

BACK TO THE FUTURE: BERLIN IN 2006-7

'With the exception of only a few chapters, every important section in the annals' of European political history 'carries the headline - defeat of the revolution'. The history of the last 100 years has worked to 'create a powerful and united counter revolution'.... 'The revolutionary risings' of 1917-23 across Europe, of 1936 in Spain, of 1943-45 in Italy and in 1968 have been 'choked in blood'.

Those who know their nineteenth century political history will know that by the editing of the text and the insertion of different dates and places I have used Marx's opening words in the Class Struggles in France in 1850 to describe the failure of the 1848 'Springtime of the peoples' 'revolutions' to describe instead most of the twentieth century (1). Today they are a modest description of the blood spilt, especially in Russia, Germany and Spain in defeating the potential revolutions of the twentieth century. Marx's experience of the failed German revolution of 1848 led to his attempt to understand the early global Capital of his own day. Hopes for a new revolution after the failures of 1848 led him sometimes to over anticipate the possibilities in his generation. It has always been a temptation to see revolution as just around the corner.

I have narrowed my analysis down to three case studies of this problem - all of which are a species of what in Britain we now call New Labour - those bearing the appearance of socialists or at least social democrats - who have sold out to today's Empire of Global Capital. I begin with a long forgotten tale of a lost socialist opportunity after 1918; not in Russia, but in Germany. As a modern Czech writer Kundera hinted, there has been a process of forced forgetting (2). To rebuild a civil society which can spread the notion of a real democratic revolution there also needs to be a continued remembering and re-connection to our recent global history.

When the Czech Theologian Jan Huss was executed by the Pope's orders for heresy in 1415, it looked as though the Protestant Revolution, first inspired by the English uprising in 1381, a generation earlier, had been defeated. It took another 100 years for the conditions for another Reformation to be in place. So, in a different way against the modern left, this has been the experience of much of the twentieth century. We on the left looking for alternatives are still living with the weight of the sheer immensity of the killing the twentieth century entailed. It shows no sign of abating in the twenty first. Everyday even on our propagandist TV screens, as US audiences once saw Vietnam, we see the modern military Empire, which is still killing people. The Empire of Global Capital that lies behind it is still making money for the few.

When one of the major Catholic theologians, Wilhelm Eck, came to an official 'disputation' with Martin Luther he told Luther that his theses made him a Hussite. Not strong on politics at this point in his career, Luther had to go away to research to him an unknown Czech Church leader. He came back with the apocryphal comment: 'we are all Hussites now'(3). In the twentieth century, the left has had its own Hussite experience of counter revolution, of killing carried out to prevent the spread of a heresy – the heretical thought that ordinary people and not their rulers should be able to participate directly in running our society. Like the Catholic hierarchy in 1415 the new Popes of the age of media control will and have slaughtered those that oppose them.

GERMANY - THE WEIGHT OF DEAD GENERATIONS

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living' (4). It seemed odd that this phrase from Marx expressed my pre-dominant feeling after my first visit to a re-united Germany in 2007. Somehow it summarised the dead weight of its socialist traditions in the experience of the lost and defeated Revolution of 1918-23 and of the Stalinist repression that constituted a main residue of the East German experience. It reflected the failures of both German 'social democracy', as represented in the SPD and of its 'Communist' (KPD) sister (first re born as the PDS). In Britain today the socialist left has to come to terms with the accommodations of New Labour to Global Capital, and since 2003 to an especially virulent militaristic imperial form. In a Germany that has through the dreadful experience of Nazism avoided the same recent military trap, I sensed nevertheless a profound disillusion that goes back to 1918. This defeat I would argue is akin to Marx's experience of 1848.

The crucial battles of the revolutionary left in Western Europe began in Germany in 1918. There are good reasons for studying the German counter revolution first. Germany is the largest nation within the enlarged European Union and as the first to go through the formative experience in the twentieth century of a 'lost' revolution (5). If Rosa Luxemburg thought socialism in Germany had a long march in 1919 (6), what now after the defeats, betrayals and disillusion of the socialist left after the SPD and KPD in West and East? An SPD lost in a reformist opportunism and lust for power after 1918, and subsumed in a grand coalition for a capitalist so-called 'social market' economy after 1966. A KPD destroyed by Stalinist control and savage Nazi repression and a new 'Communist' (SED) party elite imposing its will via dictatorship in the East after 1945. None of these are adverts for a future participative civil society.

The difficulty for creating a genuinely anti capitalist agenda, never mind a 'socialist' movement in Germany, given this history, remains. This is not to imply that there are not, as in Britain, popular movements. Some today use the Green symbol, not only because the environmental issues are genuine in a more obviously industrial society than the Britain of 2007, but also because the socialist label is discredited. Similarly, the Church has some worthwhile achievements and thinking in the field of global justice. However, a radical socialist movement in Germany looks set to remain a minority – if not necessarily a sectarian – occupation. Since 2005 establishment Germany has embraced a new CDU/CSU/SDP alliance and the SDP has chosen this 'centrist coalition' in preference to the left and Greens. The left in Germany in 2007, as in the 1960s, had been shoved onto the margins. With the creation of a new 'Left' in June 2007 – and a national vote of 8 percent in 2009 - it may well be that the recession will alter the triple alliance and throw up more hopeful long term strands in Germany than anywhere else in the EU. This makes the lost German revolution all the more important to understand (7). Unfortunately, with Marxism as the old official religion of the GDR also colours the analysis available for a discussion of Capital and of socialism in Germany. Talking to German Christians it quickly became clear that any Marxist analysis had huge barriers given its past history as a senile dogma for a Stalinist regime. A creative and Marxist influenced analysis of today's capitalist Germany - and capitalist EU - is all the harder. The EU is more likely to be defined by corporate interests, whatever rhetorical lip service is made to a 'social model'. No wonder the prospects for radicalism in the West are carrying a dead weight.

WE ARE ONE PEOPLE: CAPITAL'S IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL

On a rainy June Berlin day a year after seeing young Germans able to wave the German flag again at the 2006 World Cup without apology, I spent an afternoon in the German Historical Museum. Starting with Charlemagne and emerging via Luther, building the German Empire, two wars and the Nazis one leaves to the poster 'Wir Sind Ein Volk' - We are One People. The theme of the museum, quite unintentionally one hopes, would have done justice to Hitler – a clever play on deep themes in German history – here stressing the importance of a (re-) united Germany, using what has become a popular catch phrase summarising the 1989 'revolution'. My judgement was coloured coming from the Check Point Charlie Museum. We had visited on a hugely symbolic day – 17 June – the anniversary of the 1953 up-risings in the East against the imposition of ever harsher work targets after 1948. The Check Point Charlie Museum was packed with young people, perhaps you might say a good thing that they were there to remember German history. But what kind of history was this? To me, it seemed like a Cold War history still stuck before 1989. Everything Russian or East German was bad, while the Museum celebrated the many heroic attempts at escape from the demonised East. This is not to say that the East did not have a lot wrong with it - but here was a totally black and white picture. No attempt to suggest why the Russians may have feared encirclement; no attempt to understand the genuine socialist traditions of East Germany, even less an attempt to see that the socialist possibilities of the East had been distorted, maimed and probably ruined for generations by the militarism and authoritarianism of Stalinist rule, both in East Germany and beyond. This was a history told by the victors of the Cold War battles. Now there was no alternative to the victory of what lay un-stated - to the victory of parliamentary democratic yes - but clearly all the more so, for it being un-stated, to the victory too of the Capitalist west. The real victory of global Capital, as the Check Point Charlie Museum implicitly showed in its open pro-Americanism, was a victory that was not just about Germany at all.

The Check Point Charlie Museum was a good insight into the propaganda battles that are still being fought in twenty first century Germany. It was a good example of how a genuine story of a fight against oppression in the East had been distorted and spun into an implicit unquestioning of a pro-American, anti communist light from the West. For We are One People maybe what the people had shouted in 1989. It is not what they had first shouted in 1918, nor perhaps 1953, nor maybe even in 1989. The origins of the phrase 'Wir Sind Ein Volk' - most definitely not explained by the Museum - were in the modern era, as far as I can discover, not from 1989 but from 1918. After the sailors' revolt and popular demonstrations in Kiel in November 1918, it is reported that on the next day in Wilhelmshaven, the major port next door, a peoples march shouted 'Wir Sind Das Volk' - 'We are the People'. How much can be changed by one word. 'We are the People' as I read it can be taken to have a very different meaning from that now ascribed to it. It was not a statement of nationalism - of the new united Germany - with which Capitalist Germany has proclaimed its victory since 1989. For there already was one Germany in 1918 - whatever class and regional divisions beset it - so it could not possibly have this nationalist re-united meaning.

WE ARE THE PEOPLE: WIR SIND DAS VOLK

We are the People was a shout of frustration after effective rule by the Prussian military was replaced by the factional manoeuvring of the Generals, the capitalists, the SPD and the revolutionaries. It is as if to say we are being forgotten in this factionalism - and yet the people 'on the streets' hold the true power. As in so many other places, here are the ruled letting their old rulers and their potential new rulers know they still felt disenfranchised. Yet it was also to say - we hold the power - listen to us. In this it is on a par with the Argentinean people's anger at their political - largely Peronist - elite in 2002 and the shout 'they all must go'. Whatever else it was, this first Wir Sind Das Volk was emphatically not what it has been made since (8). With this a true statement of the people has been spun into effective support for a united German capitalism (and of course this last word is nearly always omitted in the discourse). While appearing to be based on the traditions of the past, the new slogan has been used as a dead weight to lie heavily on the new possibilities for the future. The new post German 1989 world claims the legitimacy of 1918 whilst at the same time subverting it. The overthrow of a militaristic authoritarianism - whether it be the Prussian Kaiser or a Prussian Stalinist is equally celebrated - but the hidden victory of the capitalist order on both occasions slides by almost un-noticed. For in Germany, as elsewhere, it must be made to seem that there is no alternative.

Harman argues that revolutions that are defeated are soon forgotten. This may not be true. I see 1793-1799 as a defeat for much of the French revolution, and that of 1917-21 eventually a defeat for the Russian revolution too. I don't think either have been forgotten. What is true is that the German revolution of 1918-23 is often forgotten not least in Germany itself. It can be presented as an up-rising or a putsch, particularly that of the Spartacus League in January 1919, akin to the failed right wing - 'Kapp putsch' but the revolutionary impact - which led to the fall of the Kaiser and the Prussian state's dominance - can be minimised or distorted. 1918 can be presented as a faltering German step on the road to parliamentary democracy in a weak Weimar; of course 'we', that is the Allied armies, therefore brought the Germans onto the right road after 1945. As with its remaining revolutionary message - akin to liberty, equality and fraternity - 'We are the People', Wir Sind Das Volk - is twisted into a message about German nationalism to be almost the opposite of what it was.

Garton Ash, a British 'expert' on writing 'the history of the present' notes that some young Germans - less than twenty years on - need to be reminded of the fall of the Wall. He links November 1989 to the history of other Novembers - Hitler's attempted putsch in 1923, the Kristallnacht of 1938 - when the Nazis attacked Jewish shops. Even his German history does not run to the more important lost revolution of 1918, which he does not mention in his latest piece on 'remember remember' the 9th of November. Writing from Lewes, which emphasises the need to remember November 5th so much and the death of (Protestant) martyrs at the hands of a cruel counter revolution brings the process of what is remembered and what is forgotten to the fore for me. For as Garton Ash admits it is the triumph of capitalism that has dominated the German and East European experience since 1989 (8). The lost revolution also lies at the heart of the rise of Nazism. To understand the present crisis of the left in Germany and in Europe we need to understand the creation and importance of social democracy in Germany before 1914 (9).

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, EMPIRE AND WAR

Chris Harman's descriptions of the German revolutionary situation in Berlin and Bavaria especially in November 1918 as Prussian militarism looked defeated, read remarkably like Orwell's descriptions of revolutionary Barcelona in 1936. 'It was as if the bourgeoisie had vanished from ...the globe' (10). Germany in November 1918 had become like Russia in 1917: whole regiments had gone over to the revolution and army lorries flew the red flag; hotels were requisitioned as headquarters for the new Red army; a throng of 12-15,000 armed proletarians filled the streets (11). No wonder there was wild cheering in Russia when news of the German revolution came through.

The revolutionaries on the left of the SPD were actually powerless in this situation. The Spartacus Group around Liebknecht and Luxemburg had created their own organisation in early 1916. But Liebknecht was not released from jail until Oct 23, and Luxemburg was not free until November 9th, just as Ebert was made Chancellor under a new German Republic. The revolutionaries had no organisation. The old USPD strongholds in Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg and Leipzig had lost many of its militants at the front. No revolutionary shop stewards were left in the shipyards at Bremen. Berlin only had 7 members belonging to Spartacus group and no caucus on the workers council until February. Harman estimates that there were 3 to 4,000 revolutionary socialists in Germany in late '18; Fowkes an upper limit of 10,000. Despite this the formal foundation of the Communist party took place in late December (12).

Ebert offered Liebknecht and Barth, a member of the shop steward organisation created by the strikes in Berlin, places in his new government. Liebknecht saw it as a ruse to tie him in, Barth did not. From here the real battle in Berlin from December 1918 to March 1919 – and then elsewhere in Germany - was between the radical elements among the armed forces, particularly the sailors, aided by radical workers and Communists versus the Freikorps and the older army.

The Frei-Korps, first recruited by the SPD, especially from the old war's special storm troops, to do its dirty work first flew the swastika in battles against the SPD's own working class supporters in the battles that were to come. The route to Hitler also lies on not only the Prussian Junkers and military, but on the SPD. Perhaps in remembering November 9, we should also remember 6 December. If the Stasi did not fire in 1989, the first Freikorps troops fired on a demonstration in Berlin on 6 December 1918. Since November popular demonstrations had carried large placards with 'Brothers Don't Shoot' – a pamphlet with this title had gained Tom Mann in Britain a jail sentence before the war.

Already by November 10, the first major defeat was suffered. The soldiers and workers occupying the Reichstag listened to the debates between the SPD, USPD and revolutionary shop stewards and wanting 'unity' above all else effectively went with keeping Ebert in power. Haffner describes it as a revolutionary endorsement of a counter revolutionary government (13). On November 12 the new SPD government suspended the state of emergency, made legal the right of association (which the people had taken the previous week) and enacted universal suffrage and the eight hour day.

GERMANY 1919: MURDERS AGAINST 'ANARCHY AND TERROR'

The clash between Soviets and SPD government came to a head in the 'Christmas Crisis'. The Peoples Marine Division (largely sailors from Kiel) occupied Ebert's office on December 24 – they had not been getting paid. Ebert had been rescued by the army; the sailors had not wanted to harm him. The revolution did not want to kill; the counter revolution had no such scruples. The new SPD government would not dismiss the Army High Command, fearing that it would not obeyed. Lower down, the offices of the old Prussian State were barely scratched. Artillery was used on the sailors. Outraged the USPD Ministers brought in by Ebert resigned. Liebknecht had no contact with the sailors, but wrote on 'Ebert's Bloody Christmas' (14).

State power was a 'No Man's Land'. Power had 'slipped' from the hands of the old regime and of big Capital but the working classes had not picked it up. The soldiers and workers councils, despite being far more pro SPD than they were for the revolutionaries, resisted giving authority back to their old officers. Under the pretence that a parliament had not yet been elected to give any broader popular movement legitimacy, the SPD clung on to its trenches out in No Mans Land and then slowly began to move against their own allies. As Luxemburg put it 'Yesterday parliamentary cretinism was a weakness, today it is an ambiguity, tomorrow it will be treason to socialism'. Even non Marxist historians can see that the excuse of the lack of 'reliable (sic) armed forces' meant that the SPD gave power to what became known as 'Noskepolitik', as this ambitious careerist SPD leader was given control of the Freikorps (15). As the history of Weimar was later to show, the Constituent Assembly of the new Republic, as Breitman puts it well 'depended on the Prussian Officer corps'. Luxemburg concluded 'Ebert and Scheidemann can only rule by the bayonet; the bayonet will then rule without Ebert and Scheidemann' (16).

The so-called Spartacus League up-rising of January 1919 was not an up-rising. The Christmas defeat meant that Ebert gave a free hand to Noske's growing Freikorps. The pretext for a new clash came with the refusal of the USPD Berlin Police Chief to resign over his claimed refusal to suppress street 'violence'. A mass demonstration - bigger than that of November assembled on January 5-6 while the leaders debated. There was a General Strike which took over the newspapers and rail. Armed civilians using snipers took the Brandenburg Gate. Harman claims that Ebert deliberately provoked the confrontation to lead the revolutionaries on the streets prematurely. On January 13 the first Freikorps arrived in Berlin, using tanks, artillery and machine guns (17). These January troubles went down in history as the 'Spartacus up-rising'; but as with much counter revolutionary history it is based on a lie. Most of the Communists had opposed it. 'The KPD had neither foreseen, desired, planned or guided' the up-rising. Luxemburg, may have foreseen the possibility but unlike Liebknecht, had argued strongly against any Putsch strategy. The government claimed that the KPD were bringing 'anarchy and terror' – the 'war on terror' is not a new idea even for social democrats. It was the SPD that brought the terror. Luxemburg and Liebknecht were murdered out of hand on January 15. As we in Britain embark on a new round of authoritarian State legislation against 'terror', this is also consistent with other so called socialists of the Second International – as well as the violence perpetrated by the Leninists and Stalin. To make Luxemburg and Liebknecht the victims of a civil war they unleashed, is 'simply not true'. The so-called Spartacus or Communist Putsch was in fact a Freikorps Repression – a counter revolution (18).

FIGHTING IN THE RUHR, BERLIN AND COALITION GOVERNMENT

After the defeat in Berlin, where hundreds more were killed after the leaders, the story of the rest of 1919 until 1923 is a story of the Freikorps rolling up – in turn - one working class defence line after the other. Bremen's Socialist Republic - a stronghold of the USPD – held out for 25 days in January 1919. The November Revolution had been peaceful in the industrial Ruhr with little opposition. The miners had been kept quiet with the promise of 'socialised mines'. The trouble in the Ruhr first came as Luxemburg had suggested via economic claims, as the miners struck – unofficially for a 6 hour day – to reduce unemployment – and they had seen the price of coal had risen 50 per cent. Just as Berlin was squashed, workers and soldiers in Essen occupied the Mine offices; by February 1919, 183,000 were on strike.

The Freikorps entered the Ruhr, strike leaders in the mines, metalworkers and rail were arrested, while street fighting continued. The lessons of subduing the Ruhr were then applied back to Berlin, as a new General Strike broke out in early March. This time General Luttwitz used aircraft and tanks against the workers' area in East Berlin. The military occupation of Berlin lasted for 6 weeks and at least 1500 were killed. Soldiers shot indiscriminately into strikers' meetings – 300 were killed in one, 160 in another. One General later described it as '10 days of terror'. The SPD had become an 'executioner' of its own working class'. By mid 1919 the German Revolution was broken; the first revolutionary wave had run its course. The Ruhr workers had been forced back to work through huge fines, prison, hunger and martial law. The workers and soldiers councils were destroyed.

The SPD stayed in government – but its real power was illusory. Government without the SPD would have been impossible, without them Germany would have staggered from general strike to general strike. In terms of formal political alliances, while the army and Prussian Junkers really ruled – and their landed interests were left untouched – the SDP appeared to govern through alliances with the middle class and Catholic Centre parties. The break off of the USPD in 1917 had enabled the SPD to pursue a concessionary strategy with the centre, playing on the fears of 'Bolshevism' to pull the Centre in. Ironically this was exactly the strategy that the Italian Communists pursued in 1945-7 and the lack of which in Italy in 1918-22 had supposedly led to fascism there. It was largely this peasant Catholic and Centre vote that moved to Hitler from 1928 (19). The SPD partly had themselves to blame for a strategy that was later to be used against them.

After the January 1919 election results the SPD leadership pursued the coalition path that underlay the whole Weimar period to 1933. With 38 per cent of the vote the new SPD (often called the 'Majority Socialists') and the USPD a further 8 per cent, the old SPD had a vote equal to that which has ever put any Labour Government in Britain into power. The SPD however chose to make a coalition. The Centre party (with 20 per cent) and the Democrat party (19 per cent) both wanted each other in to fend against the mighty weight of the SPD and neither were prepared to admit the revolutionaries in the USPD. Even the business class at this point were prepared to go along with the SPD to preserve their new labour agreements. No one in the SPD leadership appeared to want the USPD either. After the events in the Ruhr and Berlin, the USPD then voted in March for rule by the workers councils (Soviets) and not by the Assembly.

THE MUNICH SOVIET OF 1919 AND KAPP PUTSCH OF 1920

In April 1919 more violence broke out in Bavaria with a proclamation of Soviet rule in Munich. The Revolution of November 1918 had followed a different course in Bavaria. The appearance of a radical revolution in the most clerical conservative State in Germany with 8 million catholic peasants presents an anomaly (20). The revolution in Bavaria was proclaimed two days earlier than in Berlin on November 7 with not a shot fired. The disruption of 1918 meant that Bavarian politics went back to its traditions of autonomy and separation; Bavaria and Austria had always been the main competitors with Prussia for leadership of imperial Germany.

The radicalizing factor in Munich came from three factors. The first came from the traditions of a radical peasants league. The second was that new war industries –run by Krupp - had generated a new working class fresh from the peasantry. The third was that unemployment quickly increased – there were 40,000 unemployed in Munich alone by March 1919. In April Soviet rule was proclaimed by a KPD activist – Levine. This was too much both for the rest of Bavaria and the Central Government. A USPD/SPD/Liberal coalition had nominally ruled excluding the Popular Party which had just obtained a majority of the Bavarian Assembly seats and eventually became today's Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). Violent killings had been going on since December and by early May there were at least 20,000 Prussian Freikorps in Munich, fighting a Red Army of 10,000. Munich was cut off – without coal or food and was taken after two days of ferocious fighting, with executions and 1000 killed.

The military coup of March 1920 is traditionally known as the Kapp Putsch, named after the Chancellor's brief reign. But the real power lay with the newly created Reichswehr, based on the old Freikorps. General Luttwitz appointed Kapp. The immediate pretext for the coup was the need to reduce the size of the German army, as demanded by the Versailles Peace Treaty of June 1919. The first time Ebert took on the army he lost. Freikorps troops who had been fighting against the Bolsheviks in Latvia in 1919 refused to disband and much of the rest of the army supported them. As troops symbolically marched through the Brandenburg Gate, Ebert and all his ministers fled to Dresden. With a complete lack of irony Ebert now called for a General Strike. The revolutionary forces he had put down he now called upon to save him. The workers may have been confused in 1919 by the division in their ranks, now they had seen the 'White Terror'. A major up-rising took place over much of Saxony, where there was a week long of fighting in Halle, and in Thuringia, where there was fighting in Gotha and Weimar. The strike closed all transport, news, post and factories. In Berlin, water, gas and electricity were cut off. The defensive General strike succeeded – the first time the workers' huge potential economic power had been employed. Kapp at first ordered all strike leaders to be shot. In the Ruhr, the army had occupied the pit towns in early 1920. At the onset of the new strike, a 50,000 strong 'Red Army' controlled the Ruhr from Essen in the West to Munster in the North. The USPD ran the large town of Dortmund. Kapp fled. The March 1920 Revolution had repeated the achievements of November 1918. There was no 'socialist advance' – but the workers had shown they were prepared to strike against the military. But the SPD remained true to its 1918 colours. Once the generals gave way, the army were still used to enforce the writ of the Central Government in areas like the Ruhr, Halle and Chemnitz in Saxony. 20,000 were killed in the subsequent repression.

A RADICALISED WORKING CLASS: SPD AND USPD IN 1920

A German Civil War now broke out in 1920. Jones describes it thus: 'For the first time in West European history, the State's professional armies were in confrontation with a properly organised revolutionary army'. The Red Army lost and 20,000 were killed in the subsequent repression. The peace of Germany in the Summer of 1920 was the 'peace of the graveyard' (21).

In 1920 the SPD government was too pre-occupied with this fighting to look at economic and industrial reform. A bourgeoisie that had been frightened in October 1918 was now regaining its confidence – after a massive workers repression – and the SPD was seen as no threat either to the capitalist economy or the Catholic Church. Indeed, the SPD was already, as the Generals had hoped, being turned into the whipping boy for imperial Germany's defeat. Yet the SPD posters had claimed in March 1919 'socialism is here'. In moving away from the SPD the German working class was rejecting an increasingly discredited notion of the SPD's 'socialism'.

The repression, defeats and the military putsch radicalized elements of the working class. This was reflected in the June 1920 elections, where the SPD vote halved to 5.5 million. The USPD vote almost doubled to 4.9 million. Harman argues that the USPD now had a majority of the working class vote as some of the middle class was voting for the new establishment in the SPD. It had taken four years of a revolutionary situation for the mass of the German working class to see what their most radical leaders had seen in 1917. In Leipzig where there had been a 3 day battle against the Freikorps, the USPD vote in 1920 was 39 per cent compared to only 21 per cent for the SPD. In mining towns, like Halle, which had been less politicized before the war, the gap was even larger - 44 per cent versus 16 per cent. The membership of the USPD had grown from 300,000 in early 1919 to 800,000 in the autumn of 1920.

The problem for those who wanted a Soviet style revolution was that even by March 1920 the KPD was only 57,000 strong and of these 16000 were in Chemnitz, in Saxony, where the new chemical factories had radicalized an older tradition. The KPD had very little strength in the Ruhr or in Berlin, where the key conflicts were played out. Chemnitz's joint SPD and KPD Soviet had been overthrown by the Freikorps in August 1919. Hamburg also with a tradition of radical protest was occupied by 10,000 troops between June to December 1919. In Bavaria, Levine had issued his famous phrase that the KPD activists were 'dead men on leave'. The German left problem in the middle of 1920 also became increasingly dominated by the international situation. In July 1920 it looked as if the Russian Red Army might spread the revolution by conquest; at one point it stood on the Vistula five days forced march from Berlin. By August, the attempt at spreading the world revolution to Germany was over. Here the hand of Lenin – and of the Communist International's (Comintern) advice to their German comrades – became first a burden and then an authoritarian block, eventually destroying any independent thinking within the KPD. With Lenin's insistence on affiliation to the Comintern on Bolshevik lines (22) – particularly on a centralized vanguard party – had little appeal to many in the USPD on both right and left. The right USPD, led by Hilferding, which had always looked to a reunification with the SPD and hoped to radicalize its coalition and its socialism ever since the divide of December 1918 went back. (The equivalent in Britain today and its contradictions are replicated by the Labour left's support for Brown).

THE LOST REVOLUTION AND THE SPLIT IN THE LEFT

Nationally the SPD had been in opposition between mid 1920 and May 1921 and again since November 1922. In an atmosphere of renewed crisis, Stresemann built what became called his 'great coalition' (23) across the right, centre and SPD. Four SPD Ministers, including Hilferding, were pulled in. The KPD in 1923 saw that it would be going alone and after the lessons of 1921, called off its part in the general strike. The on-going Bavarian crisis, where there had been other military coup attempts before Hitler's, had led the Bavarian government to declare a State of Emergency in September 1923. Stresemann pushed through an Enabling Act on Oct 13 – the same legislation by which the weak governments of the early 1930s and then Hitler's ruled. To appease the right, even the most non Marxist commentators like Carr argue that Stresemann had decided to make Saxony an example. Gaining the excuse of an emergency created by the right, he was going to use it to crush the last remnants of a fighting revolutionary left. Claiming that Zeigner was 'unstable' – an argument used by the Russians in the Prague Spring against Dubcek, and by Pinochet against Allende in 1973 – on October 21 60,000 central Government troops were sent into Saxony, when Zeigner refused to remove his elected Communist ministers from office. For three days the proletarian 700 KPD members in Chemnitz fought against overwhelming odds. Zeigner was put in prison: as Carr points out this was an act of dubious legality as he had been elected by a legitimate Saxon Parliament. An insurrection in Hamburg, which had failed to hear the national KPD call to pull out of any further putsch style activity, went bloodily ahead and made the name of its leader, Thalheimer, who was later to be the subservient Stalinist KPD leader from 1925. In November '23 the KPD was banned (though re-instated in March 1924, just before the May elections where it gained 4 million votes). The second revolutionary wave of 1921-3 drew to a close as the Employers Federation in November unilaterally ended the main economic gain for the workers of November 1918 – the 8 hour day. By 1926 1 in 3 KPD members was unemployed (24).

After the events of 1918-23 the German left was irreversibly split. The rump of the SPD both under Weimar and in most of the post war era has always been in a minority in the formal political arena. The split set the tramlines that created the SPD/KPD divisions in the 1920s and 30s; continued with the divisions between East and West after 1945 and remain to this day with the modern neo-Liberal SPD's refusal to go into alliance with the Greens and PDS. Troeltsch argued that the SPD had refused to adopt the promised child of revolution because it had come from their point of view from a miscarriage. It was a 'stillbirth' and could be written off as an imported 'bolshevism'. The defeat for ordinary Germans between 1918-23 was a price the whole world would pay (25).

Haffner argues that the proof of the reality of the revolution of November 1918 was the rivers of blood that then flowed to defeat it. The real heroes of November 1918 - the German working class – has never politically recovered from the blow. The most ferocious repression of the modern working class in Western Europe had been put in place by a government that called itself socialist. Franz Mehring, the German biographer of Karl Marx, died of a broken heart in March 1919, rather like Keir Hardie in 1915 in Britain. He concluded that 'no government had ever sunk as low' as that of the SPD after 1918. Social democracy, as we now can see with New Labour, has been 'domesticated by Capital for its own purposes' (26).

END NOTES

1. Marx, K. Class Struggles in France in Surveys From Exile, Political Writings Volume 2. London, Penguin Books 1973 p 35-6.
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2. Kundera, M. 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. 1978; This ed London, Faber & Faber 1982 p 3.
3. See Teich, M. Bohemia in History. Cambridge University Press 1998. The Hussites were 'the Reformation before the Reformations' p 79.
4. Marx, K. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in Political Writings Vol 2 (1973) p 146. This quote also forms the beginning of this piece which includes two other famous references: first, to events in world history occurring twice – as tragedy and farce. 1918-23 in Germany was a tragedy. Before this quote on the dead is a famous 'materialist' definition: 'men make their own history but not of their own free will;...under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted'.
5. I have borrowed the term from the best study of the period even if overlaid with for me too much Leninism, Harman, C. The Lost Revolution. Germany 1918-23. London, Bookmarks 1982.
6. See Nettel, P Rosa Luxemburg who stresses Rosa's relative pessimism about the prospects of a German Revolution in 1918/9 from the Summer of 1918 p 437-68.
7. The CDU/CSU/SPD coalition under Angela Merkel as Chancellor repeats the grand coalition of the 1920s and of 1966-9. Unlike the CDU, which owes its present form to the post 1945 re-structuring the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria has origins in the struggle in Munich in 1918-23. Die Linke – the Left – founded on 16 June 2007 has replaced the PDS which had in turn replaced the SED. This 'Socialist Unity' Party stressing a re-united socialism (after the divide of 1918) was the ruling party in the East from 1949 - 89. Die Linke has attracted both ex (left) SPD and PDS members. It has done well in Berlin (where it jointly rules with the SPD) Bremen and Hamburg, taking 7.5 percent in the June 2009 EU vote and argues for German troops out of Afghanistan.
8. Garton Ash, T. We The People. The Revolution of 1989. London, Granta 1990. The phrase is used here for the East European Revolutions, as seen by Garton Ash in 'Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw'. It makes no reference to 1918 as far as I can see apart from the claim that this was the 'first peaceful revolution in German history' (p69). As we shall see, this doubly distorts 1918 which was largely peaceful until Noske and the Freikorps got to work. It also makes one wonder on its twentieth anniversary what kind of 'revolution' 1989 really was. See also my article on France. And Garton-Ash. History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s. London Allen Lane 1999. This is an important idea, but as I try to briefly show Garton Ash's efforts fall well short of what we need.

9. Earlier German history and the later rise of Nazism is dealt with in more detail in Wilde (2006) chapter 3 p 63, 69-82.

10. The quote is from Harman p 10. On Barcelona in 1936 see the article on Spain.

11. Beware of the modernising historians on these events. So Evans, R.J. The Coming of the Third Reich London Penguin 2003 sees November as a 'descent into chaos' (p 73-4). Who defines it thus and why? He also tells the story of Raimund Pretzel - the actual name of Sebastian Haffner (who wrote his book – below - under a journalist's pseudonym). He notes Haffner's book on Defying Hitler London, Phoenix 2003, but not his work on the lost revolution.

Even worse, for example, is Fulbrook, M. Divided Nation. A Concise History of Germany 1918-90. Oxford University Press, 1992 p 25. She speaks of the Kiel sailors who 'mutinied' to 'save their own skins'. This throwaway line is factually incorrect. The sailors saw through what the Navy command was attempting (ordered back out to sea to continue fighting). They were not just trying to save their lives – but many others and they did not stop there – but went on to be the crucial opening force in the attempt to create a far more participative democracy in Germany. Some lost their lives in the later process. There is barely a word in Fulbrook's opening – handily dated from 1918 – so that the carnage after 1914 can be avoided. No words there then for the millions who lost their lives for German militarism and authoritarianism which the sailors were now fighting – knowing that the leaders of the last equivalent protest in 1917 had been shot. The implicit acceptance that the authorities were in the right and that the sailors were merely trying to save their skins is a breathtaking piece of imperial arrogance and ideological collusion.

12. Fowkes, B. Communism in Germany Under Weimar. London Macmillan 1984 p 8-13, 19, 33- 66.

13. Harman p 21-2, 29-34, Haffner p 11, 26-9.

14. See Schorske, C. E. German Social Democracy 1905-17. The Development of the Great Schism. Harvard University Press, 1955 p 285-91. One of his concluding comments is that the 'German Revolution was fought out within the working class' (p 323).

15. Jones, N.H. Hitler's Heralds. The Story of the Freikorps. 1918-23. New York, Dorset Press, 1987 p 7-24, One General claimed that 'our armies are a prey to anarchy' (p 24). Noske dominates Jones' story of the SPD's relationship to the Freikorps.

16. Breitman, R. German Socialism and Weimar Democracy. Univ of North Carolina Press, 1981 p 26,37-9. Luxemburg quotes are Fowkes p 19 and Harman p 96.

17. Jones describes the Berlin demonstration filling the area from the Tiergarten to the Alexander Platz. p 52. Harman/Haffner p 73-85.

18. Sadly even the latest English historian on Hitler 1889-1936. Hubris. London, Penguin 2001. Ian Kershaw, falls into the same trap; even using the 'Spartacus uprising' as the cause of the divide between the SPD and KPD.

19. Harman p 111-49, Fowkes p 25-31, Breitman p 44-59, Haffner p 177.
20. On the peasant leagues and then the much later vote build up for Hitler see Wilde (2006) Chapter 3.
21. On Bavaria see Haffner p 169- 76, Jones Quotes p 178, 186, Harman p 159- 69.
22. Lenin, V. I. Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder This Ed London, Lawrence & Wishart 1947. Written in March/April 1920 it is also subtitled 'An Attempt at a Popular Discussion on Marx's Strategy and Tactics'. Coming out of the heat of the Russian Civil War with its 'iron discipline' aimed especially at the German and Italian movements Lenin succeeded in making organization and tactics a more divisive issue. On the SPD, Breitman p 67-9; on Leipzig, Jones p 179.
23. Carr, W. A History of Germany. 1815-1990. London, Arnold This Ed 1991 p 274.
24. Fowkes p 119-24,138. When I was a young student my earliest analysis of Nazi Germany stemmed from Alan Bullock's work on Hitler: A Study in Tyranny London, Odhams 1952. I swallowed then the thesis that the German left resistance after Hitler's rise to power had collapsed easily. This built the myth that somehow the Communists - or even the Socialists - had no deep roots in German society (whereas Nazism had) and that the proper internal opposition to come from the Church and then the army from the late 1930s to the 1944 bomb attempt on Hitler. Since my early Christian education also stressed Bonhoeffer's role in this, it added to the story of the Resistance Church. In fact out of a KPD membership of around 250,000 (bigger than today's Labour party in Britain), up to 150,000 were arrested or persecuted, 25,000 had been executed or murdered. Recovering from the shock of 1933, it had been crushed in blood by 1935. See Merson, A. Communist Resistance in Nazi Germany. London, Lawrence & Wishart 1985 particularly p 309.
25. Claudin, F. The Communist Movement from Comintern to Cominform. 1970. This Ed London, Penguin 1975. Claudin argues that the Comintern subordinated other national revolutions to 'Russian reasons of State' while the KPD, criticized by the Russians in 1933 'had not taken a single step without strictly obeying orders' (after 1925) p 3, 130.
26. The quotes here are from Haffner p 201 and see p 149-52, 195-201.