most of them radicals, numbered an estimated 600. For the next few days the Freikorps carried out a grisly and merciless counterrevolution: anyone found with weapons or with telltale evidence of having resisted the counterrevolution was shot out of hand. The gentle Gustav Landauer (a participant in the anarchistic council republic) was savagely beaten and shot, while Leviné was tried, abused, and rescued from a horrendous death only by a comparatively merciful firing squad. Bavaria, far from seeking to avenge this "white terror," never again seriously flirted with socialist ideas.

THE HUNGARIAN "SOVIET REPUBLIC"

In 1919 many restive movements—not only those embodying workers' and peasants' discontent but also others expressing nationalist sentiments in the wake of the First World War—readily raised red flags and tried to emulate Russia's October Revolution. In the case of Hungary, issues of national identity, territorial integrity, and victimization by the triumphant European states were far more at play than revolutionary socialist consciousness. Indeed, although the Hungarian "soviet republic" was led by a party inspired by the Bolsheviks, it was in reality the product of nationalism and acute land hunger.

Until the fall of 1918 Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an archaic "dual monarchy" in which Hungarian and Austrian heads of state shared political and administrative power under a Habsburg emperor. At the turn of the century the empire included numerous southern Slavs, Romanians, Bohemians, Poles, and Italians, all of whom were striving in various degrees to realize their own national identity. Although the empire was relatively tolerant of its diverse members' cultural traditions, power rested primarily with the Austro-Germans in Vienna and with the Magyars in Budapest.

As a locale where revolutionary Marxists might hope to achieve socialism, Hungary was as improbable as Bavaria. Again, culturally conservative, Catholic, and overwhelmingly agrarian as it was, its proletariat was numerically small and ideologically backward. Social

stratifications ran deep, and ethnic antagonisms ran high, not only among the various minorities but between these groups and the privileged Magyars. Hungary's very small, relatively submissive, and parochial working class was not favorably disposed toward socialist ideas, nor were ordinary workers significantly influenced by revolutionary Bolshevism; indeed, they possessed something closer to a Menshevik outlook. The Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), established in 1890, was a conventionally reformist social democratic entity that adapted itself to this narrow base by calling for the creation of republican institutions, eschewing the peasantry as "petty bourgeois," and acting as an agent for achieving small gains for workers.

The Bolshevik Revolution, however, seemed to energize Hungarian workers. Demonstrations rocked the country, and workers' councils appeared in Budapest and other cities, with little if any support from the HSP. Workers went out on strikes—in one significant case, almost in defiance of the HSP's leadership—and they mounted a general strike to protest against the onerous terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. In the spring of 1918 Hungarian soldiers deserted the front in droves. On October 25 of that year the HSP formed a political alliance with the Liberal Party, creating the Hungarian National Council. This government-in-waiting had a Liberal leader, Count Mihályi Károlyi, at its head. It called for an end to the war, Hungarian independence, and a host of liberal reforms.

Three days later, a peaceful demonstration of citizens petitioning the king to accept the council's demands was fired on by police. Thereafter public sentiment shifted radically towards the Liberals, and a hue and cry arose to make Károlyi head of an independent Hungarian state. Soldiers demanded the right to form their own councils. The empire at this point was collapsing, and on the night of October 30, as soldiers were rebelling in the streets, Károlyi and the National Council took power. The emperor abdicated on November 11, and four days later the Hungarian Republic was proclaimed. Like the Mensheviks in Petrograd, the HSP in Budapest (along with the Liberals) had risen to the leadership of a liberal bourgeois revolution. The Liberal Party and the HSP shared the common belief that Hungary had to complete its "bourgeois revolution" before it could turn to socialist measures such as the nationalization of industry.

Meanwhile, on March 24, 1918, a Hungarian Communist Party (HCP) was created at the Hotel Dresden in Moscow as the Hungarian section of the Russian Communist Party. Its principal spokesman, the young, radical, and able propagandist Béla Kun, had earlier been captured on the Russian front and thereafter worked tirelessly to transpose Bolshevism to his native land. Kun saw Károlyi as the Hungarian Kerensky, who had to be

overthrown by a proletarian revolution. The HCP, the Bolshevik-style party assigned to this task, was highly disciplined, and well organized. After the armistice in November 1918 the HCP leaders made their way to Budapest where, thanks to their indefatigable efforts, the party sank deep roots into Hungary's metal, railroad, and munitions industries. It was decisive in its actions and certain in its goals. Soon some 8,000 workers rallied to its banner—a sizable membership for so new a party. By the winter of 1919 the HCP was a major presence in the streets and factories of Budapest, organizing demonstrations almost daily. Politically it clashed repeatedly with the notoriously opportunistic and reformist HSP. On February 20 the government (in which the HSP was a leading party) decided to tolerate this irritant no more and clamped down on the party, shutting down its offices and press and arresting Kun and 68 of his comrades.

The situation changed materially on March 19, 1919, when the Allied Armistice Commission in Budapest issued what was called the Vyx Ultimatum. This order demanded that the Károlyi government surrender a sizable portion of eastern Hungarian territory to the Allies, so that they could turn it into a cordon sanitaire (a neutral zone) to protect Europe against the Bolshevik "plague." The land to be surrendered contained most of the country's coal mines and a large part of its productive agricultural territory—at a time when food shortages were starving the cities. All Hungarians—not only the workers and peasants but the middle classes and nobility as well—saw the Vyx Ultimatum as crassly imperialistic. Two days after it was issued, the Hungarian government rejected it. Lacking a strong military force to resist the Allies, however, many Hungarians felt that their only chance of preserving their territory was the Russian Red Army, which at the time seemed on the verge of rolling westward into Europe. The Red Army, Hungarians hoped, would provide them with the military forces needed for resisting Allied imperialism.

Accordingly, on the very day the government rejected the Vyx Ultimatum, a crowd of Socialists rushed to the prison to free Béla Kun and his comrades. They offered Kun the option of leading a new unity party, to be formed by the merger of the HCP and the HSP. The party would take the HSP's name and the HCP's program. Following Kun's agreement, the new unified HSP took power, and Hungary declared itself to be a "soviet republic."

Former HCP members helped staff the party's bureaucracy, and Kun became Minister of Foreign Affairs. But the majority of the Hungarian working class remained wedded to the old HSP: in fact, within the new party the 200,000 traditional Socialists greatly outnumbered the 8,000

Communists. Thus, although the Hungarian "soviet republic" tried to appear to be carrying on a social revolution, the measures it took were primarily a façade for advancing patriotic goals and "bourgeois democratic" political reforms (which, in the absence of a worldwide proletarian revolution, would not have been inappropriate for Hungary).

The story of the "soviet republic" is thus a dismal one, in which patriotic issues were camouflaged as class issues. Kun and his party committed one fatal mistake after another, the most notable being their failure to break up the large estates and redistribute the land to the peasantry in functional holdings—in stark contrast to the Russian Bolsheviks, whose first act upon gaining power was to issue the land decree, granting land to the peasants. The Hungarian Communists, in effect, tried to nationalize the plantations in order to industrialize them as agrarian factories. Accordingly, the peasantry became hostile to Kun, who could not depend upon their support to defend Hungary against the Allies. The Communists' sole political hope of victory now rested more than ever on the advance of Russian troops into Central Europe.

This hope was dashed when White Russian victories in the Ukraine blocked the Red Army from moving westward. The HCP now found itself isolated. Starting in April, military invasions by Czechoslovakia and Romania (supported by France) into Hungarian territory undermined the new "soviet republic." By June the regime had become the target of domestic hostility, not only from the peasants but also from the workers, whom Kun had in fact privileged in order to win their support.

Finally, on August 1 the Communists resigned from the government. On that day Kun expressed his views on the workers' betrayal of the "soviet" government in words that may be regarded as a forthright judgment of the role of the working class in the interwar period: "The proletariat of Hungary betrayed not their leaders but themselves . . . Now I see that our experiment to educate the proletarian masses of this country into class-conscious revolutionaries had been in vain."³ Kun had antagonized the peasants and pampered the workers, but the workers, like their counterparts in most of Europe, had thrown their support to the Social Democrats, who mainly despised and manipulated them. Thus did "soviet" Hungary end its brief life in ignominy, a remarkable victim of Marxist dogma. In November 1919 the counterrevolution and the Allies installed the reactionary Miklós Horthy as head of state, who went on to inflict a "white terror" against everyone associated with the Károlyi and Kun regimes. Not until 1956, in an insurrection against Russian occupation, would the voice of the Hungarian workers be heard once again—and again more in support of nationalist than socialist goals.

THE AUSTRIAN UPRISING OF 1934

Fifteen years later some of the challenges that faced the Hungarians confronted another Danubian socialist movement, one that was reformist but deeply humanistic. The Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP), established in 1888 by Victor Adler and his associates, differed little from other European social democratic parties in its evolutionary approach to social change; Austrian Socialists believed that socialism, in fact, could be achieved electorally and were oriented toward gaining immediate material gains for the working class. But the party took a decidedly cultural approach to the achievement of socialism in a multinational arena, notably the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In contrast to the other European social democratic parties, which emphasized class identities, the SDAP adapted itself to the empire's cultural variety by acknowledging the positive value of cultural diversity. Instead of accepting Friedrich Engels' schematization of dialectical materialism, however, Austro-Marxists adopted a quasi-Kantian ethics of universal brotherhood. They emphasized a cultural unity that was enriched by Austria's ethnic, traditional, and linguistic diversity, thereby yielding a transcendental unity that made difference into the cement for a "new socialist man," a form of humankind that welcomed and was nourished by heterogeneity rather than homogeneity.

As happened elsewhere in Europe, the prolonged and brutal war led to the emergence of a popular antiwar movement, and Austrian soldiers too became demoralized. After the Bolshevik Revolution Austrian workers, like their counterparts in many countries, formed councils, and after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty they went on strike to protest against its terms. After the emperor abdicated on November 11, a provisional government for an independent Austria was formed, dominated by the Social Democrats. Elections of February 1919 showed the SDAP to be the strongest party in the new country. The following year it lost its strong position but retained its hold over the relatively autonomous city of Vienna throughout the 1920s.

In Vienna the SDAP imposed luxury and progressive income taxes on the rich, which enabled it to finance an unprecedented array of social programs. Austro-Marxists had long considered their movement to be a pedagogical agency for engaging in character formation (*Bildung*). Accordingly, when they took power in several Austrian cities, they established a multitude of progressive schools, gymnastic societies, theatrical groups, literary societies, libraries, and many other humanistic institutions. This ethical and pedagogical approach was epitomized by

Otto Bauer (a socialist academic who became a prominent SDAP leader) when he said the party had to produce a "revolution of the soul."

More pragmatically, the SDAP government also introduced a housing program that was unrivaled in the world. With financing from a tax on luxury rents, it constructed a series of superblock apartment houses that were consciously monumental in scale. Not only did these structures provide wholesome living conditions, they also had, as Anson Rabinbach emphasizes, a decidedly defensive purpose:

The militant and fortresslike structure of the Vienna apartment buildings was not meant merely to suggest defense symbolically. The widely held conception that the complexes were located according to military-strategic considerations, and built to be defended in the event of civil war, is not entirely mistaken. The position of the superblocks in the city ... gave credence to the idea that military-political planning was parallel.⁴

These "fortresslike structures" did not preclude the SDAP's hope that socialism could be achieved electorally: that once socialists gained a majority of the legislature, they could bring a socialist society into existence peacefully and democratically. Implicit in this belief was the assumption that the other parties in Austria would be honorable enough to respect the outcome of an election, even one in which the SDAP achieved its "magic 51 percent"; and in such a case allow the socialist-dominated legislature to carry out the party's program. But the SDAP's major rival, the Christian Social Party, was not committed to respecting electoral outcomes. Bitterly antisocialist and explicitly anti-Semitic, this reactionary party was partly subsidized by Benito Mussolini. Indeed, the examples of fascism being set in Italy and Germany made it plain to astute observers that the socialists would have to fight the fascists not only in the electoral arena but in the streets as well. Accordingly, the radical elements in the SDAP established an armed proletarian force known as the *Schutzbund* (Defense League) to defend socialists against fascist assaults.

In 1928, while Bauer continued to mumble piously about the virtues of middle-class democracy, the semifascistic right wing was growing significantly, leading to the creation of a fascistic paramilitary organization, the *Heimwehr*, which clashed repeatedly in the streets with the socialist *Schutzbund*. In May 1932 Dr Engelbert Dollfuss, a Christian Social leader, became the chancellor of Austria and made an alliance with the *Heimwehr* that gave it a legitimate role in the state. In September 1933, shortly after Hitler came to power in Germany, Dollfuss staged a

coup: he proclaimed an end to parliamentary government and established a corporate state along lines similar to Mussolini's fascist state in Italy. Dollfuss would rule primarily by decree.

A historic conflict between social democracy and fascism was now about to be joined. The *Schutzbund* wanted to take up arms against this move toward fascism in Austria, but the SDAP executive chose instead to negotiate with the reactionaries. Dollfuss's government replied by banning the *Schutzbund*. Angry proletarians, disillusioned with the SDAP for its eagerness to accommodate Dollfuss, left the party in droves. In January 1934 Dollfuss, responding to pressure from Mussolini, took steps to suppress the SDAP itself and ended the publication of its official organ. Still the party's executive, taking the moral high ground, refused to act, in the hope that public outrage would rescue the party by pressuring the regime to reconsider. This public response was not forthcoming.

The left wing of the SDAP, however, proved to be an exception to the reformist passivity so common in central European social democracy. On February 7, 1934, the *Heimwehr* demanded the dissolution of the government of Upper Austria—selecting, whether consciously or not, the province that was home to the most militant and radical provincial chapter of the SDAP. The Upper Austrian party organization, based in the key industrial city of Linz, had not succumbed to the pervasive fatalism of the SDAP executive. On the contrary, it had long identified with the party's left wing and had never tried to separate itself from the local *Schutzbund* or tried to restrain it. The leadership of the two organizations overlapped considerably, especially in the person of Richard Bernasek, who was both the Linz SDAP secretary and a leader of the Upper Austrian *Schutzbund*. On February 11 Bernasek learned that on the following day the government was planning to arrest all the SDAP leaders in Linz and seize the local *Schutzbund*'s arms. Together with his comrades, he resolved to defy party policy and resist the seizure. In a letter to the SDAP leaders in Vienna, they advised them that the local party would respond to the attempted seizure with armed resistance and that it expected them to call upon the workers there to rise in their support. The party leaders, in an act of arrant cowardice, rejected this demand. Bauer even sent a courier to Linz insisting that the Upper Austrian party refrain from independent action. Any uprising would be hopeless, he argued, urging compromise and declaring that "there was still a possibility of rescuing the constitution."⁵

As might be expected, Bauer's hope that the Dollfuss government would compromise with the Social Democrats proved to be in vain. During the night of February 11–12, however, Bernasek and some 50 to

60 *Schutzbündler* (members of the *Schutzbund*), encamped in the Hotel Schiff in Linz, which doubled as the local SDAP headquarters and the *Schutzbund*'s arms depot. At 7 a.m. police entered the hotel and tried to arrest several local Social Democrats, including Bernasek, but with only revolvers at their disposal, the police were easy to fend off. The police then turned toward the cinema, where arms were stored, but on their way they walked into a barrage of machine-gun and rifle fire, directed at them by several score *Schutzbündler*. Linz had risen, igniting risings in several Austrian industrial cities as well.

But it was the insurrection in "Red Vienna"—which began shortly afterward—that captured worldwide attention. On the morning of February 12 the SDAP executive, unable to open negotiations with Dollfuss, finally decided to call a general strike, which would be the signal for the *Schutzbund* to take up arms. The strike began immediately, with a citywide shutdown of electricity. At noon Dollfuss declared martial law and a curfew. Almost everywhere in the capital, the police and the army seized arms, sealed off the inner city with barbed wire, and attempted to safeguard government buildings. In the late afternoon the government officially dissolved the SDAP and issued warrants for the arrest of its leaders. It banned the Viennese municipal and provincial parliaments, calling up the army reserves (both infantry and artillery, which occupied *Schutzbund* mobilizing centers), while the police rounded up as many militia leaders as they could find.

Demoralized or indifferent, or both by now, most of the Viennese proletariat reacted to the strike call with passivity. The *Schutzbund*, now that its most important leaders were arrested, was thrown into confusion. The leader of the western district of Vienna became a police informer, immobilizing the militiamen in the area. Most districts in the capital saw little military action. Lower Austria, a notoriously conservative area, did nothing to aid the risings in Vienna and elsewhere.

But the honor of Austrian socialism was upheld in certain parts of Vienna, where resistance reached desperate and even heroic proportions. There the *Schutzbund* units engaged in largely defensive actions, relying on sniper fire from roofs, upper-storey windows, and recessed doorways. But during the afternoon of February 12 the fighting moved to the large Social Democratic housing complexes, the superblocs, where battles between workers and the authorities reached furious proportions. The army could capture these structures only by inflicting heavy gunfire on them and bringing in armored cars, artillery, and mortars to clear the workers from key positions. In one case the *Schutzbündler*, defeated in a certain superblock, escaped through the city's sewers, then resumed

fighting elsewhere in the city. In other cases crack *Schutzbund* units took the offensive against the police and the army, capturing municipal and official buildings. Although the areas of major combat were limited in number, the intensity of the fighting reached a point where the military was obliged to call in specially trained mobile units before it could dislodge the workers and take over their positions. Without the army's support, in fact, the police in all likelihood would have been entirely driven out of certain working-class districts.

Perhaps the heaviest fighting took place around the Karl Marx Hof, the largest and symbolically the most important of the superblocs. Directly across from the Karl Marx Hof stood the Heiligenstadt railway station, which housed a police headquarters. At 1 a.m. on February 13 the *Schutzbund* seized the station, compelling the army to bring in armored vehicles and artillery. Positioning their artillery on heights overlooking the complex, the troops let loose with a bombardment that the workers met with all the firepower at their disposal. An army assault followed at 4 a.m., and the workers met it with such tenacious resistance that they caused the troops to retreat, despite the army's superior weapons and training. Additional army units were called in for assistance, and around 10 a.m. they blew open the main gate, but were compelled to fight house by house—and by midday had still failed to subdue the workers. Not until the late afternoon of February 14 were the complex and its district finally taken. On February 15 Red Vienna ceased to exist.

The outcome of the insurrection was never in doubt, not even to those who took up arms in its support. But the courage displayed by the insurgents stirred the entire world. European socialists soon gave Red Vienna the accolade of the "Vienna Commune" and compared its combatants honorably with the Parisian Communards of 1871. Forgotten as it may be by today's quasi-pacifistic Left, the Austrian uprising of February 1934 was no mere fleeting episode in the history of revolutionary socialism. Although the *Schutzbund* had been able to throw only a fraction of its forces against the government, thousands of armed workers were involved, and the army had had to throw its best-trained and best-armed forces against them, finally subduing them only with heavy weapons. Official casualty figures of only 186 dead and 486 wounded are hardly credible; an accurate count for both sides will probably never be known.

Bauer and other SDAP leaders fled to Prague on February 13, even before the workers were defeated. Coward and compromiser that he was, Bauer later came to regret his behavior, acknowledging retrospectively:

We could have responded on March 15 [1933, the day of Dollfuss's coup] by calling a general strike. Never were the conditions for a successful strike so favorable as on that day. The counterrevolution which was just then reaching its full development in Germany had aroused the Austrian masses. The masses of the workers were awaiting the signal for battle. The railwaymen were not yet so crushed as they were eleven months later. The government's military organization was far weaker than in February 1934. At that time we might have won. But we shrank back, dismayed, from the battle . . . we postponed the fight because we wanted to spare the country the disaster of a bloody civil war.⁶

Instead they got fascism, devastating reaction, and demoralizing defeat. But the Austrian insurrection had a great impact on socialists outside Austria. It showed that armed resistance to fascism was indeed possible, and the "Vienna Commune" became an inspiration to European, North American, and especially Spanish socialists well into the 1940s.

What is particularly significant about the "Vienna Commune" is the light it throws on the nature of proletarian socialism. The uprising could not be cast in strictly Marxist or anarchist terms. With its municipalist character and its ethical stance, it hinted at a communalist vision of a new society, based on civic association and a communal version of socialism. Viennese socialism, like Luxemburg's humanistic socialism, believed above all in the moral remaking of humanity, in contrast to the orthodox Marxism that focused on material development, economic interest, and political centralization. The Austrians had opened a new horizon for socialism—a communal and ethical one—that went beyond Marxism, syndicalism, and the "hunger radicalism" that pervaded the socialist outlook of the 1920s and 1930s.

Moreover, the Austrian socialists, especially the SDAP's rank and file, were realistic enough to train the workers for action. The Schutzbund gave the "Vienna Commune" a bite that was lacking in European social democracy. It anticipated the prospect of civil war, which caused Bauer and his colleagues to shudder. The personal cowardice of the SDAP leaders was demoralizing, all the more because fascist Germany on Austria's northern frontier and fascist Italy to the south seemed to be encircling the country. The worker-militants who fought in the Schutzbund probably knew they were fighting a losing war—but they fought to the end nonetheless. It was this steadfastness that made the "Vienna Commune" not only inspiring but psychologically unique. It was, in a sense, a precursor of the Spanish Revolution—which also posed

moral goals that were not fashionable among Marxists elsewhere in Europe and in North America.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, "Preface," *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Part I (written November 1858–January 1859), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, *Marx: 1857–1861* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), p. 263.
2. Allan Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria, 1918–1919: The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 310.
3. Quoted in Rudolf L. Tökés, *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic: The Origins and Role of the Communist Party of Hungary in the Revolutions of 1918–1919* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), pp. 203–4.
4. Anson Rabinbach, *The Crisis of Austrian Socialism: From Red Vienna to Civil War, 1927–1934* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 62.
5. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 181.
6. Otto Bauer, *Austrian Democracy under Fire* (London, 1934), p. 43. This was very much the excuse that Ebert, Scheidemann, and Noske had used when they handed the power in their hands over to the army in 1918–19.