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The German Revolution: The First Stage
The logical result of the collapse of German Imperialism following the military defeat, was the revolution.

On November 4th the revolt in Kiel occurred. The ferment manifested itself first among the sailors. Rumours of revolt among the sailors were heard during the past year, and the Independent Social Democrats defended themselves against the accusations of complicity. Now it broke out anew, stronger and more general, “by mistake” as the Vossiche Zeitung said. Revolutions often occur through such mistakes - the conviction amongst the sailors that the fleet was ordered out to hopeless combat.

The sailors organised a council, arrested their officers, hoisted the red flag, and presented their demands to the Government. The social-patriot, Noske, arriving in Kiel, attempted to stop them but in vain.

On November 5th the movement extended to Hamburg, where the dock workers declared for a sympathetic strike; traffic ceased and the soldiers joined the revolution. Within the next few days the movement spread to Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, Lubeck, and throughout the northern regions generally, while Wolff’s Bureau sent out vague reports of the revolt and the prediction that it would be quickly suppressed. In Berlin the intrigue of new ministries continued. Max von Baden disappeared, the Social Democratic Party presented an ultimatum to the Government and Vorwaerts entreated the workers to remain “calm” - counter-revolutionary to the last.
Meanwhile, the revolution continued to spread; in Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, throughout Germany.

Everywhere Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils sprang into being and imprisoned the officers and officials of the old regime, except those who declared their willingness to assist the revolution. Everywhere the new Republic was proclaimed, kings and princes abdicated and disappeared, and, finally, on November 9th, Emperor Wilhelm abdicated. Berlin, which remained calm until the last, went over to the revolution, the Soldiers’ and Workers’ Council took control without bloodshed, and the police of the old regime disappeared from the streets. The movement extended to the Western front, and Wilhelm was forced to flee from the General Staff Headquarters at Spa to the Netherlands.

With scarcely any resistance, in one assault, the revolution was victorious. This proves that the old system was already crumbling and had lost the entire sympathy of the masses, whose sufferings had reached their climax through the war and whose fear of the old regime was banished through the military defeat. This inflammable situation, where one spark spread the flames everywhere, enabled the secret preparations of the groups of the Independents and the extreme left for an armed uprising to break into action, and thus leaders sprang up everywhere to take command. So with the fall of German Imperialism also fell the political form wherein it functioned: the absolutistic, feudal, militaristic, police state was replaced by the democratic republic.
Through its rapidity and unanimity the revolution rested on the surface of civil society and could not as yet penetrate into the depth of the great masses. For those who accomplished it, the revolution, as all modern revolutions, is a proletarian revolution. But in its objects and results it is, as yet, only a purely political, and, therefore, a bourgeois revolution. This is evident from the fact that the social-patriotic leaders, Ebert and Scheidemann, were selected to function as the heads of the provisional government.

It seems at first glance unaccountable that the masses, driven to desperation on account of the war and its horrors should overthrow and expel those responsible for the war, and, at the same time allow their accomplices, who always supported the war policy, to take the helm. But this is simply the result of political incompetence and traditional adherence to the old Social Democracy. The four years of war, through the pressure of the battlefield and the activity of the censor, made political development, except in small groups, impossible. The masses have destroyed the machinery that crushed them, they have won their political liberty, and now the political development, the orientation of what they further desire, can be started. They are still impressed with the naïve illusions of the first days of the revolution - even as in Paris in 1848; these later revolutions must first go through the development of former revolutions - the illusions of the people’s unity, of liberty and democracy.

The various denominations and reflections of these fantastic illusions: we speak of the People’s Republic, the rulers are
called the People’s representatives, we pass motions against all discord and dissension. The reality of society, the class distinction of bourgeoisie and proletariat seems to have disappeared. As this reality again becomes apparent the class struggle will burst forth anew. It will be sharp and violent in Germany because both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are strong, their class consciousness is forceful and production is highly developed. This will be the next stage of the revolution; it is even now developing. [This was written in the latter part of November, 1918.]

How are these contending forces arrayed?

In normal times the bourgeoisie rules through its powerful and perfectly organised state apparatus, whereas the masses are divided into separate groups and are thus powerless. Revolutions occur when the masses are spontaneously inspired by one will and thus find power in their unity. New individuals take the helm, different forms of government come, but then the masses resume their daily tasks, the inspiring fire of one powerful will evaporates, they again fall apart as individuals and groups, while the bourgeois apparatus that remained and was deprived of its power only temporarily, retakes its old position unopposed by any organised force, and again becomes the stable organisation of rule. So, through the storms of the revolution class rule grows and becomes stronger as the experience of the revolution teaches it to pretend, to adopt the external forms of democracy, the dress of people’s rule - the rulers change but the rule over the masses remains. To destroy this rule it is necessary to break the old government’s
organisation, the old bureaucracy, and to strengthen the
temporary organisation of the masses into lasting power. This
happened in Paris in 1871 by the Commune, and in Russia in
November by the Soviets.

In Germany the workers have created such an organisation, the
same as took place in Russia, in the formation of Workers’ and
Soldiers’ Councils. These councils gave the revolution a direct
power which led to its initial speedy victory. They are the new
instrument of power for the masses, the organisation of the
proletarian masses as against the organisation of the
bourgeoisie. They do not, as yet, know what they want, but
they are there - not their programme but their very existence
has revolutionary significance. A revolutionary government
which wishes to be the organ of the Socialist proletariat should
commence now to remove the old functionaries and abolish
their functions.

The government of Ebert, Scheidemann and Haase has done
the contrary. It has attempted to force the Soldiers’ Councils
into a subordinate commission of advice and to restore the
disciplinary powers of the officers which has resulted, in many
places, in strong resistance and refusal by the soldiers. It has
maintained the old bureaucracy and allowed it to continue its
rule; it has done the same as every bourgeois party does when
it assumes control - taken for itself the best positions and left
all else in status quo ante. It has retained the old generals in
command of the army and has made no attempt to further
revolutionary propaganda amongst the soldiers. Thus, by
allowing the apparatus of the ruling class to remain intact it
openly encourages the counter-revolution. Already the bureaucrats openly denounce the “government of dilettantes”, the generals at the front order the red flag hauled down, and every reaction is encouraged.

The bourgeoisie is entirely satisfied with this government, especially since it announced that no change will be made in property rights and that the banks will not be nationalised. The reason for these announcements is that the government is trying to rely upon the whole population, upon the workers and the bourgeoisie alike, thus, upon the co-operation of the classes it hopes to be the government of the “continued God’s peace”. This is a reflection of the unconsciousness of the masses, and will become increasingly impossible with the more forceful awakening of the class struggle.

For the time being the government swings between the classes, it has conservative deeds for the bourgeoisie and revolutionary phrases for the workers - because the bourgeoisie is alertly class conscious and not easily defrauded, while the workers are not yet fully awakened. The first part, the appeasement of the middle classes is taken care of by Ebert and Scheidemann, while the nice Radical speechmaking is the task of the so-called “Left Wing”, the Independents: Dittman and Barth, who were included in the government for this reason.

The majority Socialists lack confidence in Socialism and in the ability of the proletariat. They do not dare to socialise society against the bourgeoisie, they are afraid to rule without the old bureaucracy. The rule of the workers appears to them - even as
to the bourgeoisie - to be chaos; their own theoretic inability makes them fear the gigantic task which the historical situation imposes upon the German proletariat. For this reason they want a National Constituent Assembly at the earliest possible moment to relieve them of responsibility.

The middle class also wants the convocation of this assembly because through it they hope to restore normal conditions, the establishment of a “stable” government which would send the councils home with expressions of thanks for services rendered. This has made some of the workers reflect and especially among the Independents they begin to doubt and strive to delay the convocation of the assembly. The Independents occupy in the coalition the place which the social-patriots formerly occupied in the bourgeois government, namely to prevent the workers from rebelling against the government. But they are compelled on account of the revolutionary tendencies amongst the workers, to resist the ultra-conservative dealings of the government.

This explains the growing friction between Kurt Eisner [since assassinated], the leader of the Bavarian Councils, and Barth, on one side, and Ebert and Scheidemann on the other. The Independents also propose plans for moderate socialisation - not all at once, no experiments! They propose beautiful plans for the upbuilding of Socialist production upon the basis of great industries and great agriculture whose support they must have. They do not think about the fact that Socialism is not a question of the nationalisation of industry, but is a question of the power of the proletariat - in the theoretic writings of
Kautsky nothing is said about this! The result will be that when the bourgeoisie again assume power it will make an end of all these plans or realise them in its own way as State Socialism.

Besides the Independents already go arm in arm with Jaffe, the Bavarian Professor of Economy, who during the war outlined a project for extensive State Socialism, which is better called State Capitalism. The two parties, the majority Socialists and the Independents will, without a doubt, unite with the radical bourgeois parties upon this State Socialist programme, provided the proletariat does not intervene. While the Government is only concerned with externals and the maintenance of order - which, in reality, becomes increasingly chaotic - the friction between the classes develops. The bourgeoisie organise White Guards, the proletariat form Red Guards, and in secret reaction conspires and prepares for civil war. And while the arrival of troops strengthens the reactionaries, the revolutionary spirit flames amongst the workers.

The great struggle which must develop will be between the bourgeoisie, openly or covertly represented by the Social Democratic and the Independent parties, and the revolutionary movement, now called the Communist Party but which during the war was embodied in the Spartacus Group and the Bremen Internationalists. Although, as an organisation, it is not yet distinct and apart from the Social Democracy and the Independents the Communist Party is in direct opposition, it defends the dictatorship of the proletariat as against democratic parliamentarism and is opposed to the convocation
of the National Assembly; it demands the abolition of Capitalism and the annulment of state debts. It represents the ideal of the Russian Bolshevik party although not directly connected with it, on account of friction between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. By the bourgeoisie and the Social Democrats the Communists are represented as being the Bolsheviki, and all the denunciation and misrepresentation directed against the Russian Bolsheviki are also directed against them. Many motions adopted by Soldiers’ Councils - especially at the front, where they are least developed politically, and where, above all, they desire rest and peace - express their abhorrence of Bolshevism. As yet, the Communists are but a small minority, and the social-patriots and the bourgeoisie use this fact to consolidate their forces. The influence of the Communists upon the workers, however, is growing by leaps and bounds.

The international situation, the threatening food shortage and the menace of the Entente troops are great obstacles to revolutionary developments in Germany. From a military point of view Germany is absolutely at the mercy of the Entente, and, economically, she is also dependent upon the Allies. Her stores of foodstuffs are very small, and she is dependent upon the goodwill of the Poles for grain from the Eastern provinces. Through the loss of Lorraine Germany has not enough iron ore to supply her industries. The Entente had already notified her that the delivery of grain depends upon the maintenance of order and the establishment of an orderly government. The Entente, which sent troops to suppress Communistic Russia and
restore the bourgeoisie, is careful not to allow a revolutionary Germany to assist Russia, even morally; and Vorwaerts? ever the lackey of the powers that be, first of Wilhelm, now of the Entente - is terribly agitated against the proposal of Russia to send representatives to the German Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils. Vorwaerts, the bourgeois press, and the Government all combine to inspire the population with fear of the Entente threat, and to paint the economic situation as black as possible. They thus hope to stifle the revolutionary will of the workers, and it is beyond doubt that they will be successful with a considerable section of the masses.

There is little doubt but that the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils called for December 16th will support, by a big majority, the bourgeois government of Ebert-Haase. These councils are not by any means pure proletarian institutions; in the Soldiers’ Councils are the officers; in the Workers’ Councils are the Trade Union and party leaders. These men will not allow the revolution to go any further if they can prevent it.

But there are other objective material factors that will force the workers from the bottom up. In the first place the opposition between capital and labour - the first assault brought the proclamation of the eight-hour day and the establishment of the Workers’ Councils in the factories. Now that the reaction is setting in the manufacturers are endeavouring to take back these concessions and reduce wages, while on the other hand, workers are demanding further reforms. Here and there clashes, in the shape of strikes, are occurring which require extraordinary efforts on the part of the Independent agents of
the Government to conciliate. This will eventually compel the Government to act and force it to choose between pressing the bourgeoisie or having further sections of the masses arrayed against it. In the second place the economic want will effect the Government still more. The misery and deprivation the war has brought has been so horrible that the workers will not be able to carry any further burden, and if the Government does not actively assist them - and this means that it must take from the possessors - then the revolutionary spirit will receive fresh impetus among the masses.

In times of want, such as confront Germany now and in the coming years, only a government which by its deeds and its viewpoint will not be opposed to the great masses can exist. Consequently it is not to be expected that the present Government of Germany will be successful in confining the revolution to its present purely political reform character; but the attitude of the masses now in assisting the Government to a great extent, and is, therefore, strengthening the bourgeoisie, and will increase its power of resistance in the coming civil war.

Much depends on the class instincts of the coming Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils. If it will lay the foundation for power, the power of the workers and soldiers, then the proletariat will be well armed for the coming struggle.

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