

The German October: The missed revolution of 1923

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In 1923, a deep economic and political crisis shook German society to its foundations. To mark the centenary, half a dozen new books have been published about this “year on the precipice,” written by well-known historians and journalists such as Volker Ullrich and Peter Longerich. Under the present conditions of high inflation, fierce class conflicts and escalating wars, the events at that time are again of burning contemporary relevance.

The new books all follow the same narrative: as a result of hyperinflation, impoverishment and radicalisation, the democratic republic was endangered by attempts to overthrow it from left and right and was finally saved by the courageous intervention of those with political and military responsibility.

If one studies the events more closely—and some good material can be found in the books for this purpose—a completely different picture emerges. The social crisis shredded the democratic facade of the Weimar Republic and showed what it really was: a cover for the continued dictatorship of the German Empire's old elites—the big industrialists, the big landowners and the military.

Reich President Friedrich Ebert, a Social Democrat, “saved” the republic by unleashing the Reichswehr (army) against insurgent workers, forcibly deposing the left-wing Social Democratic governments in Thuringia and Saxony, and transferring executive power in the Reich to the Supreme Commander of the Reichswehr, General von Seeckt, thus effectively establishing a military dictatorship. The establishment of such a dictatorship was also the goal pursued by Hitler and General Ludendorff in November 1923, when they organised a coup in Munich.

After Gustav Stresemann's government had succeeded in bringing inflation under control through a currency reform at the end of the year, and the economy had recovered somewhat thanks to American aid, von Seeckt returned executive power to the civilian government. But that was just an interlude. When the next major crisis overtook Germany with the Wall Street crash of 1929, the democratic façade finally collapsed.

For two years, the Centre Party politician Brüning ruled with emergency decrees, which were approved by the Reich president. As the crisis continued to escalate, the ruling class was no longer satisfied with a temporary transfer of executive power to the military, but appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor and empowered him as dictator. 1923 proved to be a prelude to the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933.

There was an alternative. If the working class had seized power in 1923 and disempowered and expropriated the old elites, German and world history would have taken a different course. The opportunity to do so existed. Hyperinflation—at its peak, a dollar was worth 6 trillion marks—polarized society and radicalized the working class and the middle classes. It plunged workers into abject poverty and wiped out the savings of the petty bourgeoisie, while crisis profiteers, such as the great industrialist Hugo Stinnes, amassed enormous fortunes.

The mood was revolutionary. The Communist Party grew at the expense of the Social Democrats. Its membership increased to 300,000 and it had

the majority of socialist-minded workers behind it. But its leadership was not up to the task. At times it adapted to nationalist moods and took a long time to understand the revolutionary situation. It was not until the summer, when a general strike forced the government of Wilhelm Cuno to resign, that it began to plan an uprising in close consultation with the Communist International in Moscow.

But when left-wing Social Democrats spoke out against the prepared uprising at a works council congress in Chemnitz on October 21, the KPD cancelled it at the last minute. It only broke out in Hamburg, where it was suppressed within three days.

The consequences of the failure of the socialist uprising, the “German October,” went far beyond Germany. In the Soviet Union, where the working class had followed the progress of the German revolution with hope, its failure strengthened the conservative bureaucracy. In the same month, the Left Opposition was founded, which took up the fight against the bureaucracy.

The “lessons of October” played an important role in the struggle between the bureaucracy and opposition. When Trotsky drew the lessons of the German defeat in a pamphlet with this title, he was violently attacked by Stalin and his allies. Ten years later, the disastrous policies Stalin imposed on the KPD would pave the way for Hitler to come to power.

The new books about 1923 largely ignore the importance of the “German October” and its failure. They dismiss it with a few lines or portray it as a hopeless coup attempt by a small group that had no support among the masses.

Even Volker Ullrich, who devotes an entire chapter to the “German October” in his otherwise readable book *Germany 1923: The Year on the Abyss*, concludes this chapter with the rejection of the insurrection plans by representatives of the SPD in Chemnitz, “it became clear that both the Comintern and the German Communists had misjudged the mood in the working class.” The KPD headquarters then drew “the only possible consequence” and abandoned the insurrection plan.

The following article, based on a lecture given in the summer of 2007 and first published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on October 22, 2008, shows that this is not true. The “German October” failed not because of the “mood of the masses,” which was revolutionary in every respect, but because of the political mistakes and hesitation of the KPD and the Communist International under the leadership of Zinoviev, who was at the time closely allied with Stalin.

The article shows that two conditions must be met for a successful socialist revolution: an objectively revolutionary situation that leaves the working class no other way out than the overthrow of capitalism, and a revolutionary leadership that is anchored in the working class and is equal to its tasks.

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In 1923 an extremely favourable revolutionary situation developed in Germany. The German Communist Party (KPD), in close collaboration

with the Communist International (Comintern), prepared an insurrection—and then cancelled it at the last minute, on October 21. Trotsky later spoke of “a classic demonstration of how it is possible to miss a perfectly exceptional revolutionary situation of world-historic importance.”^[1]

The German defeat of 1923 had far-reaching implications. It allowed the German bourgeoisie to consolidate its rule and stabilise the situation for six years. When the next major crisis erupted in 1929, the working class was thoroughly disoriented by the Stalinist leadership of the KPD. This led directly to the fateful events that culminated in the coming to power of Hitler. Internationally, the defeat of the German October perpetuated the isolation of the Soviet Union and thus constituted an important psychological and material factor that strengthened the rising Stalinist bureaucracy.

Today’s lecture will focus on the strategic and tactical lessons of the German October; lessons that rapidly became a heated matter of dispute between the Left Opposition and the Troika led by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev. Before dealing with these issues, it is necessary to give an account of the events of 1923.

Germany in 1923

All the basic issues that drove German imperialism into the First World War in 1914—access to markets and raw materials for its dynamic industry, the reorganisation of Europe under its hegemony—remained unresolved in 1923. In addition to having lost the war at a tremendous cost of human life and material resources, Germany was obliged by the Versailles treaty to pay immense reparations to its major rival, France, and to other imperialist powers.

The immediate post-war years, 1918 to 1921, were characterised by a series of revolutionary upheavals that could be suppressed only by the joint efforts of Social Democracy and right-wing paramilitary forces. On January 11, 1923, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr and reignited the political and social crisis in Germany.

The French government justified the military occupation of the heart of the German steel and coal industry with the claim that Germany had not met its obligations to pay war reparations. The German government—a far-right regime led by the industrialist Wilhelm Cuno and tolerated by the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—reacted by calling for passive resistance. In practice, this meant that the local authorities and the companies in the Ruhr boycotted the occupation forces. The government continued to pay the wages of the local administration and offered subsidies to the coal and steel barons to compensate for their losses.

The result of these enormous expenditures and of the absence of urgently needed coal and steel from the Ruhr was the complete collapse of the German currency. The mark, already highly inflated, was trading at 21,000 marks per US dollar at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, when inflation reached its peak, the rate was almost 6 trillion marks to a dollar—a figure with 12 zeros.

The social and political impact of this hyperinflation was explosive. It polarised German society in an unprecedented way. For workers, inflation was life threatening. When they collected their wages at the end of the week, they were hardly worth the paper the huge sums were printed on. Wives waited at the factory gates in the evening to rush to the next shop and buy something before the money had lost its value the next day.

To give just one example: An egg cost 300 marks on February 3. On August 5, it cost 12,000 marks and three days later, 30,000 marks. Even though wages were adapted to inflation, the average wage measured in dollars fell by 50 percent in the course of six months. Simultaneously, the

number of unemployed exploded—from less than 100,000 at the beginning of the year to 3.5 million unemployed and 2.3 million short-time workers at the end of the year.

But the workers were not the only ones ruined by hyperinflation. Those living on a pension lost all means of subsistence. Those who had saved some money lost everything overnight. In order to survive, many had to sell their house, their jewellery and everything else they had saved in the course of their lives—only to find out the next day that the revenue was worthless.

Arthur Rosenberg, who wrote the first authoritative history of the Weimar Republic in 1928, states: “The systematic expropriation of the German middle classes, not by a socialist government but in a bourgeois state dedicated to the defence of private property, was one of the biggest robberies in world history.”^[2]

On the other side of the social gap there was a group of speculators, profiteers and industrialists who made a fortune out of inflation. Whoever had access to foreign currency or gold was able to export German commodities abroad and reap super-profits due to the low wages. These were the forces behind the Cuno government. The most famous of them was Hugo Stinnes, who bought 1,300 factories and made billions in this period. He was also a major political operator behind the scenes.

The social polarisation and the collapse of the middle classes brought about a sharp political polarisation.

The SPD rapidly lost both members and voters, and disintegrated. Since the overthrow of the Kaiser by the November Revolution of 1918, the SPD had been the main pillar of bourgeois rule in Germany. In 1918 it had aligned itself with the military high command and the right-wing paramilitary *Freikorps* to repress the proletarian revolution and murder its most outstanding leaders—Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

The SPD was the only party in Germany which unconditionally defended the Weimar Republic. All other bourgeois parties would have preferred a more authoritarian form of rule. Friedrich Ebert, a leader of the SPD, was the first president of the Weimar Republic. He occupied the presidential office until his death in February 1925, i.e., during the entire period dealt with in this lecture.

The counterrevolutionary role of the SPD repelled many workers and brought them to the Communist Party, the KPD. But at the beginning of 1923, the trade unions and layers of more conservative workers still supported the SPD. With the impact of inflation, this changed rapidly.

The historian Rosenberg, a leading member of the KPD in 1923 (he later joined the SPD), writes: “During the course of 1923 the SPD steadily lost in strength... The trade unions in particular, which had always been the main pillar of SPD influence, were in full disintegration... Millions of German workers no longer wanted to hear anything about the old trade union tactics and left the associations. ... The disintegration of the trade unions was synonymous with the paralysis of the SPD.”^[3]

As the SPD disintegrated, Social Democratic workers listened carefully to what the Communists had to say. Inside the SPD, a left wing developed, ready to collaborate with the KPD. As we will see, coalition governments of the left SPD and the KPD were formed in Saxony and Thuringia for a short period in October. As the membership of the SPD decreased, the influence of the KPD grew. Its membership rose from 225,000 to 295,000 within one year.

There were no national elections between 1920 and 1924, so there are no reliable figures on the KPD’s electoral support. But an election held in the small rural state of Mecklenburg-Strelitz gives an indication. In 1920, the SPD received 23,000 votes and the Independent SPD (whose majority later joined the KPD) received 2,000 votes. The KPD did not stand. In 1923, the SPD and KPD both received approximately 11,000 votes. In the Saar, a mining area previously dominated by Catholicism, the KPD increased its vote between 1922 and 1924 from 14,000 to 39,000.

Inside the trade unions, Communist influence was likewise growing at

the expense of the SPD. When the delegates to the congress of the German Metal Workers Union were elected in Berlin, the KPD far outnumbered the SPD. It received 54,000 votes, while the SPD obtained 22,000—less than half the amount of the KPD. According to one KPD leader, in June the party had 500 factions in the 1.6 million-strong union. Some 720,000 metal workers supported the Communists. The West German historian Hermann Weber concludes in his book on the history of the KPD: “The year 1923 showed a steadily growing influence of the KPD, which had probably the majority of the workers oriented towards Socialism behind it.”^[4]

The KPD before 1923

In 1923, the KPD was everything but a unified party. It was only four years old, but had already gone through tumultuous events, several changes in leadership, splits and fusions and was affected by intense internal divisions.

Its most outstanding theoretical and political leader was without any doubt Rosa Luxemburg, who was murdered just two weeks after the founding of the party—an irreparable loss. Luxemburg was a revolutionary of enormous courage and integrity. Her writings on revisionism and her struggle against the rightward shift of German Social Democracy—which she saw earlier and more sharply than Lenin—belong to the best that have ever been written in Marxist literature.

But like Trotsky—and for much longer than he—Luxemburg did not draw the sharp organisational conclusions that Lenin drew from his understanding of revisionism. Even after August 4, 1914, when she formed the *Gruppe Internationale*, later called *Spartakusbund*, Luxemburg did not formally break with the SPD. Her slogan was: “Don’t leave the party, change the course of the party.”

In 1915, the *Spartakusbund* rejected Lenin’s call for a new international at the Zimmerwald Conference, and as late as in March, 1919 the KPD delegate to the first congress of the Third International, Hugo Eberlein, abstained in the vote on founding the new international. He had been instructed by the KPD to vote against, but was then persuaded in Moscow of the correctness of the decision—so he abstained.

When the Independent SPD (USPD) was formed in 1917 by SPD members of the Reichstag [German parliament] who had been expelled from the SPD because they refused to vote for new credits for the war, Luxemburg and the *Spartakusbund* joined this centrist organisation as a faction. They did so despite the fact that amongst the USPD’s most prominent leaders was Karl Kautsky, as well as Eduard Bernstein, the theoretical leader of German revisionism.

Luxemburg justified this in an article asserting that the *Spartakusbund* had not joined the USPD in order to dissolve itself in a spineless opposition. “It has joined the new party—confident in a mounting aggravation of the social situation and working for it—in order to push the new party forward, in order to be its hortative conscience... and in order to take the real leadership of the party,” she wrote.^[5]

Luxemburg sharply attacked the Bremen Left—led by Karl Radek and Paul Frölich, Luxemburg’s later biographer—who refused to join the USPD and described it as a waste of time. She denounced their advocacy of an independent party as *Kleinküchensystem* (a system of small kitchens) and wrote: “It is a pity that this system of small kitchens forgets the main thing, namely the objective circumstances, which in the final analysis are decisive and will be decisive for the attitude of the masses... It is not enough that a handful of people have the best recipe in their pocket and know how to lead the masses. The thinking of the masses must be liberated from the past traditions of 50 years. This is only possible in a big

process of continuous inner self-criticism of the movement as a whole.”^[6]

It was only in December 1918, one month after three leaders of the USPD had joined a provisional government led by the right-wing SPD leaders Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann, that the *Spartakusbund* broke with the USPD. The government of Ebert became the executioner of the November revolution. It soon aligned itself with the military command. The USPD, which had done its job, was no longer needed.

At the end of the year, in the midst of fierce revolutionary struggles, the KPD was finally founded by the *Spartakusbund*, the Bremen Left and a number of other left-wing organisations.

The delay in founding a genuine revolutionary party, independent of the Social Democrats and the centrists, accounts to some extent for the many ultra-left tendencies that mushroomed in Germany in the early 1920s. The betrayal of the SPD—first in 1914, when it supported the war, and then in 1918, when it drowned the revolution in blood—led to a sharp reaction amongst workers, who, in the absence of a resolute, Bolshevik type organisation, turned to different forms of left radicalism or even anarchism. This problem was to bedevil the KPD for a long time.

At the founding congress of the KPD, Luxemburg was in a minority on the question of participating in the elections to the national assembly. The majority was opposed. And there were many more ultra-left tendencies outside the party.

In April 1920, after an armed workers’ uprising in the Ruhr, the left wing split from the party and formed the KAPD, promoting ultra-left, anti-parliamentarian and anarchist ideas. The KAPD took a considerable section of the KPD membership with it—according to some sources, the majority. But it disintegrated rapidly, as it had no coherent programme. The Comintern, with some success, tried to win back the healthy sections of the KAPD and even invited it to one of its congresses.

However, in 1919 it was mainly the USPD that profited from the shift to the left of the working class. In the 1920 Reichstag election, the SPD received 6 million votes, the USPD 5 million and the KPD 600,000.

The USPD was a classical centrist party. The leadership was moving to the right, intersecting with workers moving to the left. Many workers who supported the USPD admired the Soviet Union. The right-wing leaders of the USPD found themselves increasingly isolated. With its 21 conditions for membership, the Second Congress of the Comintern deepened the divisions inside the USPD.

In December 1920, the majority finally joined the KPD—or VKPD, as it was called for some time. The minority later rejoined the SPD. The fusion with the USPD increased the membership of the KPD by a factor of five and transformed it into a mass party. But the new members also brought with them many problems of the past and the centrist traditions of the USPD.

In March of 1921, a failed uprising in Central Germany—the so-called *Märzaktion*—provoked a new crisis in the ranks of the KPD. After the national government sent police units into the factories to disarm the workers, the KPD and the KAPD called for a general strike and the overthrow of the national government. The uprising was clearly premature. It ended in a bloody defeat.

Approximately 2,000 workers were killed in the fighting and the ferocious repression that followed. As a result, Paul Levi, a close friend of Rosa Luxemburg and a major leader of the party, who had, correctly, opposed the uprising from the beginning, viciously attacked the party in public. He was finally expelled and made his way back into the SPD.

The German March events were at the centre of the debate at the Third Congress of the Comintern, which was held from June 22 to July 21, 1921 in Moscow. Trotsky described the Congress later as a “milestone” and summed up its significance as follows: “It set down the fact that the resources of the communist parties, politically as well as organizationally, were not sufficient for the conquest of power. It advanced the slogan: ‘To the masses,’ that is, to the conquest of power through a *previous conquest*

of the masses, achieved on the basis of the daily life and struggles. For the mass also continues to live its daily life in a revolutionary epoch, even if in a somewhat different manner. ...”^[7]

The Third Congress promoted transitional demands, the tactic of the United Front and the slogan of a Workers’ Government, to win the confidence of workers still supporting the Social Democrats. It insisted on the necessity to work in the unions.

This met with furious resistance from left-wing and ultra-left tendencies inside the KPD, who promoted the so-called “offensive theory” and rejected any form of compromise, as well as parliamentary and trade union work. They were supported by Nikolai Bukharin, later the leader of the Right Opposition, who argued for “an uninterrupted revolutionary offensive.” It was in answer to these tendencies that Lenin wrote his pamphlet “*Left-Wing” Communism—An Infantile Disorder*.”

In studying these conflicts, it is notable that Lenin as well as Trotsky took an extremely patient approach to the different factions in the KPD. They tried to educate, explain, integrate and prevent premature splits. They restrained hotheads on the left and the right who wanted to expel their opponents. They tried to keep Levi in the party, until his provocative behaviour made it impossible.

During the Third Congress, they spent hours discussing in small groups with different factions of the KPD. While they were intransigent towards the infantile left, they also sensed an element of conservatism in the party leadership to which these lefts were reacting. In other words, Lenin and Trotsky tried to develop a tempered, experienced leadership, trained to deal with contradictions and to react rapidly to a changing situation. This was in sharp contrast to the later practices of the Comintern under Stalin.

The Ruhr events

Let us now return to the events of 1923.

One-and-a-half years after the Third Congress of the Comintern the conflicts within the German Communist Party (KPD) were not really resolved. After the occupation of the Ruhr by the French army, the conflict between the leadership majority and the left opposition erupted once again in full force. Differences emerged over the support given by the KPD to a left-wing Social Democratic Party (SPD) government in Saxony and the course to be adopted in the occupied Ruhr.

The party was now led by Heinrich Brandler, a founding member of the *Spartakusbund*. While many former lefts had turned sharply to the right, a new left-wing faction had formed under Ruth Fischer, Arkadi Maslow and—to a lesser extent—Ernst Thälmann. Fischer and Maslow were both young intellectuals who had joined the movement after the war. They had the majority of the important Berlin organisation behind them. Thälmann was a worker who joined the KPD through the Independent SPD (USPD). He was the leader of the KPD in Hamburg.

On January 10, the SPD government in Saxony fell and the KPD conducted a campaign for a united front and a workers’ government. While the majority of the SPD favoured a coalition with bourgeois parties, a left minority was for an alliance with the KPD. The KPD developed a vigorous agitation and published a “workers’ program,” which included among its demands: confiscation of the property of the former royal family; arming the workers; a purge of the judiciary, the police and the administration; calling of a congress of factory councils and control of prices by elected committees.

This found support inside the SPD, where the left wing finally formed a majority. It accepted the “workers’ program” with one exception: the dissolution of the parliament and the convening of a congress of factory councils. On this basis, an SPD government was formed with the support

of the KPD.

This step was supported by the majority of the KPD leadership and by Karl Radek, now a leading figure in the Comintern but fiercely denounced by the KPD left. They saw the support for the government in Saxony not just as a temporal tactical step, to win over Social Democratic workers, but as a political adaptation to the left-wing Social Democrats, whom they considered not less treacherous than the right wing. Their suspicion was not without reason, as later events would show: On October 21, Brandler called off the prepared insurrection because the left Social Democrats were not prepared to support it.

In the Ruhr, the KPD distanced itself clearly from the SPD, which gave full support to the “passive resistance” campaign of the government of Wilhelm Cuno. The Cuno government on its part collaborated with paramilitary gangs, secretly supported by the army, and with openly fascistic elements, encouraging them to commit acts of sabotage against the French occupiers. This attracted right-wingers and fascists from all over Germany to the Ruhr. The SPD found itself in a de facto alliance with these forces.

The KPD denounced the nationalism of the SPD as a repetition of its policy in 1914, when it voted for the war credits, and strongly opposed it. It called for a struggle against the French occupiers and the Berlin government alike. One issue of the *Rote Fahne* carried the headline: “Fight Poincaré and Cuno at the Ruhr and at the Spree.” This line was soon confirmed when workers started to rebel against the unbearable social conditions, protesting against the occupiers, the local industrialists and the Berlin government alike.

But soon the leaders of the KPD left moved in, agitating on party meetings in the Ruhr. Ruth Fischer advocated calling on workers to seize the factories and mines, to take political power and establish a Workers Republic of the Ruhr. This Republic would then become the base for a workers’ army that would “march into Central Germany, seize power in Berlin, and crush once and for all the nationalist counterrevolution.”^[8]

Her line was adventurous, a repetition of that of the March action in 1921. An uprising in the Ruhr would have remained isolated, as no support was prepared in the rest of Germany. Furthermore, the Ruhr was full of paramilitary and fascist forces and the French army would hardly have passively accepted a proletarian uprising. While the French occupiers looked with some sympathy at strikes directed against the German government, it would have been quite a different matter with a proletarian insurrection.

As the faction fight in Germany grew increasingly bitter, Zinoviev, the secretary of the Comintern, invited both sides to Moscow, where a compromise was reached. The Communist International agreed with the support given to the SPD government in Saxony by the KPD, but criticised certain formulations, indicating that this was more than a temporary tactic. It rejected Fischer’s plans for the Ruhr.

The compromise resolution, passed unanimously, gave no indication that the leadership of the Comintern was aware of the growing speed of events in Germany or that it drew any conclusions from it. Quite the opposite, the resolution stated: “The differences arise from the slow speed of revolutionary developments in Germany, and from the objective difficulties to which this leads, simultaneously feeding right and left deviations.”^[9]

The Schlageter line

In June, Radek introduced a new diversion that further disoriented the already confused KPD—the so-called Schlageter line.

The KPD had been concerned for some time about the growth of

fascism in Germany. In October 1922, Mussolini took power in Rome, after a terror campaign of his armed detachments, the *fasci*, against workers' organisations and militant workers.

In Germany, the extreme right had previously been limited to remnants of the imperial army and small anti-Semitic parties. But in 1923 it started to grow and win a social base, even though it was much smaller than Hitler's social base in the 1930s. Agitation against the "November criminals," Jews and foreigners found a hearing amongst declassed petty-bourgeois elements and some impoverished workers affected by the impact of inflation. In the Ruhr, members of the extreme right presented themselves as heroic fighters against the French occupation.

Bavaria in particular, with its large rural areas, developed into a stronghold of the extreme right. After the bloody oppression of the Munich Soviet Republic in 1919 it had turned into a hotbed of opportunistic, fascistic and paramilitary organisations.

On April 7, Albert Schlageter, a member of the Freikorps, was arrested by the French army in Düsseldorf because he had participated in bomb attacks on railway lines. He was sentenced to death by a military court and executed on May 26. The right wing immediately turned him into a martyr. At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in June, Radek proposed that the KPD win over workers and petty-bourgeois elements seduced by the fascists by joining this campaign and adapting to the nationalism of the fascists.

"The petty-bourgeois masses and the intellectuals and technicians who will play a big role in the revolution are in a position of national antagonism to capitalism, which is declassing them," Radek announced. "If we want to be a workers' party that is able to undertake the struggle for power, we have to find a way that can bring us near to these masses, and we shall find it not in shirking our responsibilities, but in stating that the working class alone can save the nation."^[10]

Later on in the meeting he solemnly praised Schlageter, who, while "a valiant soldier of the counterrevolution," still "deserves sincere homage on our part as soldiers of the revolution." "The fate of this martyr of German nationalism must not be forgotten, or merely honoured in a passing word," Radek said. "We shall do everything to ensure that men who, like Schlageter, were ready to give their lives for a common cause, will become not wanderers in the void, but wanderers into a better future for the whole of humanity."

The Schlageter line was picked up by the *Rote Fahne* and dominated it for several weeks. It created a great deal of confusion amongst the Communist ranks, which had up to now resisted the nationalist pressures. There is not the slightest indication that it weakened the fascists' ranks—with the exception of a few national-bolshevist muddleheads, who joined the KPD and created a lot of trouble before it could get rid of them again. The Schlageter campaign provided ample ammunition to the anticommunist propaganda of the SPD and made it very difficult for the French Communist Party (PCF) to organize solidarity amongst French soldiers for the German workers.

The Cuno strikes

While Radek developed the Schlageter line, the class struggle in Germany intensified. In June and July, riots and strikes against high prices erupted all over the country. Several hundred thousands often participated, amongst them sections of workers who had never participated in a social struggle before. To give just one example: At the beginning of June, 100,000 agricultural workers in Silesia and 10,000 day labourers in Brandenburg went on strike.

On August 8, Chancellor Cuno spoke to the Reichstag. He demanded

further cuts and attacks on the working class and combined this demand with a vote of confidence. The SPD tried to save his government by abstaining in the vote.

Beginning in Berlin a spontaneous wave of strikes developed, demanding the resignation of the Cuno government. On August 10, a conference of trade union representatives rejected the call for a general strike under pressure from the SPD. But the next day a conference of factory councils, hastily convened by the KPD, took the initiative and announced a general strike. Three-and-a-half million workers participated. In several cities there were battles with the police with several dozen workers killed. The following day the Cuno government resigned.

Bourgeois rule was deeply shaken. "There has never been a period in modern German history that has been so favourable for a socialist revolution as summer 1923," writes Arthur Rosenberg. For the moment the SPD saved bourgeois rule. Against considerable resistance in its own ranks it joined a coalition government led by Gustav Stresemann of the Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP), a big business party.

Preparing the revolution

It was only now, after the strikes against Cuno in August, that the KPD and the Comintern realised the revolutionary opportunity that had developed in Germany and changed course. On August 21—that is, exactly two months before the insurrection was called off by Brandler—the Political Bureau of the Russian Communist Party decided to prepare for a revolution in Germany. It formed a "Commission for International Affairs" to supervise the work in Germany. It consisted of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Stalin, Trotsky and Chicherin—and later Dzerzhinsky, Pyatakov and Sokolnikov.

In the following days and weeks, there were numerous discussions and continuous correspondence with the leaders of the KPD, who frequently travelled to Moscow. Financial, logistical and military support was organised to arm the Proletarian Hundreds, which had been set up over the previous months. In October, Radek, Pyatakov and Sokolnikov were sent to Germany to assist the uprising.

But it was above all Trotsky who fought tirelessly to overcome the fatalism and complacency existing in the German section and the Russian party alike. While Stalin, as late as August 7—i.e., one day before the eruption of the Cuno strikes—wrote to Zinoviev, "In my opinion, the Germans must be restrained and not encouraged," and, "For us it would be an advantage if the fascists strike first," Trotsky insisted that the insurrection must be prepared in a period of weeks rather than months and that a definitive date should be set.^[11]

What at first sight seemed to be an organisational proposal—the setting of a date—was in fact a highly political demand. As far as Trotsky was concerned, the main task was now to concentrate the entire energy and attention of the party on the preparation of the revolution. From a more general, propagandist preparation, it had to pass to the practical preparation of the insurrection.

During a meeting of the Political Bureau of the Russian party on August 21 he argued: "As far as the mood of the revolutionary masses in Germany is concerned, the feeling that they are on the way to power—such a sentiment exists. The issue posed is the issue of preparation. The revolutionary chaos must not be rubber-stamped. The question is—either we ignite the revolution, or we organise it." Trotsky warned about the danger that the well-organised fascists would smash uncoordinated actions of workers and demanded: "The KPD must set a time limit for the preparation, for the military preparation and—in accordant tempo—for political agitation."

This was most strongly opposed by Stalin. He argued against a timetable, claiming that “the workers still believe in Social Democracy” and that the government might last for another eight months.^[12]

Brandler, in a letter to the Executive of the Comintern on August 28, also argued for a longer period: “I do not believe that the Stresemann government will live too long,” he wrote. “Nevertheless I do not believe that the next wave, that is already approaching, will decide the question of power. ... We will try to concentrate our forces, so we can, if it is inevitable, take up the struggle in six weeks. But at the same time we make arrangements to be ready with more solid work in five months.” He added that he believed that a period of six to eight months was the most probable one.^[13]

In further discussion between the Russian commission and the German leadership a month later, Trotsky came back on the issue of the timetable. He interrupted a discussion on the attitude to the Ruhr question and said: “I do not understand why so much concern is spent on the Ruhr question. ... The issue now is to take power in Germany. This is the task, everything else will follow from it.”

Trotsky then answered concerns that the German workers would fight for economic demands, but not so easily for political aims. “The political inhibition is nothing more than a certain doubt, which previous defeats have left in the brain of the masses,” he said. “The party can only win the German working class for the decisive revolutionary struggle—and the situation is here now—if it convinces a large section of the working class, its leading section, that it is also organisationally capable to lead it to victory in the most concrete sense of the word. ... If the party expresses fatalistic tendencies in such a situation, this is the greatest danger.”

Trotsky then explained that fatalism can take different forms: First, one says that the situation is revolutionary and repeats it every day. One gets used to it and the policy is to wait for the revolution. Then one gives arms to the workers and says, this will lead to armed conflict. But this is just “armed fatalism.”

From the information given to him by the German comrades Trotsky concluded that they conceived of the task much too easily. “If revolution is to be more than a confused perspective,” he said, “if it is to be the main task, one has to make it a practical, organisational task. ... One has to fix a date, prepare and fight.”^[14]

On September 23, Trotsky even published an article in *Pravda*: “Can a Counter-revolution or Revolution be Made on Schedule?” Trotsky discussed the question in general terms without mentioning Germany, as a call for setting a date for the German revolution by a leading representative of the Soviet leadership would have provoked an international crisis or even a war. Nevertheless, the article is a contribution to the discussion on Germany.

The missed revolution

Finally a date for the uprising was envisaged for November 9. But now events gathered speed.

On September 26, Chancellor Stresemann announced the end of passive resistance against the French occupation of the Ruhr. He argued that there was no other way to get hyperinflation under control. This provoked the extreme right. On the same day, the Bavarian government decreed a state of emergency and installed a dictatorship led by Ritter von Kahr. Von Kahr collaborated with Hitler's Nazis and, imitating Mussolini's march on Rome, planned a march on Berlin to install a dictatorship on the national level. Kahr was supported by the commander of the Reichswehr units positioned in Bavaria.

The Berlin government reacted by setting up its own form of

dictatorship. The entire executive power was transferred to the minister of defence, who delegated it to General Hans von Seeckt, the commander of the Reichswehr. Seeckt sympathised with the extreme right and refused to discipline the rebellious Bavarian commanders. Leading industrialists, like Hugo Stinnes, supported the plan for a national dictatorship, opting for Seeckt as the dictator.

On October 13 the Reichstag, after several days of discussion, passed an empowerment act, authorizing the government to abolish the social achievements of the November revolution, including the eight-hour day. The SPD voted for the empowerment act. While a coup was threatening Berlin that easily could have cost the lives of some SPD ministers and MPs, these SPD ministers and MPs were busy deciding on further attacks on the working class.

Saxony and Thuringia were the centres of working class resistance against these counterrevolutionary preparations. In both states the KPD joined left-wing SPD governments, on October 10 and 16 respectively. This was part of the plan elaborated in Moscow. By entering a coalition government, the KPD hoped for a stronger position and access to weapons.

But despite the fact that both governments were formed according to existing law and commanded a parliamentary majority, the commander of the Reichswehr in Saxony, General Müller, refused to recognise their authority. In agreement with the Berlin government he subordinated the police to his own command.

Threatened from Bavaria, which borders on Saxony and Thuringia in the south, and from the central government in Berlin, situated in the north, the KPD had to bring forward its plans for revolution. It called a congress of factory councils in Chemnitz, Saxony on October 21. This congress was supposed to call a general strike and give the signal for the insurrection all over Germany.

But because the left Social Democrats disagreed, Brandler cancelled the plans and called off the uprising. A majority of the delegates would have supported the call for a general strike, as Brandler wrote in a private letter to Clara Zetkin, who was his close confidante. But he did not want to act without the support of the left Social Democrats.

“During the Chemnitz conference I realised that we could under no circumstances enter the decisive struggle, once we had not been able to convince the left SPD to sign the decision for a general strike,” Brandler wrote. “Against massive resistance I altered course and prevented us, the Communists, from entering the struggle on our own. *Of course we could have received a two-thirds majority for a general strike on the Chemnitz conference.* But the SPD would have left the conference and their confusing slogans, that the intervention of the Reich against Saxony had only the purpose of concealing the Reich's intervention against Bavaria, would have broken our fighting spirit. So I consciously worked for a foul compromise.”^[15]

The decision to cancel the revolution did not reach Hamburg in time. Here an insurrection was organised, but it remained isolated and was defeated within three days.

While the Chemnitz congress was still meeting, the Reichswehr began to occupy Saxony. Armed conflicts left several workers dead. On October 28 President Friedrich Ebert, a Social Democrat, gave orders for the *Reichsexekution* against Saxony ranks—the forceful removal of the government in Saxony headed by Erich Zeigner, himself a Social Democrat, by the Reichswehr. The public indignation was so massive that the SPD was obliged to resign from the Stresemann government in Berlin. A few days later the Reichswehr entered Thuringia and removed the government there.

The deposition of these two left-wing governments by Ebert and Seeckt encouraged the extreme right in Bavaria. On November 8, Adolf Hitler proclaimed a “national revolution” in Munich and staged a coup. His aim was to force the Bavarian dictator Kahr to march on Berlin and take power

there. Hitler was supported by General Ludendorff, one of the highest commanders in the First World War.

The Hitler-Ludendorff coup failed. Berlin had already moved so far to the right that the Bavarian right was no longer in need of such a dubious figure as Hitler. Ebert accommodated to the coup by delegating the command over all the armed forces and the executive power to Seeckt. While the institutions of the Weimar Republic still formally existed, Germany was now ruled by a de facto military dictatorship until March 1924.

Why did the KPD miss the revolution?

The easy answer to this question is to blame everything on Brandler. This was the reaction of Zinoviev and Stalin, who turned Brandler into a scapegoat. Simultaneously they accused the KPD (German Communist Party) of having provided wrong information on the situation in Germany that exaggerated the revolutionary potential of the situation. In this way, they challenged the entire assessment upon which the plan for a revolutionary insurrection had been based.

Less than three weeks after the insurrection had been called off, they began to reinterpret the events in Germany. They did so to cover their own role and for factional reasons, as the struggle with the Left Opposition had now fully erupted. On October 15 the first major document of the Left Opposition, the *Statement of the 46*, was published. At the end of November, Trotsky issued *The New Course*.

Trotsky rejected the easy approach taken by Zinoviev and Stalin. He did not agree with Brandler's decision to call off the insurrection. But he did not see it as an isolated event. After all, Karl Radek, who was present in Chemnitz as a representative of the Communist International, as well as the German *Zentrale*, the central party leadership, had agreed with Brandler's decision.

Brandler's insistence that the revolution would fail—and that the Communists would be isolated if they started an insurrection without the support of left Social Democrats—was in line with previous mistakes for which not only Brandler was responsible, but the Comintern as well. Both the Comintern led by Zinoviev and the leadership of the German Communist Party (its majority and its left wing alike) for a long time had displayed a passive, typically “centrist” attitude to the events evolving in Germany. Despite the fact that the social and political situation had changed dramatically after the French occupation of the Ruhr in January, they continued to work with political methods developed at an earlier stage, when revolution was not on the immediate agenda.

It was only at a very late point, in the midst of the August events, that they changed course and began to prepare for insurrection. This gave them just two months to prepare, and the preparations were of a disjointed, hesitant and insufficient character.

Trotsky, in a speech given to the 5th All-Union Congress of Medical and Veterinary Workers in June 1924, gave the following reasons for the defeat: “What was the fundamental cause of the defeat of the German Communist Party?” he asked. “This, that it did not appreciate in good time the onset of revolutionary crisis from the moment of the occupation of the Ruhr, and especially from the moment of the termination of passive resistance (January-June 1923). It missed the crucial moment. ... It continued even after the onset of the Ruhr crisis to carry on its agitational and propagandist work on the basis of the United Front formula—at the same tempo and in the same forms as before the crisis. Meanwhile, this tactic had already become radically insufficient. A growth in the party's political influence was taking place automatically. A sharp tactical turn was needed.

“It was necessary to show the masses, and above all the party itself, that this time it was a matter of immediate preparation for the seizure of power. It was necessary to consolidate the party's growing influence organizationally and to establish bases of support for a direct assault on the state. It was necessary to transfer the whole party organization onto the basis of factory cells. It was necessary to form cells on the railways. It was necessary to raise sharply the question of work in the army. It was necessary, especially necessary, to adapt the United Front tactic fully and completely to these tasks, to give it a more decided and firmer tempo and a more revolutionary character. On this basis, work of a military-technical nature should have been carried on. ...

“The most important thing, however, was this, to ensure *in good time* the decisive tactical turn towards the seizure of power. And this was not done. This was the chief and fatal omission. From this followed the basic contradiction. On the one hand, the party expected a revolution, while on the other hand, because it had burned its fingers in the March events, [Trotsky is referring here to 1921] it avoided, until the last months of 1923, the very idea of organizing a revolution, i.e., preparing an insurrection. The party's political activity was carried on at a peacetime tempo at a time when the denouement was approaching.

“The time for the uprising was fixed when, in essentials, the enemy had already made use of the time lost by the party and strengthened his position. The party's military-technical preparation, begun at feverish speed, was divorced from the party's political activity, which was carried on at the previous peacetime tempo. The masses did not understand the party and did not keep step with it. The party felt at once its severance from the masses, and proved to be paralysed. From this resulted the sudden withdrawal from first-class positions without a fight—the hardest of all possible defeats.”^[16]

Was it possible at all to organise a successful nationwide insurrection in October 1923?

There exist a number of reports of leading German Communists, as well as leaders and military specialists of the Comintern, who were present in Germany, testifying to a very poor state of preparation. Fighting detachments—the so-called Revolutionary Hundreds—had been formed and trained, but there were hardly any arms available. The propaganda apparatus of the KPD—due to bans and oppression—was in a dismal state. The communication and coordination between the party regions functioned very badly.

On the other hand, the workers fighting in Hamburg showed an exceptional degree of courage, discipline and efficiency. Only 300 workers fought on the barricades, but they met with a wide, positive, although largely passive response in the larger population.

In his speech to the Medical and Veterinary Workers, Trotsky stressed that the dynamic of the revolution itself had to be taken into account. “Did the communists have the majority of the working masses behind them?” he asked. “This is a question which cannot be answered with statistics. It is a question which is decided by the dynamic of revolution.”

“Were the masses in a fighting mood?” he continued. “The entire history of the year 1923 leaves no doubt at all on this account.” And Trotsky concluded: “Under such conditions the masses could go forward only if there was present a firm, self-confident leadership and confidence on the part of the masses in this leadership. Discussions about whether the masses were in a fighting mood or not are very subjective in character and essentially express the lack of confidence among the leaders of the party itself.”^[17]

Lessons of October

Capitulation without a fight was certainly the worst possible outcome of the German events. It demoralised and disorganised the KPD and created the conditions where the ruling elite and the military could go on the offensive and consolidate their power. Trotsky therefore insisted that the lessons of the German defeat must be drawn ruthlessly. He strongly rejected singling out scapegoats, which was only a way to avoid the more fundamental political issues. Drawing these lessons was not only indispensable in order to prepare the German leadership for future revolutionary opportunities, which would inevitably arise. It was also crucial for all the other sections of the Comintern, who would be faced with similar challenges and problems.

Trotsky noted that the lessons of the Russian October Revolution—the only successful proletarian revolution in history—had never been properly drawn. In summer 1924 he published the book *Lessons of October*, discussing the successful Russian October in the light of the German defeat.

He insisted on the need “for the study of the laws and methods of proletarian revolution.” There were issues that every Communist Party would face when entering a revolutionary period: “Generally speaking, crises arise in the party at every serious turn in the party’s course, either as a prelude to the turn or as a consequence of it. The explanation for this lies in the fact that every period in the development of the party has special features of its own and calls for specific habits and methods of work. A tactical turn implies a greater or lesser break in these habits and methods. Herein lies the direct and most immediate root of internal party frictions and crises.”

Trotsky then quoted Lenin, who wrote in July 1917: “It happens all too frequently, that when history makes an abrupt turn, even the most advanced parties are unable for a longer or a shorter period of time to adapt themselves to new conditions. They keep repeating the slogans of yesterday—slogans which were correct yesterday, but which have lost all their meaning today, becoming devoid of meaning ‘suddenly’ with the self-same ‘suddenness’ that history makes its abrupt turn.”

“Hence,” Trotsky concluded, “the danger arises that if the turn is too abrupt or too sudden, and if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia and conservatism have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party proves itself unable to fulfil its leadership at that supreme and critical moment for which it has been preparing itself in the course of years or decades. The party is ravaged by a crisis, and the movement passes the party by—and heads toward defeat. ...

“The most abrupt of all turns is the turn of the proletarian party from the work of preparation and propaganda, or organization and agitation, to the immediate struggle for power, to an armed insurrection against the bourgeoisie. Whatever remains in the party that is irresolute, sceptical, conciliationist, capitulatory, in short, Menshevik—all this rises to the surface in opposition to the insurrection, seeks for theoretical formulas to justify its opposition, and finds them ready-made in the arsenal of the opportunist opponents of yesterday. We shall have occasion to observe this phenomenon more than once in the future.”^[18]

Zinoviev and Stalin rejected Trotsky’s approach. Driven by factional and subjective motives, they falsified the events in Germany, covered their own tracks and made Brandler the scapegoat for everything that went wrong. The consequences were disastrous. The leadership of the KPD was replaced—for the fifth time in five years—without any lessons being drawn.

As Radek pointed out in a heated exchange with Stalin at a plenum meeting of the Russian Central Committee in January 1924, experienced Marxist cadre were replaced by people who had either a background in the centrist USPD (Independent SPD) or no revolutionary experience whatsoever. Heinrich Brandler, a founding member of the *Spartakusbund* with a 25-year history in the movement, was replaced by Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, young intellectuals from a wealthy bourgeois background with no revolutionary past. The Center group, that would now form the

majority of the new leadership, had only joined the KPD in December 1920, when the left majority of the centrist USPD united with the KPD.

The replacement of the leadership set the course—after further purges and replacements in the following years—for the total subordination of the KPD to the dictates of Stalin, which would have such devastating consequences 10 years later when the disastrous line of the KPD paved Hitler’s way to power. Stalin’s alignment with the left of Fischer and Maslow was particularly cynical, as he had always held the most right-wing positions during the course of events. Stalin won the allegiance of Maslow, who was under investigation because he had allegedly given information to the police during the 1921 March events, by making sure he was cleared of the accusations.

Even the theory of Social Fascism, which equates Social Democracy with fascism, found its first expression in a document on the German events drafted by Zinoviev and adopted by the presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern against the resistance of the Left Opposition in January 1924. It reads: “The leading layers of German Social Democracy are presently nothing but a faction of German fascism under a socialist mask.”^[19]

After the party had failed to move in time from the tactic of the United Front to the struggle for power, Zinoviev and Stalin rejected the United Front tactic altogether. The theory of Social Fascism, which rejected any form of a United Front with the SPD against the Nazis, was revived in 1929 and played a fatal role in disarming the working class in the struggle against fascism.

In 1928, Trotsky once again summed up the basic lessons from the German October. Criticising the draft programme for the Comintern’s Sixth Congress, he wrote: “The role of the subjective factor in a period of slow, organic development can remain quite a subordinate one. Then diverse proverbs of gradualism arise, as: ‘slow but sure,’ and ‘one must not kick against the pricks,’ and so forth, which epitomize all the tactical wisdom of an organic epoch that abhorred ‘leaping over stages.’ But as soon as the objective prerequisites have matured, the key to the whole historical process passes into the hands of the subjective factor, that is, the party. Opportunism, which consciously or unconsciously thrives upon the inspiration of the past epoch, always tends to underestimate the role of the subjective factor, that is, the importance of the party and of revolutionary leadership. All this was fully disclosed during the discussions on the lessons of the German October, on the Anglo-Russian Committee, and on the Chinese Revolution. In all these cases, as well as in others of lesser importance, the opportunistic tendency evinced itself in the adoption of a course that relied solely upon the ‘masses’ and therefore completely scorned the question of the ‘tops’ of the revolutionary leadership. Such an attitude, which is false in general, operates with positively fatal effect in the imperialist epoch.”^[20]

[1] Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October*, in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition* (1923-25), p. 201.

[2] Arthur Rosenberg, (*Entstehung und Geschichte der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum 1988), p. 395.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 402.

[4] Hermann Weber, (*Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, Band 1, Frankfurt 1969), p. 43.

[5] Rosa Luxemburg, (*Rückblick auf die Gothaer Konferenz*, in *Gesammelte Werke* Band 4, Berlin 1974), p. 273.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 274.

[7] Leon Trotsky, (*The Third International After Lenin*, New Park: 1974), pp. 66-67.

[8] Quoted by Pierre Broué (*The German Revolution 1917-1923*, Haymarket Books: 2006) p. 702.

[9] Quoted by Broué, *ibid.*, p. 705.

[10] Quoted by Broué, *ibid.*, p. 726.

- [11] Bernhard H. Bayerlein u.a. Hsg., (*Deutscher Oktober 1923. Ein Revolutionsplan und sein Scheitern*, Berlin: 2003) p. 100.
- [12] Ibid., pp. 122-27.
- [13] Ibid., pp. 135-136.
- [14] Ibid., pp. 165-167.
- [15] Ibid., pp. 359.
- [16] Leon Trotsky, [*Through What Stage Are We Passing*, in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)*, Pathfinder Press, 1975], pp. 170-71.
- [17] Ibid., p. 169.
- [18] Leon Trotsky, (*Lessons of October*, New Park Publications, 1971), pp. 4-7.
- [19] Bernhard H. Bayerlein u.a. Hsg., (*Deutscher Oktober 1923. Ein Revolutionsplan und sein Scheitern*, Berlin: 2003), p. 464.
- [20] Leon Trotsky, (*The Third International after Lenin*, New Park, 1974), p. 64.



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