The German October: The missed revolution of 1923

Part 1

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The following article, presented in three parts, is based on a lecture given in the summer of 2007. Part two will be posted Friday, October 31.

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 re-ignited 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 twelve 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. It 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.

To be continued

Notes:
3. Ibid., p. 402.
6. Ibid., p. 274.