

Between Stalin and Hitler Communists in Inter-War Germany

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The two individuals most closely associated with the German Communist party (KPD) in the period following the First World War, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were murdered by right-wing extremists in January 1919 — the very month the party was founded.

The KPD's internal feud between its Right and Left wings quickly reduced the party to a localised rump, which enabled the Bolsheviks to use the Communist International (Comintern), of which the KPD was the largest member, to develop a mass German party on Moscow's terms. To do this, the Bolsheviks negotiated with the Independent Socialist party (USPD), without consultation with the KPD.

The USPD had been founded in 1917, as a consequence of opposition in the Social Democratic party (SPD) to participation in the war effort. Between 1918 and 1920 the USPD experienced a strong electoral and membership upsurge. This, however, was in contrast to the party's internal instability: unresolved questions about joining the Comintern, and the possibility of a 'second revolution' bringing the proletariat to power, increasingly split the party.

The Bolsheviks also took advantage of this split and applied pressure to the party's expanding pro-Comintern Left wing, the culmination of which, in December 1920, was an alliance between the USPD and the KPD to form the United Communist Party of Germany (VKPD) with 350,000 members.

Rosa Luxemburg warned the nascent German Communist party that adopting this name, and modelling itself on the Bolsheviks, would prove to be disastrous for Marxist socialism in Germany. As Norman LaPorte shows, her concern was prophetic.

Economic developments had created the social basis for Left-wing radicalism in Germany. Rapid industrialisation, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, was accelerated by the demands of the war economy. This produced a 'new' working class of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, who had not traditionally been part of the social democratic labour movement. Draconian working practices and impoverishment created a seed-bed of discontent. Significantly, these workers were not attracted to the gradualism and moderation of the SPD and gave their support to the USPD — and later to the VKPD.

Many younger workers were attracted to communism. Their conversion to political activism was underlined by the fact that the

impetus to join the VKPD came from the USPD's rank-and-file membership in the centres of heavy industry, rather than from experienced activists. Skilled workers in the VKPD felt threatened by changes in the skill structure of the workforce and were also affected by changes in demand. It was, therefore, not only the attraction of the Russian Revolution, but also an increasing rejection of the 'Weimar compromise', which translated into communist support among radicalised workers.

The 'years of struggle'

Within the young VKPD there was a sociological basis for both immediate revolutionary action and for the longer-term recruitment of social democrats to communism, to provide the party with a majority of the working class for revolution. The former was located among the 'new' working class of unskilled workers and the latter among traditionally organised skilled workers. However, the acceptance of Bolshevik conditions of entry to the Comintern made the KPD a Leninist party. While the tactical rhetoric could veer between immediate revolution and longer-term recruitment, the strategy was to destroy the rival SPD by showing its leaders to be opposed to proletarian interests. More importantly, the Comintern was dominated by Russians, who exploited the KPD as a foreign contingent to act in the interests of Moscow.

In early 1921 the VKPD, under its leader Paul Levi, implemented a 'moderate' policy of

communist constituency which must be won from Fascism for revolution.

In autumn 1923 the government was replaced by a 'Great Coalition', which ended passive resistance in favour of a negotiated settlement to the question of reparations. The Comintern responded with a sudden U-turn in its policy. The focus of the KPD's strategy was switched from the Ruhr to Saxony, where the communist leadership under Brandler was insisting that the United Front tactic had produced a revolutionary situation.

The Soviet Politburo, in particular Trotsky, worked out a plan for a German Revolution, which was endorsed at a meeting of the Comintern in September. When it became clear that the KPD did not have a majority of the working class behind it, the Soviet advisers ordered a 'retreat'. But the message was not received and passed on in time and the last communist uprising in Germany took place in Hamburg, on a very limited scale.

In the KPD's 'years of struggle', both uprisings had been ordered from Moscow, demonstrating the German party's domination by the Comintern. The KPD had remained a revolutionary party — but the prospects for revolution were weighed on the scales of Soviet state interests.

Stalinisation

The most important development in German communism between 1924 and 1929 was the 'Stalinisation' of the KPD, which paralleled events in Russia. This was made easier by conflicts in the leadership of the KPD, as each faction wanted to dominate the party and purge its opponents.

Initially Brandler served as a scapegoat for revolutionary failure, allowing the Comintern to deny its own role. But the events of 1923 had radicalised the KPD, bringing the Left to prominence under Ruth Fischer. The new leadership developed a 'social fascist' thesis, which rejected alliance with social democrats. However, pressure from the Comintern finally saw the re-introduction of the 'moderate' United Front policy. The Comintern finally replaced the Left leadership in autumn 1925, after its representative at a secret meeting during the 10th Party Congress was received with shouts of 'Push off! Go back to Moscow!' Russia's ability to intervene was enhanced by the fact that it provided the main focus of integration in an increasingly divided party.

The failure of the Left's policies also helped the Comintern inaugurate a new leadership under Thaelmann and Meyer. A 'moderate' policy was now pursued, which saw a return to work in the trade unions and parliamentary cooperation with the SPD, particularly at local level. The KPD again gradually increased its influence and membership.

By the mid-1920s the KPD's political strategy was inextricably linked to defence of the Soviet Union. 'Workers' Delegations' of non-communists visited the 'Socialist Fatherland', and social and cultural organisations were established in Germany with the aim of gaining wider

sympathy for communism. An alleged danger of war was also used to oppose Germany's friendlier relations with the West.

Despite its qualified successes, this policy ended with Stalin's change of policy in Russia. An attempted 'palace revolution' by the Centre and Right factions failed to prevent the KPD from following the Russian lead. By 1929 only the Stalin faction remained.

Political Stalinisation was accompanied by organisational changes, which removed regional influence altogether. By the late 1920s, power was exercised by a Secretariat which derived its authority solely from Moscow.

Although the KPD's policies were increasingly determined in Moscow, economic developments in Germany allowed the KPD to become a vehicle for the rejection of the 'Weimar compromise' among insecure workers. Industrial rationalisation, utilising modern machinery and assembly-line techniques, not only created structural unemployment as a consequence of increased productivity when markets were stagnant, but also threatened to downgrade skilled workers. The KPD attracted both unemployed and skilled workers — whose skill and social status was under threat.

The search for political expression of socio-economic anxiety was constant in Germany during the 1920s. The different groups of workers within the KPD, with their different ambitions, did make it easier to switch between radical and moderate policies; but it was the party's Stalinisation which was central to its development. Equally, the KPD's dependence on the Comintern was tightened in the 1920s because, in a non-revolutionary environment, the party relied on its connection with Russia to maintain its revolutionary identity.

The end of Weimar

To prevent further opposition to the imposition of an 'ultra-Left' policy, communists on the Right of the party were purged throughout the communist movement. After the KPD's 12th Party Congress in 1929, the slightest opposition to Moscow resulted in expulsion.

The 6th World Congress of the Comintern in 1928 provided a revolutionary justification. The final period of capitalist collapse was announced, in which differences between social democracy and fascism would diminish. To prevent the rise of fascism, the masses were to be organised in a 'proletarian united front' under communist leadership. Central to this was an all-out attack on the SPD, which was said to be the 'social mainstay' of the capitalist system.

With the impact of the Great Depression, the KPD's influence increased. Between 1930 and 1932 the party's vote rose from 4.6 to 5.9 million. However, the KPD remained organisationally weak. In 1932 its membership had risen to over 300,000 — but 85% were unemployed, the membership turnover was high and there were too few active functionaries.

In 1931 the vigorous opposition to the SPD

Rosa Luxemburg

proselytising non-communist workers under a 'United Front'. This was abruptly interrupted when Comintern agents arrived in Germany and put pressure on the KPD leadership to impose a 'radical' policy, involving an uprising. In essence the uprising was to serve as a German diversion to the focusing of world attention on Russian problems, most particularly the Kronstadt Revolt. It was also hoped that an uprising in Germany would bring down the Fehrenbach government — which was about to concede to the Allies' demands for war reparations, thereby creating the basis for a Western *rapprochement*.

The central plank of Soviet foreign policy was to avoid this. The KPD's new leadership, under Heinrich Brandler, and the influx of radicals into the VKPD from the USPD, made the Comintern policy easy to implement. However, the 'March Action', as the uprising in Central Germany became known, proved to be a damp squib, devoid of German explosive charge. Importantly, the uprising's lack of resonance in Germany produced a membership exodus, particularly in the former strongholds of the USPD.

The 3rd World Congress of the Comintern (1921) initiated a 'moderate' policy in Germany, as a counterpart to Moscow's foreign policy. The new keynote of caution was heightened in 1922, when the Rapallo Treaty secured the two nations' trade and diplomatic relations, and initiated secret military cooperation. The KPD was not to endanger friendly inter-state relations in a world hostile to Bolshevism. It was as a result of this forced 'moderation' that the radical Left grew stronger within the KPD.

In January 1923 the French government used the pretext of Germany's defaulting on reparations to occupy the Ruhr. For the first five months of the occupation the KPD did not alter its 'moderate' policy, despite hyper-inflation and mass unemployment shaking the country's social fabric. When the policy did change, it set out to harness nationalistic feeling to prevent the German government from reaching agreement with France. This was justified in a convoluted way: the Comintern stated that capitalism in the post-war crisis had impoverished the lower middle classes, making them part of the

extended as far as cooperating with the Nazis, in an attempt to oust the SPD-led Prussian government. However, the violence of the Nazi Storm Troopers (SA) disgusted many communists and made the policy difficult to enforce. At local level there was a tendency to cooperate more readily with socialists. However, this never developed into an adequate response to the rise of Hitler, because Stalinist domination of the party, through the Comintern, forbade such collaboration.

The employment of nationalist propaganda brought the KPD into close contact with the Nazis, earning them the name 'Kozis' (Communazis) among socialists. Leading communists spoke at Nazi rallies and, in the 1932 Berlin transport strike, pickets from both parties stood side by side. This aggressive line was partly off-set at local level by communists organising demonstrations of the unemployed outside town halls.

The 'ultra-Left' policy in Germany was made possible because mass unemployment in the 1930s gave sociological shape to the political division in the workers' movement. The unemployed predominantly voted communist as a rejection of Weimar, apparently justifying the KPD hard-line. However, the KPD's political strategy was not a response to the developments in German society; it was dictated solely by the requirements of the Soviet Union.

The Nazi era

The Nazi seizure of power did not change KPD policy. It was still claimed that the SPD was the 'social mainstay' of the capitalist system. Offers of 'united' action were addressed not to the SPD directly, but only to its membership; the KPD continued to insist that revolutionary developments were accelerating. Under the strain of these events, however, the KPD all but collapsed; a minority went over to the SA, while many participated in spontaneous demonstrations with the socialists. Two of the three party leaders,

Lenin's opening speech to the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern, July 1920.

Remmele and Neumann, were purged for their criticisms of the Comintern; Thaelmann was already in a concentration camp.

Arrests during the spring of 1933 decimated the KPD's functionary core, which had carried out party policy. Central control of the party, enforcing the Comintern line, made matters worse. In the semi-legal elections of March 1933, the KPD polled a significant vote; but by the autumn, conditions in Germany had become so precarious that the KPD leadership fled to exile in Paris.

There was now another change in the communist line in Germany, which again stemmed from the needs of Soviet foreign policy. In particular the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 1934 threatened Soviet security. At the Comintern's 7th World Congress in 1935 a 'Popular Front' policy was announced, which was to include not only socialists, but all opponents of fascism. A strong commitment to the previous line prevented a smooth change. The KPD's leadership split into a majority faction, defending the previous ultra-Left policy, and a minority, led by Pieck and Ulbricht, which had Comintern support. Opposition to the new line was finally ended by a change of leadership at the 'Brussels Conference' (1935).

The 'Popular Front' policy was significant only for communists in exile. It aimed to gain a broader base of sympathy for the Soviet Union. In Germany, neither before nor after the change, did resistance affect state policy. Some of these changes meant nothing to communists in Germany, many of whom first heard of them in 1945. The new line did bring certain successes, in particular the 'Popular Front' governments in France and Spain. But a more moderate policy abroad was accompanied by the 'Great Terror' in Russia — which killed more leading German communists than Hitler did.

The 'Hitler-Stalin Pact' of 1939 brought a return to the 'ultra-Left' policy. When war broke out, national communist parties were instructed

Karl Liebknecht

not to become involved in a dispute between 'imperialists'. It is remarkable that Stalin again won widespread support, following the Nazi invasion of 1941 and the defeat of Nazism in 1945. The myth of the Russian Revolution continued to blind 'fellow travellers'.

Conclusions

A Communist Revolution was never a realistic possibility in Germany in the 1920s and '30s, for the following reasons:

- (1) Conditions in Germany could not sustain a mass revolutionary party. This made the KPD increasingly dependent on the Comintern which, by 1921, was acting solely in the interests of Soviet foreign policy.
- (2) A paradox emerged: to gain mass support the KPD needed to be associated with the Soviet Union — but this prevented the party from using its influence in the interests of German workers.
- (3) Nonetheless, support for the KPD grew as social insecurity removed the Weimar Republic's legitimacy in the minds of unemployed and depressed workers. However, because the KPD did not respond to conditions in Germany, it became like a huge red balloon — bloated, but with only a thin membrane holding it together.
- (4) The sacrifice of the KPD to Soviet state interests was heightened when the Nazis came to power. The KPD was decimated, while Soviet Russia continued to maintain trade and diplomatic relations with Hitler.

Further reading

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 Rosenhaft, E. (1983) *Beating the Fascists? The German Communist Party and Political Violence*, Cambridge University Press.

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