

The last words of Eugen Leviné



Eugen Leviné (1883 – 1919) was one of the leaders of the short-lived Bavarian Council Republic and a member of the Communist Party of Germany. Along with hundreds of other workers, communists, socialists and anarchists, he was arrested following the attack on Munich by the German Army and the Freikorps, and later executed. In June 1919, while on trial for high treason, Leviné made his last speech.

I find it rather difficult to state my case. Even before my first interrogation I pointed out that the whole of these proceedings – the entire trial was really only the outcome of a political and not of a legal situation. The indictment of high treason is based only on the fact that the Soviet Republic was defeated. When it succeeds, it ceases to be high treason. Much the same was said in the leading article of the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, which stated that "only unsuccessful high treason is high treason. If it succeeds, it ceases to be high treason. High treason is thus a political, not a legal issue."

I look upon this Court as the representatives of that class I have always regarded as my political adversaries. Perhaps I could account for my actions before Communists; but how could I defend myself before my adversaries for actions which they must regard as directed against their very existence?

I found myself in a similar situation in Russia; I refused to plead and was acquitted for lack of evidence. I shall not pursue the same tactics now; I propose to explain my motives.

I am not defending myself because I expect a more lenient sentence from you. Had I wished this I rather ought to be silent. My Counsel, who are closer to you both politically and as individuals could conduct my defence far more effectively. I am addressing the Court now for the same reasons which made me defend myself so resolutely throughout the whole proceedings. Both in the Press and among the public the most monstrous rumours have been spread about the Soviet Republic, about me personally, about the entire course of events, and I do not wish to let the rumours go by unopposed. The Munich workers have known me only

for a short time and some of them may be gnawed by doubts as to whether I am really worthy of the confidence they have placed in me. As I am no longer free, I must use this trial to set everything out clearly.

My second reason is that I am a member of the Communist Party, and this is the most hated and most maligned party in Germany. I regard it therefore as my duty to proclaim in public the motives by which the members of the German Communist Party work, wish to work, strive to work. I owe it to the workers on the Executive Committee and to over twelve hundred members of the Factory Councils with whom I have grown close through our day to day collaboration, even if they ultimately repudiated me. I owe it to them, too, to clear their names.

I am defending myself, then, not to obtain a more lenient sentence, but so as not to miss an opportunity of establishing the facts.

The main difference between myself and the Prosecution is that we regard all political and social phenomena, in Germany as well as in the rest of the world, from totally opposite angles. The Prosecuting Counsel overestimates the power and capacity of leaders to act and to influence events. He assumes that the dice of world history would fall differently according to whether they are cast by honest or dishonest leaders. But the leaders themselves emerge from the masses, even if from a different milieu. They become leaders not because they are superior to the masses but only because they are capable of formulating what the masses themselves intuitively desire but cannot express for lack of formal education. You will therefore find in your bourgeois circles a great many people superior to me in erudition, but at a workers' meeting, I, Gentlemen, would carry the day – and not because of my personal superiority, but only because I would be expressing what the masses felt and wanted.

It was the tragedy of the Munich masses that they still had too little political experience. They were well aware that to achieve victory the entire proletariat must act as a body; but they believed that this body could have various programmes and that it was quite sufficient for the Social-Democrats, the Independent Socialists and the Communists to conclude a formal agreement.

This was actually one of the reasons for the defeat of the Munich Soviet Republic. When the proletariat is united in its will and purpose, it is invincible, but not when unity is established in a merely formal organisational way.

This point of view makes my appraisal of all the issues with which I shall deal later quite different from that of the Prosecution. I do not wish to mitigate my sentence; I do not wish to shift the legal responsibility onto the Executive Council. I answer unreservedly for my actions. I was partly the initiator and I first formulated the ideas which the workers only felt instinctively; but I can say that I would never have taken part in a revolution which was thrust upon the workers by the leaders in the way the Prosecution has described.

When I went as a young student to Russia, I already realised that the activity of a political agitator consists only in formulating the historical will of the masses, not in forcing his own will upon them against their will. This principle governed my actions. I appealed to the masses. When they agreed with me, they responded. When they did not, I had unfortunately to play the part I did play and to reap the legal consequences of what others in their folly had

sown. I say all this not to explain my personal attitude, but because it expresses the fundamental views of the Communist Party. This party is generally regarded as a group of people who set out to impose minority terror and dictatorship over the proletariat. Yet every line of the party programme testifies that the proletariat alone is destined to achieve its emancipation.

Our whole attitude to the much-debated question of terror and the use of force follows on from this viewpoint that not only a major part of the task but the entire task is assigned to the masses. I have already had the opportunity to expound my attitude to the dictatorship of the proletariat: that it is only an intermediate stage between the dictatorship of capital and the establishment of complete democracy with only one class of working people. The Communist Party is convinced that this programme could very well be realised without violence if the dwindling minority of property owners would not close their minds to historical necessity. The armed struggle of which we are so vehemently accused only begins when this dwindling minority nevertheless proceeds to defend the privileges of its caste and class by force of arms.

"The Proletarian Revolution has no need of terror for its aims; it detests and abhors murder. It has no need of these means of struggle, for it fights not individuals but institutions." How then does the struggle arise? Why, having gained power, do we build a Red Army? Because history teaches us that every privileged class has hitherto defended itself by force when its privileges have been endangered. And because we know this; because we do not live in cloud-cuckoo-land; because we cannot believe that conditions in Bavaria are different – that the Bavarian bourgeoisie and the capitalists would allow themselves to be expropriated without a struggle – we were compelled to arm the workers to defend ourselves against the onslaught of the dispossessed capitalists.

This is how it has been in the past and this is how we shall naturally always act in the future, whenever we succeed in attaining power. We did not call on the workers to take up arms out of pleasure in bloodshed. On the contrary, we would be only too happy if the hitherto privileged classes would refrain from embarking upon a hopeless struggle – for one day the struggle will be hopeless. I should like to draw your attention to the fact that the victory of the proletariat in November also passed without bloodshed. In Berlin, for example, the first shots were fired at six o'clock in the evening from the Royal Stables when a group of officers opened fire on defenceless pedestrians out of annoyance at the course of events.

In my view we armed the proletariat to deter the bourgeoisie from an armed counter-attack. The President of the Court or the Public Prosecutor earlier quoted part of an article from the Bulletin of the Executive Council, expressing the apprehension that any gun not surrendered by the bourgeoisie would be used against the proletariat.

While I was initially extremely pessimistic about the situation and did not believe that Bavaria was any different and that the Bavarian Government would not dare to allow the Prussians to march on Munich, I gradually came to hope that we might possibly succeed in holding out until Soviet Republics had been proclaimed in other parts of Germany and that the Hoffmann Government would refrain from attacking us.

We all regard the events of the early days of May not as a proletarian offensive but as an unmotivated bloodbath into which the White Guards plunged the Munich working class.

During the whole time I was in Munich I had the great joy of working hand in hand with my Communist friends. There was always complete unanimity between us and I therefore felt that I was not a stranger but could identify myself with these Communist workers, and through them with the entire Munich working class. I was therefore entitled, at least for that period, to speak in their name.

A second point which also follows from my whole outlook is the recall and dismissal at any time of each and every functionary. The cornerstone of a Soviet Republic is the factory council. The workers are not organised regionally, but in the factories, where they are together every day, where they can get to know each other in the course of their daily work, and where elections of the functionaries are held on totally different principles. There the workers know whether their representative is a mere babler or a man who can stand his ground.

That is why we accepted this form of organisation as natural and normal – all the more so since the new state was to include only working people. Every representative would hold office only as long as his electors wished. It was therefore not an empty gesture when I repeatedly offered to return my mandate to the Factory Councils. Hence I can say that I and my friends – I may call them my friends – of the Action Committee, all thirty-five of us who resigned on 27th April, were prepared to do so at any time. Not one of us clung to his mandate. And I can assure you that the life we led had no great attraction for any of us, nor for the workers among us, weary after their daily work.

All of us remained in office only out of a sense of duty and regarded it as a heavy burden. I repudiate any suggestion that any single one of us craved for or was drunk with power. Not a single one of us wrested power by force. We received it from the workers of Munich. In the course of two weeks they compelled us three times to keep our mandates. I therefore also reject the allegations that only a triumvirate – Levien, Leviné and Axelrod – or an alien clique, determined the policy. None of these three was a member of the Revolutionary Tribunal or the Committee for Combating the Counter-Revolution.

I should also like personally to reject a reproach which, it is true, was raised from outside the Court but was partly also levelled at me by the Prosecution – namely, that we are aliens. I know very well that I am of Russian origin. I am a Jew, I am not Bavarian. How then could I presume to accept a post which, according to my Counsel corresponded to that of Prime Minister? To understand this you must project yourself into the minds of the working class.

Our ideal is a future German Soviet Republic which one day will be merged into an International Soviet Republic. As long, however, as that was not achieved, Soviet Republics could and can only be affected in separate places, and we were of course convinced that everyone who felt fit for a given post must accept it if no one else was available.

I accepted the post because my previous activity had also given me insight into economic relationships and because I felt justified and indeed morally bound to accept it as no one else was there. And as long as I held the post I had a duty to perform towards the German as well as the International proletariat, and the Communist Revolution.

The Prosecution accuses me of having instigated the ten days' general strike. It is true that it was I who moved the resolution calling for a general strike. It was obvious that to safeguard a proletarian dictatorship the entire proletariat should stand by, and stand by armed.

We had no police, and it was essential to prevent looting and so forth. The Prosecution has asked how I could possibly justify keeping people away from their work for ten days at a time when work was so urgently needed. The German Government kept millions of proletarians away from work, not for ten, but for many hundreds of days. The German Government aspired after Bagdad and Longwy. We wanted Communism. The means, however, which you do not condemn in their case, you should also not condemn in ours just because we pursue other aims.

The Prosecution claims that the workers only struck under the threat of machine-guns. In reality the motion calling for the strike was unanimously adopted by the representatives of all the factories, including the clerical staff; the officials' organisations, the post office workers – all were in favour of the strike.

Where then is the terror? Where the violation by a minority? Why does the Prosecution accept the legends which discredit the workers of Munich? Why will it not admit that they acted in accordance with their own mass-resolutions?

Some time later, on the Tuesday after Easter, it was proposed to call off the strike in view of its economic effects. I made a counter-proposal. Sunday and Monday were Easter holidays. If the workers returned to work on Tuesday, it would have created the impression that the strike had fizzled out. I suggested a more dignified conclusion, more consistent with the will of the working class – namely, to strike on Tuesday, to close all theatres, to stop all trams running so that it was quite clear that it entirely depended on the individual, free decisions of the workers whether they worked or not. This resolution was again accepted unanimously.

The Prosecution will know how it was carried out. The workers, with hundreds of post office employees, men and women, in their pale-blue uniforms in the vanguard, marched to the Wittelsbach Palace to express their solidarity with those who have been portrayed in this Court as terrorists and the enslavers of the Munich proletariat.

In the opening stage of the Soviet Republic we had to prevent the propaganda of the bourgeois Press. We were not in a position to introduce mere censorship and were therefore compelled, it is true, to close down the newspapers.

You say that is terror. Yes, it is terror. The same terror practised by the Hoffmann Government in suppressing the *Rote Fahne*. The same terror which affords me no other opportunity of justifying myself before my Party comrades than to appeal to the President of this Court to let me state my case.

The Prosecution accuses me of having insisted on harsh sentences and at the same time holds me responsible for the looting in the Soviet Republic. I cannot quite understand it. Either I ought not to have instructed the Tribunal to apply severe measures, as was testified by the witness Kämpfer, in which case I cannot be reproached for the looting; or else I should have been allowed to instruct the Tribunal in its duties in the manner I considered necessary in the interests of our work and our task, and then I cannot be reproached for having done so. While condemning me for even considering the introduction of capital punishment, the Prosecution is demanding in the same breath the death penalty for me – for me who neither looted nor murdered.

The Prosecution has spoken of the internal peace which I have endangered. I did not endanger it, because internal peace does not exist. As long as the word "socialism" merely heads the notepaper of the various governments there can be no internal peace; and as long as there are shareholders who could double their fortunes in the five years of war without doing a stroke of work, the workers will try to claim their share of that increased wealth and the shareholders will not allow it. And the more the economic conditions deteriorate in the aftermath of the war, when the prisoners of war return to find no work, no homes, no clothes and the little there is cannot be justly distributed because there is no Communist Republic, the internal struggle will continue. And if it assumes forms of which I and my friends do not approve, the struggle will go on as an inevitable phenomenon against which there is no appeal.

Take a look round! In this very Court are officials who earn monthly only 150 to 180 marks under the present cost of living. Take a look at the homes of the so-called "Spartacist nests", and you will understand that we have not endangered the internal peace; we have only revealed that internal peace does not exist. And so long as it does not exist this struggle will go on. And if it assumes military forms and carries in its wake all the ghastly misery and distress that actually prevailed in Munich during the first days of May, it is not we who are to blame but those who deny the working class the right to decide its own destiny.

The Prosecution has claimed that I am morally guilty of shooting the hostages. I emphatically repudiate this charge. The guilty are those who in August 1914 were the first to take hostages, though they were never brought to justice or sentenced to death. If anyone else is to blame it is the men who sneaked off to Bamberg and from there sent misguided proletarians together with Officers' Units and Negroes to fight against Munich.

[Uproar and indignation among the judges. The President intervenes and tries to stop Leviné from proceeding.]

Mr President, I know very well what I may bring on myself by this statement. But I must say that I have been provoked by the Prosecuting Counsel as never before in my whole political career. To justify his demand for the death sentence the Prosecution charged me with dishonourable motives, and based this charge above all on an accusation of cowardice – one of the gravest accusations that can be levelled against a man who has been engaged for sixteen years in the revolutionary struggle.

I am prepared to let that pass and will only say that if the Prosecution reprimands me for not having joined the Red Army after I withdrew from the government and had no more duties to fulfill, I must refer to the statement already made by my Counsel – namely, that I am guided by the code of honour prevailing among my own friends.

On the last evening we held a meeting, attended by workers, members of the Red Army and others, at which it was unanimously decided that members of the Red Army were to remain at their posts, while former members of the government were to "disappear".

I disappeared. I disappeared, I "sneaked away" in agreement with my Communist friends. But not to save my skin.

Gentlemen, you were very indignant about one of my remarks. I shall not speak about the manner in which I made that remark, but in substance it is nevertheless true. I have read

myself in the news papers that among the troops which marched on Munich there were Negroes. Moreover the Hoffmann Government had not shrunk from certain other measures. Everyone must admit that the blockade of Munich, the closing of the railways and the stoppage of food supplies as practised in this "free state", were nothing more than a repetition of the English blockade which was regarded as morally so objectionable.

As to the charge of cowardice, I cannot prevent the Prosecuting Counsel from making such accusations. But I may perhaps invite him, who demands the death penalty, to be present at the execution. He may then also admit that it is a misconception to assume that only those who fight in the front lines of the Red Army risk their lives. You know the poem which appeared in *Vorwaerts* after the Berlin January Days:

*A hundred proletarian corpses all in a row;
Karl, Rosa and Company, none on show!
None on show!*

Three days later Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered, and the "Company", my friends Werner Müller and Wolfgang Fernbach were also killed. Not one of them was a member of the Red Army.

Gentlemen, I have twice been accused by representatives of the Bavarian Government of cowardice. The first time by Schneppenhorst for not approving of the establishment of a Soviet Republic; the second time by the present Prosecution for fighting not by force of arms but in my own way, according to my own judgement, and for my absence from the battlefield as agreed with the Communist Party.

I am coming to a close. During the last six months I have no longer been able to live with my family. Occasionally my wife could not even visit me. I could not see my three-year-old boy because the police have kept a vigilant watch on us.

Such was my life and it is not compatible with lust for power or with cowardice. When Toller, who tried to persuade me to proclaim the Soviet Republic, in his turn accused me of cowardice, I said to him: "What do you want? The Social Democrats start, then run away and betray us; the Independents fall for the bait, join us, and later let us down, and we Communists are stood up against the wall."

We Communists are all dead men on leave. Of this I am fully aware. I do not know if you will extend my leave or whether I shall have to join Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. In any case I await your verdict with composure and inner serenity. For I know that, whatever your verdict, events cannot be stopped. The Prosecuting Counsel believes that the leaders incited the masses. But just as leaders could not prevent the mistakes of the masses under the pseudo-Soviet Republic, so the disappearance of one or other of the leaders will under no circumstances hold up the movement.

And yet I know, sooner or later other judges will sit in this Hall and then those will be punished for high treason who have transgressed against the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Pronounce your verdict if you deem it proper. I have only striven to foil your attempt to stain my political activity, the name of the Soviet Republic with which I feel myself so closely bound up, and the good name of the workers of Munich. They – and I together with them –

we have all of us tried to the best of our knowledge and conscience to do our duty towards the International, the Communist World Revolution.