The German October: The missed revolution of 1923

Part 2

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The following is the second part of three-part article based on a lecture given in the summer of 2007. The first part was posted October 30. The final part will be posted Saturday, November 1.

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."[1]

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."[2]

The Schlager line

In June, Radek introduced a new diversion that further disoriented the
already confused KPD—the so-called Schlager 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 nationalistic, fascist and paramilitary organisations.

On April 7, Albert Schlager, 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."[3]

Later on in the meeting he solemnly praised Schlager, 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 Schlager, 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 Schlager 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 muddle heads, who joined the KPD and created a lot of trouble before it could get rid of them again. The Schlager-campaign provided ample ammunition to the anticomunist 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 Schlager 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 of 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.[4]

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.[5]

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.[6]

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 confuse 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."[7]

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."[8]

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—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.

To be continued
Notes:
2. Quoted by Broué, ibid., p. 705. [return]
3. Quoted by Broué, ibid., p. 726. [return]
5. Ibid., pp. 122-27. [return]
6. Ibid., pp. 135-136. [return]
7. Ibid., pp. 165-167. [return]
8. Ibid., pp. 359. [return]

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