

# THE GERMAN REVOLUTION

**SELECTED WRITINGS OF  
ROSA LUXEMBURG**

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**£5**

# THE GERMAN REVOLUTION

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## INTRODUCTION

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In November 1918 German workers overthrew the imperial government and ended the First World War. What began as a sailors' revolt within weeks saw workers' councils take charge of numerous German cities. A social democratic government took power amidst a situation of dual power.

Yet within the space of three months the revolution would be thwarted and its revolutionary leaders murdered or driven underground. Right wing paramilitaries at the behest of the social democratic government drove back the working class mobilisation. The working class would remobilise repeatedly between 1919 and late 1923, but was eventually subdued. The defeat had enormous consequences. Minimally, a stronger labour movement and more democratic state could have stymied the rise of the Nazis. Had the German workers come to power, then there would have been no Stalinist dictatorship in Russia and quite possibly socialism on a global scale.

A century on, there is still much today's Marxists can take from the study of the German revolution. New research on the period is available, much of it in English for the first time. And to move forward, the working class movement has to learn from major defeats. As one of the main protagonists in the events, Rosa Luxemburg put it, "the masses were up to the challenge, and out of this 'defeat' they have forged a link in the chain of historic defeats, which is the pride and strength of international socialism. That is why future victories will spring from this 'defeat'."<sup>1</sup>

### **Imperial Germany**

The roots of the German revolution stretched back at least a half century. In 1871 Germany was unified from above by Bismarck's wars against Austria-Hungary and France, yet was still dominated by the Junker landowners. Under the Hohenzollern Kaiser [Emperor] Wilhelm II, Germany underwent a period of combined, state-led industrialisation, in which a millions-strong working class developed. However the drive for empire within a system of antagonistic European imperialist alliances ultimately caused the First World War in 1914.

By the autumn of 1918, four years of war had taken an enormous toll on German society. Food rationing and the British blockade reduced consumption to half its normal level in Germany. About 700,000 Germans died from malnutrition during wartime. At the front, perhaps two million Germans lost their lives, with more than four million wounded and over one million taken prisoner.<sup>2</sup>

### **Social Democracy**

In this situation, the politics of the labour movement would be decisive. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was founded in opposition to the German state. Its leaders August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht refused to vote for war credits in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870-1. The party was forced underground from 1878-1890, but continued to grow. By 1912 the SPD had over a million members, garnered over four million votes (a third of the electorate), and had 110 Reichstag [all-German parliament] deputies (though the Reichstag had very limited powers).

Even in last days of July 1914, the SPD published anti-war manifestos and organised anti-war demonstrations. On 30 July the SPD leaders, fearing that the party's anti-war stand would get it suppressed, sent two people to Switzerland with the party treasury. The next day, 1 August, the SPD-aligned trade-union leaders responded differently to a similar fear, by signing a no-strike deal for the duration of the war. On 3 August, the SPD Reichstag fraction decided by 78 to 14 to vote for war credits. The minority agreed to respect discipline. SPD co-chair Hugo Haase presented the collective decision backing war credits to the Reichstag on 4 August, although personally he was against the war credits. It was an epochal betrayal. The SPD under the leadership of Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann would support the war until the bitter end and impose

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“civil peace” on the working class for the duration.

By 1917, the SPD had lost three-quarters of its pre-war membership. It was still a mass force with 250,000 members. It faced internal dissent. On 2 December 1914, SPD deputy Karl Liebknecht voted alone against military credits in the Reichstag. On 18 March 1915, Liebknecht and Otto Rühle voted against war credits. In June 1915 nearly a thousand SPD officials signed an anti-war petition to the party executive. By the end of the year, 18 SPD deputies voted against financing the war in the Reichstag, including Haase and George Ledebour.

In March 1916, these deputies were expelled from the SPD Reichstag fraction. They formed the Social Democratic Alliance (SAG). On 7 January 1917, the opposition held a national conference and was expelled from SPD by the party executive. On 6-8 April 1917 the opposition formed the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD). It had around 100,000 members, along with 14 of the eighty-odd daily papers.<sup>3</sup> It was strong among the organised workers of many big cities - in a good few, stronger than the SPD - but its leaders were people like Haase, Luise Zietz, and Rudolf Hilferding, not revolutionaries. Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein were also members of the USPD.

## Spartacus Group

The sharpest tendency within the SPD opposed to the war was the circle around Rosa Luxemburg, which included Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin, Ernst Meyer, Julian Marchlewski, Wilhelm Pieck, Hugo Eberlein, Leo Jogiches, Käthe Duncker, Hermann Duncker and Karl Liebknecht. In spring 1915, despite Luxemburg's arrest and Liebknecht's conscription into the army, they published the newspaper *Die Internationale* and Liebknecht's leaflet: “The Main Enemy is within Your Own Country”.

On New Year's Day 1916, they founded the International Group, named after their banned journal. They adopted Luxemburg's theses, *On the Tasks of International Social Democracy* and her *Junius* pamphlet. On 1 May 1916, the group organised a successful peace demonstration in Berlin with left socialist worker-youth groups. Karl Liebknecht was arrested. In September 1916 they published the first of their Spartacus letters. The group was only an informal network, with no central committee or formal membership. They intervened in the SPD national conference in September 1916 and the founding USPD conference in April 1917, joining the latter as an open faction. However there were no further national gatherings of the Spartacus Group until October 1918.

The Spartacus group's main strongholds were in Stuttgart, Hanau, Chemnitz, Braunschweig, and Duisburg, along with the socialist youth organisation. They took part in but did not organise the mass political strikes of June 1916, April 1917 and January 1918. They distributed thousands of leaflets, but faced repeated repression. Jogiches built their network until his arrest in March 1918. Mathilde Jacob and others rebuilt the group until further arrests in August. Liebknecht was released from prison on 23 October and took part in the uprising. Luxemburg was not released until 8 November<sup>4</sup>



*Karl Liebknecht addressing a crowd in Berlin*

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## Left Communists

The other main internationalist opposition within the SPD during the war was based mainly in North Germany. The Social Democratic Organisation of Bremen (SDVB) led by Johann Knief had a substantial following in the city. In January 1916, officials loyal to the party executive split the SPD in Bremen. Knief and others, including Paul Frölich and Karl Radek, began publishing the *Arbeiterpolitik* newspaper in June 1916. The paper contemplated “the possibility and necessity of establishing an independent organisation for proletarian socialism”. On 1 December 1916, the SDVB cut off its membership dues to the party executive. The executive immediately expelled the entire Bremen organisation from the SPD.

Bremen and Hamburg radicals never joined the USPD and opposed those on the left who did. Thirteen delegates from local radical left groups met conspiratorially in Berlin on 26 August 1917 to establish the International Socialist Party of Germany (ISD), but police broke up the gathering and seized drafts of the founding documents. The party borrowed from anarcho-syndicalism, defining itself as a “unity organisation”, combining party and trade unions. In December 1917 Knief called on the Spartacus Group to break away from the USPD and create a separate radical party. In November 1918, this radical left constituted itself as the International Communists of Germany (IKD) and published a daily paper, *Der Kommunist*.<sup>5</sup>

## Revolutionary Shop Stewards

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards were a network of trade union militants opposed to civil peace, who were the principal organisers of the mass strikes during the war. Led by metalworkers Richard Müller and Emil Barth, the Stewards became radicalised through their strike activity and were a thousand-strong network well rooted in large workplaces by 1918.

The Stewards organised the first political mass strike in June 1916, which involved 55,000 workers in Berlin and Braunschweig. Three hundred thousand workers took strike action in Berlin, Halle, Magdeburg, and Leipzig in April 1917, with Berlin workers electing a workers’ council to represent them. On 28 January 1918, Berlin’s entire armament industry came to a standstill. By the afternoon, 414 delegates representing 400,000 workers gathered for a meeting in the Berlin union hall, chaired by Müller. They also faced repression and conscription.

By the summer of 1918, after collaborating with the Stewards during the strikes, the Spartacists were badly weakened by informers and arrests. The Stewards, fearful of suffering the same, cut off contact with them. Müller dubbed the Spartacists’ agitation “revolutionary gymnastics”; while the Spartacists criticised the Stewards as a conspiratorial club. After Liebknecht was released from prison, he regularly participated in the Stewards’ secret meetings and brought other Spartacists along. Stewards’ leader Emil Barth organised the purchase and collection of weapons (with assistance from the Russian embassy). They were hidden by Cläre Casper and Lucie Heimburger-Gottschar, who had participated in the earlier strikes.<sup>6</sup>

## November 1918: The Kaiser goes, the Generals Remain

A novel entitled *The Kaiser goes, the Generals Remain* captured the outcome of the November revolution in Germany. By autumn 1918, the generals told their political masters that the situation was hopeless. Kaiser Wilhelm appointed his cousin, the liberal Prince Max von Baden, as chancellor. He in turn invited two SPD leaders, including Philipp Scheidemann, to join his cabinet, and they accept-



Poster declaring the Ebert government of 12 November 1918, signed by Emil Barth, Revolutionary Stewards representative

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ed. The new government could not quell the anger about to explode.

On 16 October 1918, the USPD called a demonstration in Berlin. More than five thousand workers resisted police attacks and broke through police lines to reach the Reichstag building. They chanted: “Down with the war. Down with the government. Long live Liebknecht!” Demonstrators made their way to the Soviet embassy. A week later Liebknecht was released from prison and greeted by 20,000 militant Berlin workers.<sup>7</sup>

## **Sailors’ revolt**

The revolution was sparked by a sailors’ revolt. At the end of October the German admirals decided on a last-gasp operation, committing the fleet against the superior British navy. To crews, it looked like a suicide mission. When ordered to sea, sailors from Wilhelmshaven mutinied. Mass arrests were ordered, but the revolt spread. On 2 November, demonstrators in Kiel supporting the Wilhelmshaven revolt clashed with police. The following day, USPD member Karl Artelt was elected leader of the first sailors’ council, a committee representing 20,000 combatants. Artelt later wrote:

*“We held our first meeting in the dining hall of the torpedo division. During the meeting, a sergeant appeared, telling us that we should present our requests to the commander of the division. We explained to him that we had no requests, only demands.”*

On 4 November, SPD politician Gustav Noske arrived in Kiel. The sailors, many of whom had little political background and would still have seen the SPD as “the left”, or “the workers’ party”, elected him chair of the newly formed Kiel soldiers’ council. It was the SPD’s first act to control the revolution.<sup>8</sup>

## **Workers make a revolution**

Between 1 and 15 November, workers’ and soldiers’ councils took charge of various German cities, including Leipzig, Hamburg, Bremen, Chemnitz, Brunswick, Düsseldorf, Mülheim an der Ruhr, Kiel, Lübeck, Flensburg, Oldenburg, Cuxhaven, and Hanover. In the great industrial centres the uprising followed a common pattern: first, workers’ mass strikes and demonstrations broke out, then soldiers joined the revolt and finally a joint workers’ and soldiers’ council assumed control. However some of the leaders lagged behind events.

The Berlin Workers’ Council led by the Stewards held a secret meeting on the evening of 2 November. It decided on an uprising in the capital to begin on 11 November, despite intense pressure from Liebknecht to start on Monday 4 November. The decision to postpone was made with a slim majority of 22 votes to 19. Only Shop Stewards were allowed to vote (not the Spartacists and the USPD). On 3 November, a representative of the red sailors gave the council a first-hand report on developments in Kiel, but the Stewards were unconvinced and stuck to their plan.<sup>9</sup>

On 3 November officers fired on a massive, unarmed demonstration, killing eight. The next day the Berlin workers responded with a general strike. By 6 November the revolution had spread to the major cities across Germany. The SPD Executive demanded the Kaiser’s abdication, in a meeting at the Reich Chancellery with von Baden and General Groener. SPD leader Friedrich Ebert said: “If the Kaiser does not abdicate then social revolution is inevitable. But I will have nothing to do with it. I hate it like sin.”

On 7 November, Bavarian King Ludwig III abdicated and the USPD proclaimed a Bavaria republic. (The German Empire of 1871-1918 was a monarchy, but with other monarchies within it. Four of its 26 constituent states, including Bavaria, were kingdoms, and the rest, other than the three “free cities”, Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck, also had aristocratic rulers).

The following day the Shop Stewards’ collective judgment changed. The Berlin Workers’ Council finally decided to call the mass political strike for the following day. Emil Barth later claimed that the revolution had been directed entirely by himself from the back room of a pub. The Shop Stewards’ systematic preparation for the uprising was critical, particularly their weapons procurement.<sup>10</sup>

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## The Republic

On 9 November 1918 hundreds of thousands of workers demonstrated on the streets. In Berlin, Scheidemann proclaimed Germany a republic while the Kaiser was in Belgium, aiming to pre-empt Karl Liebknecht's call for a socialist republic at the same demonstration. Ebert demanded to be made chancellor, but was outraged by Scheidemann's behaviour. SPD and USPD leaders held negotiations for the formation of a government based on parties rather than workers' councils in the back rooms of the Reichstag. According to participants, Liebknecht was urged by soldiers to join the SPD-USPD unity government. He finally accepted office, provided that it would only last for three days until an armistice. But, after Jogiches expressed his strong disagreement and the USPD abandoned the conditions of his participation, Liebknecht rescinded.<sup>11</sup>

On the night of 9 November, the Shop Stewards occupied the empty Reichstag building. They held an assembly, where Müller proposed the election of workers' and soldiers' councils throughout Berlin and for a meeting of their representatives in the Circus Busch meeting hall the following afternoon. The proposal was accepted. The SPD responded by distributing thousands of leaflets to win the soldiers' councils over to their side. The SPD issued a call for unity in their paper *Vorwärts*, under the headline "No Fighting among Brothers".<sup>12</sup>

## Dual power

On 10 November 1918, a "Council of People's Delegates" was formed, borrowing its name from the workers' government in Russia, and made up of Ebert as chair plus Scheidemann and Otto Landsberg from the SPD; Barth, Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann from the USPD. From 9 November, Ebert had also been chancellor in the old legal forms, so Ebert was the "head of government" in two ways, with the same old unelected state machine behind him. For example, Wilhelm Solf, "Secretary for the Colonies" since 1911, remained "Secretary for Foreign Affairs", even under the new "Council"; Paul von Krause remained "Secretary for Justice". The "Council of People's Delegates" started calling itself "Reichsregierung" ("Imperial Government") rather than "Council" from 29 December 1918, and would dissolve itself in favour of an SPD-led coalition parliamentary government on 13 February 1918, with Ebert now becoming "President".

The new composite government faced immediate competition from the newly formed workers' councils.

Some 3,000 people assembled for the Berlin's workers' and soldiers' council at the Cirkus Busch on 10 November, with soldiers constituting a majority. Checking of credentials was cursory. Although the Stewards presided over the gathering, they were not able to carry their ideas. The Shop Stewards had planned to appoint an "action committee" made up exclusively of Spartacists and Stewards as the highest organ of the revolution, to move towards state power resting with the councils, not with the coalition between the USPD and the SPD. Soldiers led by the SPD dissented rowdily and threatened to boycott the assembly. Eventually an Executive Council of Greater Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils was elected with seven SPD members and seven USPD members, plus soldiers' representatives. Müller and the USPD never held a majority because the soldiers usually sided with the SPD.<sup>13</sup>

The old order, shorn of its outer shell, continued in power. Ebert established a secure phone line with the Prussian General Groener, so that every night they could review the situation in light of developments. On 12 November the Executive Council unanimously agreed to establish a Red Guard, but was forced to retreat the next day by pressure from the soldiers' representatives. Social Democrats and the army top brass portrayed the Red Guard as a competing organisation and a vote of no confidence in the soldiers. On 15 November, SPD trade union leader Carl Legien signed a partnership agreement with industrialists that pledged to suppress radical socialist forces within the unions.<sup>14</sup>

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## The revolutionary left

What did the revolutionary left do in the situation? On 11 November Luxemburg's current formed the Spartacus League as a nationwide organisation with its own central committee, although it remained inside the USPD. Between 11 and 17 November they had no publication at all. The four page *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag) finally resumed publication on 18 November. The Spartacists did provide a sharp balance sheet on the situation. Liebknecht wrote:

*“Unity means to make the proletariat strong enough to fulfil its historical mission. But not all kinds of unity make strong. Unity between fire and water extinguishes the fire and makes the water evaporate. Unity between the wolf and the lamb turns the lamb into the wolf’s dinner. Unity between the proletariat and the ruling classes sacrifices the workers. Unity with betrayers means defeat. Only forces with the same goals grow stronger from unity. To chain opposite forces together means to paralyse them... Only merciless critique can bring clarity. Only clarity can bring unity...”*

*“The ‘socialist’ government has maintained or even reinstated the entire administrative apparatus of the bourgeois state and the old military machinery – institutions that are nearly impossible to control for the workers’ and soldiers’ councils; the enormous economic power of the ruling classes has not been touched...”*

*“We must not fool ourselves. The political power that the proletariat seized on 9 November has largely disappeared—and it diminishes further by the hour.”<sup>15</sup>*

The SPD proposed calling elections for a national parliament, which the left understood was a deliberate attempt to derail the drive for working class power. Luxemburg wrote:

*“The National Assembly is an outdated legacy of bourgeois revolutions, an empty shell lacking in content, a supposed requirement left over from the times of petty bourgeois illusions in a ‘united people’ and in the ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ of the bourgeois state.*

*“Today, whoever raises the call for a National Assembly is consciously or unconsciously turning the revolution back to the historical stage of bourgeois revolutions. He is either a covert agent of the bourgeoisie or an unconscious ideologist of the petty bourgeoisie.*

*“Today it is not a question of democracy or dictatorship. The question which history has placed on the agenda is: bourgeois democracy or socialist democracy. Because dictatorship of the proletariat is democracy in a socialist sense.*

*“Dictatorship of the proletariat is not a matter of bombs, putsches, riots and ‘anarchy’, as the agents of capitalist profit consciously misrepresent it. It is the use of all the means of political power to achieve socialism and to appropriate the capitalist class – in the interests of, and by the will of, the revolutionary majority of the proletariat. That is to say: in the spirit of socialist democracy.”<sup>16</sup>*

This assessment demonstrates Luxemburg's political evolution. It was the right line in German conditions in November 1918. It was also an implicit rejection of her criticism of the Bolsheviks' closing the Russian constituent assembly early that year. Luxemburg understood that for socialists it was a matter of either/or: a bourgeois republic or workers' democracy.

The Spartacists made plans and debated strategy. Clara Zetkin wrote an article in *Rote Fahne* on 22 November, entitled, “The Revolution – Thanks to Women”. Luxemburg wrote to Zetkin on 24 November, proposing a daily supplement to *Rote Fahne* directly focused on female readers, or maybe a separate women's paper.<sup>17</sup> The Marxists were still debating their organisational conclusions. In a letter dated 17 November 1918, Zetkin also argued against establishing a new party too soon. “I think we should stay on the USPD for now as its relentless critics”. Luxemburg concurred, criticising an article by a young comrade Fritz Rück and explaining that the Spartacist leadership were demanding a party congress of the USPD.<sup>18</sup> The lefts centred in Bremen formally founded the International Communists of Germany (IKD) on 23 November.

## December 1918: Christmas struggles

In December 1918 the revolution went into retreat. On 6 December, counterrevolutionary soldiers machine-gunned a legal demonstration in Berlin, killing sixteen. Two days later the Spartacists called the first armed demonstration since the overthrow of the Kaiser and 150,000 gathered in an impressive display of their growing influence. But on 10 December, in a highly symbolic incident, armed former royal guards entered Berlin and pledged allegiance to Ebert's Council

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of People's Delegates, but not the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Great Berlin.

Between 16 and 21 December 1918, the General Congress of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Germany convened in Berlin. Of the 425 delegates who gave their party affiliation, 292 were SPD supporters and 94 USPD members. The Spartacists only had ten delegates. The congress was another setback. Delegates voted for national assembly elections and against rule by the council system. It elected a new Central Council to take up the national responsibilities previously vested in the Executive Council, effectively confining the latter's authority to Berlin.<sup>19</sup>

## Christmas Clashes

Several hundred sailors from Kiel, known as the People's Naval Division, were installed at the Imperial Castle and the nearby royal stables during the November revolution. The sailors agreed to vacate the castle and reduce their force to 600 men, in return for a Christmas bonus. The government reneged, so on 23 December the sailors seized Otto Wels, SPD Commandant of Berlin. Ebert resolved to "finish off once and for all the People's Naval Division". Around seventy people were killed during the Christmas clashes, but the People's Naval Division managed to hold their position with reinforcement by the Republican Soldiers' Army and Berlin security forces.

On 29 December, the USPD members resigned from the Council of People's Delegates over the SPD members' disregard of the Council Congress's resolutions and its alliance with counter-revolutionary forces during the Christmas clashes. The SPD replaced the USPD members with two new SPD members, Gustav Noske and Rudolf Wissell; Noske was appointed minister of the armed forces.

## Founding the Communist Party (KPD)

The situation cried out for revolutionary leadership. According to the Spartacist leader Heinrich Brandler, in November 1918 the Spartacus League had at most 3,000 members.<sup>20</sup> However the Spartacists took an important step toward constituting themselves as a political party on 14 December by publishing their political programme, drafted by Rosa Luxemburg, in *Rote Fahne*. It was quickly republished as a pamphlet entitled *What the Spartacist League Wants*.

On 15 December, immediately before the Councils Congress, the Berlin USPD held a conference on whether to organise its own special party congress. The right wing USPD leaders, led by Haase and Hilferding, wanted to concentrate on the forthcoming elections to the national assembly and opposed holding a special congress. Luxemburg and Liebknecht denounced the national assembly as a snare to undermine the workers' councils and demanded a special USPD congress, calling on the USPD ministers to leave the Ebert government. Although the Berlin USPD was considered the bastion of the party's left wing, the USPD right wing's resolution was adopted by 485 votes to 185. The Spartacist tactic of working within the USPD appeared to have stalled.

The IKD also exerted pressure to form an independent workers' party. The IKD had a core of about fifty people in Bremen, with a periphery of up to a thousand supporters, mostly shipyard workers who had been expelled from the SPD. Delegates from some ten local IKD groups met in Berlin from 15-18 December for their first national conference. They envisaged a federated organisation, rejecting centralised party structure as a flaw of the SPD. At this point the IKD was not committed to unity with the Spartacus League.

IKD delegates met again in Berlin on 24 December 1918 for their second national conference. Against Knief's opposition, they decided to boycott the National Assembly elections. At the same time, they decided to unite their organisation with the Spartacus League. Karl Radek, representing Soviet Russia, convinced Knief to give up his aversion to joining with the Spartacists.<sup>21</sup> Knief himself was by this time seriously ill: he would die in April 1919, aged 38.

The *Rote Fahne* mentioned a "national Spartacus League conference" on 23 December and again in a lead article dated 29 December. The decision to form an independent party was made on the evening of 29 December, although Luxemburg and Jogiches were unhappy about fusion

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with the IKD. Jogiches believed that they should stay in the USPD until its next congress. They chose the name Communist Party over Luxemburg's preferred Socialist Party. Again Radek played a key role in persuading the Spartacist leaders to support unity.

The "Communist Party of Germany – Spartacus League" (KPD-S) was founded by 127 delegates, who met in the banquet hall of the Prussian state parliament in Berlin between 30 December 1918 and 1 January 1919. In attendance were 83 delegates from the Spartacus League and 29 from the IKD. Liebknecht explained the rationale for the new party, given the situation and the bankruptcy of the USPD. The Congress voted to oppose participation in the forthcoming national assembly elections, despite the impassioned pleas of Paul Levi and the Spartacist old guard. Only Luxemburg's intervention in favour of a commission avoided the adoption of Paul Frölich's demand to "leave the unions". However the party did adopt Luxemburg's programme.<sup>22</sup>

Liebknecht led for the Spartacists in negotiations with the Shop Stewards to join the nascent KPD. The Stewards agreed with Liebknecht's and Luxemburg's positions, but saw the majority of the participants in the party conference as having what Müller called an "anarcho-syndicalist putschist mentality". On New Year's Day, the Stewards presented the KPD delegates with five conditions for their participation in the new party: renunciation of fundamental antiparlamentarianism, total parity between Stewards and Spartacists on the executive board, a revision of the Spartacists' "street tactics", Stewards' influence on the party's publications, and removal of the word "Spartacus" from the future party name. The Congress rejected the Shop Stewards' conditions. As a result, the new party was born without a mass base among the workers of Berlin.<sup>23</sup>

## January 1919: the revolution repressed

In January 1919 the German working class revolutionaries were repressed by right-wing paramilitaries and government troops at the behest of the SPD government. Despite being dubbed the "Spartacus uprising", the nascent KPD neither planned nor organised the events.

On 4 January 1919, Berlin chief of police Emil Eichhorn (USPD), who had refused to attack demonstrators during earlier clashes, was sacked by the government. The following day, in protest against Eichhorn's dismissal, thousands of workers, many armed, demonstrated in Berlin. Some occupied newspaper offices, including the SPD's *Vorwärts*. Paul Frölich later pointed to evidence of the involvement of agent provocateurs in these occupations.

## Revolutionary committee

Some 70 revolutionaries convened in the evening of 5 January. KPD leaders Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck participated, but without a mandate from the party central committee. Liebknecht advocated overthrowing the government. The gathering decided to arrest the members of the cabinet during the night, to occupy the militarily most important buildings on Monday, to arm the workers and set up commissariats. Only Müller, Ernst Däumig, and four other Shop Stewards spoke out against the planned uprising and proposed that actions were limited to a general strike. At Pieck's request, a 33 member "revolutionary committee" was formed, including co-chairs Ledebour, Liebknecht and Shop Steward Paul Scholze.<sup>24</sup>

With nearly half a million participants, the mass demonstration on 6 January was even larger than the previous day. It appeared as if the majority of the Berlin workers favoured the removal of the Ebert-Scheidemann government. The committee took up quarters in the royal stables that had become the People's Marine Division's base, but the sailors decided to remain neutral. The committee reconvened in the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz. It decided to negotiate with the SPD government, despite opposition from Liebknecht and Pieck.

Luxemburg was impressed by the success of the general strike and now saw a possibility to take power. Her lead article in the *Rote Fahne* on 7 January, "Where are the Leaders Going?" proclaimed the goal to "occupy all positions of power". The first meeting of the KPD leadership with Liebknecht and Pieck was held that day. Luxemburg and Jogiches urged more definitive leadership of the struggle and clear slogans. In a lead article "Neglected Duties" (8 January),

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unsigned but attributed to Rosa Luxemburg by Clara Zetkin, *Die Rote Fahne* argued that the Ebert-Scheidemann government “had to be removed... they had to be driven out of power”, although it warned that this must be done by “grabbing actual positions of power and holding on to them and using them” rather than by a coup - by “storming into the Reich Chancellery and dispersing or arresting a few people”.<sup>25</sup>

Signalling an uneasy awareness of limitations, the article also warned that 6-8 January had highlighted “the weakness and immaturity... the shortcomings” of the revolution so far. In her speech to the founding congress of the KPD(S) eight days earlier, Luxemburg had warned that the revolutionary message had still to be taken to the rural population (still around 40% of the total: big cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants had had only 20% of the total population in 1914), that the revolution must be made by building up the strength of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils from the base, and “the process will be a rather more tedious one than we had imagined in our first enthusiasm”.

KPD leaders met again in the evening of 8 January. Questioning the attempt to seize power while still a minority, Luxemburg famously asked Liebknecht, “Karl, is that our programme?” Jogiches forcefully called for Liebknecht and Pieck to resign from the revolutionary committee. A majority passed the proposal over the dissenting votes from Pieck and Liebknecht, and Liebknecht announced that he would not comply with the resolution, initiating a split among the KPD leadership. Jogiches went so far as to propose that the group publicly distance itself from Liebknecht in the *Rote Fahne*. Despite the KPD central committee’s decision, Liebknecht and Pieck attended the revolutionary committee meeting with the Shop Stewards later the same evening. After many hours of discussion, a large majority in that committee emerged in favour of once more calling for a general strike and an intensification of the armed struggle.<sup>26</sup>

## Repression

The uprising was in retreat by 9 January. First the army, now under the command of Gustav Noske, begins its attack on the protestors. Noske bluntly stated that “someone must play the bloodhound” and “you play with matches, you get burned!” At the same time a mass movement developed in the factories of Berlin. Workers called for socialist unity between the “ordinary” members of the SPD, USPD and KPD to end the bloodletting. The unity movement involved over 200,000 workers in Berlin and spread to other industrial centres across Germany. Workplace assemblies elected worker delegations, usually on a parity basis, to demand the resignation of the government and of all socialist party leaders in order to stop the fighting in Berlin. Workers called on the unification of the three socialist parties and new workers’ council elections.<sup>27</sup>

On 9 January, Radek wrote to the KPD central committee. He argued:

“In your pamphlet about your programme, *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*, you declare that you only want to seize power if you have the majority of the working class behind you. This fundamentally correct point of view is founded on the simple fact that the workers’ government cannot be formed without the backing of the mass organisation of the proletariat. Today, the only mass organisations to be considered, the workers’ and soldiers’ councils, have no strength except on paper. Consequently, it is not the party of struggle, the Communist Party, which heads them, but the social-patriots or the Independents. In such a situation, there is absolutely no question of dreaming of the proletariat possibly taking power. If as a result of a putsch, the government fell into your hands, you would be cut off from the provinces, and would be swept away in a few hours...

“In this situation, the action on which the revolutionary delegates decided on Saturday as a reply to the attack by the social-patriotic government upon the police headquarters should have had the character only of an act of protest. The proletarian vanguard, exasperated by the policy of the government and badly led by the revolutionary delegates, whose political inexperience made them unable to grasp the relation of forces in the Reich as a whole, has in its zeal transformed the movement of protest into a struggle for power. This permits Ebert and Scheidemann to strike

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a blow at the movement in Berlin which can weaken the movement as a whole...

“The only force able to call a halt and to prevent this disaster is you, the Communist Party. You have enough perspicacity to know that this struggle is hopeless. Your members Levi and Duncker have told me that you know this... Nothing can stop him who is weaker from retreating before a stronger force.”<sup>28</sup>

On 11 January, when the *Vorwärts* occupiers sent seven representatives to negotiate, they were arrested by government troops, brought to the barracks, and shot. The *Vorwärts* building was then stormed under heavy artillery fire and the newspaper district taken over by government forces. The police headquarters in Alexanderplatz, the other main scene of the uprising, was also stormed on the same night. By the following morning the uprising had been suppressed.<sup>29</sup>

On 13 January *Vorwärts* all but called for the Communist leaders to be killed in a satirical poem. The loyalist Cavalry Rifle Division was given the task. On 15 January, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were arrested,

tortured and killed by reactionary soldiers. Major Waldemar Pabst, who supervised the assassinations, wrote in his memoirs that he reported directly to the government and was congratulated by Ebert and Noske.

Elections for the national assembly took place on 19 January. They were boycotted by the KPD. The SPD became the single biggest party with 11 million votes (38% of the vote), but the overall majority went to the bourgeois parties. The USPD garnered less than 8%. The SPD got 163 seats in the 423-seat Reichstag; the USPD 22 seats. A coalition government was formed, led by the SPD, with the bourgeois liberals of the Catholic Centre Party and the “German Democratic Party” (of which the pre-war Progressives were a large component). Ebert became president, and Philipp Scheidemann (SPD) “prime minister” (later “chancellor”).

### Last phase

Workers’ struggle continued throughout Germany, as did the repression. On 4 February 1919, government troops and Free Corps units crushed the Bremen Council Republic. Between 3 and 16 March a strike wave under the leadership of the Stewards led to armed confrontations. From 9 to 16 March, a state of emergency was declared. Government troops and Free Corps units suppress the workers: about 2,000 people were killed, 1,600 arrested; KPD chair Leo Jogiches was killed on 10 March. For two months there was widespread unrest in Upper Silesia, the Ruhr Valley, Württemberg, Magdeburg, Leipzig, and other regions and towns, which was repressed by the military in late April. Between 8 and 14 April, the Second General Congress of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils of Germany was held in Berlin, but it did not rally the workers to continue to fight.

### Munich

The events in Munich closed this phase of the German revolution. In November 1918 a coalition government of USPD and SPD socialists, headed by Kurt Eisner and backed by the soldiers’



“Someone must play the bloodhound”- Gustav Noske, SPD politician

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and workers' councils, proclaimed a republic. However elections to the Bavarian State Assembly on 12 January 1919 demonstrated that the government did not enjoy majority support. Eisner decided to step down and was on his way to inform the State Assembly, which met for the first time on 21 February, when he was assassinated in Munich by a reactionary soldier.

The State Assembly convened on 18 March and gave full legal authority to a cabinet under SPD leader Johannes Hoffmann. On 7 April an ad hoc committee of the left seized power in Munich and proclaimed the Soviet Republic of Bavaria. KPD leader Eugen Leviné dubbed the new regime the "pseudo-Soviet Republic". Reactionary forces launched their first military attack on the Bavarian Council Republic on 13 April, but were repulsed by the KPD's Red Guards. KPD leaders took over the council republic's administration, and it became known as the "Second Council Republic".

On 1 May, government troops and Free Corps units marched into Munich and crushed the council republic. Over one thousand militant workers were killed. Anarchist Gustav Landauer was murdered. Leviné and other KPD leaders were subjected to a show trial. In court Leviné famously defied the threat of the death penalty, stating "We Communists are all dead men on leave". In July Leviné was executed for his role in the Bavarian Council Republic. The anarchist Erich Mühsam were sentenced to fifteen years of confinement in a fortress.

There would be other big workers' radicalisations and mobilisations, especially in March 1920 and in late 1923, but Germany capitalism and the core of its state machine had survived the first great wave of revolution, and would survive the events of 1920 and 1923 too.

## **Why is the German revolution relevant today?**

Why is the German revolution relevant today? First, it illustrates the extent and limits of workers' revolutions. On the positive side it brought an end to the First World War and deposed the monarchy. The inauguration of a democratic republic, including votes for women for the first time, were substantial gains for the German working class. However the revolution was at most political change rather than social transformation. It had the potential for much more because of the workers' own councils. The German Social Democrats and their liberal bourgeois allies failed to purge the government apparatus of monarchists and far-right nationalists. They left bourgeois property intact and reinforced bourgeois rule. They limited their own scope for action and ultimately signed their own death warrant by failing to mobilise against the Nazis' rise to power.

The German revolution is relevant today because of what it tells us about political actors in



*Spartacist militia in Berlin*

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revolutionary situations. The three months tested all the political forces on the left and found them wanting. Social democracy played a counter-revolutionary role. Their leaders were far more willing to license and encourage massive violence against former comrades than anyone could have imagined. It was a warning about how other social democrats would behave in the future. The USPD were centrists, torn between reform and revolution and unable to articulate an alternative way forward. The IKD were ultra-left, with no strategy for winning the working class for socialism. The revolution broke the militant Shop Stewards movement. Its best elements from the USPD left, including Müller and Däumig, eventually joined the KPD.

## The Spartacists

How should we evaluate the Spartacists? They played a heroic role in opposing the war, for which they faced harassment and imprisonment. They intervened in the anti-war strikes and in the November revolution, but did not lead events. In the aftermath of 10 November, Luxemburg and Liebknecht provided unsurpassed clarity on the political situation, particularly the survival of the bourgeois state apparatus intact apart from its figurehead. They were absolutely clear about the role of the SPD in ensuring bourgeois rule.

The Spartacists were right in their critique of the national assembly, but also that in the circumstances, the communists should have fielded candidates to make socialist propaganda. They were right to advocate work in the existing unions. Their sharp critique of the USPD, the Stewards, the IKD and the conduct of the councils was entirely necessary in the situation. They also provided the revolutionary socialist methodology to guide the working class movement:

“‘To be revolutionary means to always call things by their name’. These words of Lassalle are more important today than ever.”<sup>30</sup>

“Only indecision, halfheartedness, and haziness can put the revolution at risk. Everything that contributes to clarity, every disclosure of the truth only fuels its fire.”<sup>31</sup>

“Clarity, the most severe, the most determined struggle in the face of all attempts at hushing up, mediation and sogginess, the concentration of the revolutionary energy of the masses and the creation of appropriate organs for their leadership in struggle – those are the most burning tasks of the next period.”<sup>32</sup>

## Critique

Did the Spartacists overestimate the possibilities for workers taking power in January 1919? Historian Ottokar Luban argues:

“Rosa Luxemburg’s illusionary and unrealistic evaluations of the mood of the masses... Her existing tendency towards illusions on the proletariat’s readiness for action assumed extreme proportions during the January 1919 uprising. She had largely lost contact with the masses...”

“In my opinion, Rosa Luxemburg’s balance sheet of the January uprising [‘Order Reigns in Berlin’, 13 January] is one of self-deception, helplessness and a flight into an almost completely determinist picture, bereft of any hint of self-critical analysis.”<sup>33</sup>

This is too harsh. At least for a few days, Luxemburg was at least ambiguous on the idea of an attempt to seize power in January 1919 which could only have been premature. Her assessment of the situation was not as sharp as the balance sheet drawn by Radek on 9 January. But she also reminded her comrades, repeatedly, that conditions were “unripe”, and could only be made “ripe” by building the strength of the workers’ councils from below. Liebknecht and others like Pieck were far worse, lacking any sense of the balance of forces, any sober appreciation that the revolutionaries remained very much a minority current within the German working class movement. In short they did not follow their own Marxist approach: to start with the world as it is and then to draw political conclusions from this reality, including the relative strength of their own forces.

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## The party

In a recent history of the German revolution, William Pelz criticises those on the modern left who fault the German revolutionaries for not building a “Leninist” vanguard party. He claims that the German Revolution failed for more complex reasons than can be answered the lack of a Bolshevik-style party.<sup>34</sup> Whatever the complexities, the German working class showed huge revolutionary potential in 1918-23. And, to emancipate itself, even the strongest and most combative working class needs to develop, within its ranks, a class-conscious leadership. Even the best of the revolutionaries, grouped around Luxemburg, failed to provide the necessary leadership to transform the situation for workers’ power. The contrast with Russia in 1917 is stark: the strategy and tactics of the Bolshevik party, well rooted in the working class, made the difference between defeat and victory. For example, they enabled the Bolsheviks to navigate a premature upsurge by a section of the working class (the “July Days”) with much less disarray and damage than the KPD suffered in January 1919.

The KPD could have been built through better tactics in January 1919, pursuing joint struggles where possible with social democratic and USPD-supporting workers both on the economic front and at the level of democratising the state. Participation in the reformist unions and standing candidates in the national assembly elections would have certainly have expedited its growth. As Luxemburg’s programme stated, the revolutionaries could not take power without the backing of the majority of the working class. In the absence of such support, they needed what were later known as “united front” tactics, namely joint struggles for common goals by revolutionary and reformist workers. However things looked to the mostly very young and impatient members of the KPD(S) in 1919, neither the USPD nor the SPD were in fact “rotting corpses” then. They still contained hundreds of thousands of workers. In fact, they were growing rapidly, as hundreds of thousands of previously-politically-inactive workers came into political life, and most of them joined what they saw as the biggest, so maybe most likely to be effective, force proclaiming general socialist aims. The USPD had about 300,000 members at the end of January 1919, while the SPD had over a million in March that year.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that the KPD(S) was overwhelmed by the impatience and even romanticism of its young and inexperienced members in 1918-9 was linked to the fact that it set about organising and training itself as a coherent collective force so very late. Luxemburg had been one of the earliest critics of the Bernstein revisionist current within the SPD in the late 1890s. Her *Social Reform or Revolution* (1899) skewered those who argued that it was best to focus on immediate reforms, explaining that this meant the demise of the final goal of socialism and destroying the compass directing day to day struggles. From 1910, at least, that is, much earlier than Lenin, she became a severe critic of the centrist current around Karl Kautsky, which rationalised the SPD’s increasingly reformist parliamentary practice and its allies in the bureaucratic trade unions.

Yet Luxemburg and her co-thinkers did not draw the necessary political and organisational conclusions about the state of the labour movement. They did not organise a faction within the SPD. They had no publication of their own until late 1913 and after that only sporadically. They did not organise themselves for waging the class war either within the SPD or in the workplace. They did not create an organised force that during the war could have assembled, educated, and trained disillusioned social democratic workers, from the SPD, the USPD, or the Stewards, for the struggle for working class socialism. They did not create a compact and grounded cadre that could have guided the 1918-9 revolutionary upsurge to victory. It was their fatal mistake.

It might be a cliché to argue that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. For the sake of today’s struggle for socialism, every activist should study the lessons of the German revolution.

*Paul Vernadsky*

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## FURTHER READING

Pierre Broué (2005) *The German Revolution, 1917-1923.*

*Although first published (in French) as long ago as 1971, it remains the best account of the events from the war until 1923.*

John Riddell (1986) *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents, 1918-1919.*

*Many key documents from the war and 1918-19, good translations and helpful footnotes.*

Gabriel Kuhn (2012) *All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918-1919.*

*Range of Spartacist and Stewards' texts, including material from outside Berlin. Good translations. Sympathetic to the lefts.*

Norman LaPorte and Ralf Hoffrogge (2017) *Weimar Communism as Mass Movement 1918-1933.*

Ottokar Luban, 'The Role of the Spartacist Group after 9 November 1918 and the Formation of the KPD';

Gerhard Engel, 'The International Communists of Germany, 1916-1919'.

*Two very good chapters on the origins of the Communist Party, as well as other recent scholarship.*

Ottokar Luban (2004) 'Rosa at a Loss: The KPD Leadership and the Berlin Uprising of January 1919: Legend and Reality', *Revolutionary History*, Vol.8 No.4.

*Sharp critique of Liebknecht and Luxemburg during January 1919.*

Ralf Hoffrogge (2015) *Working Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement.*

*Recent account of working class militant organising during the war and revolution.*

Max Shachtman (2018) *In Defence of Bolshevism.*

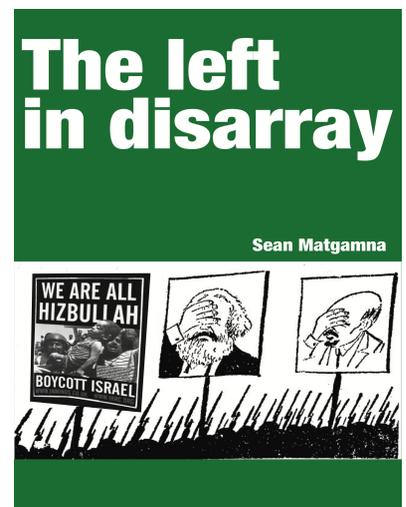
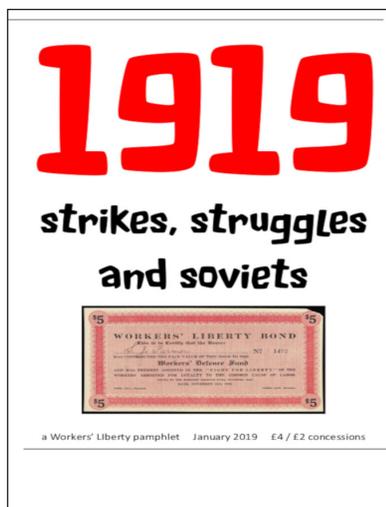
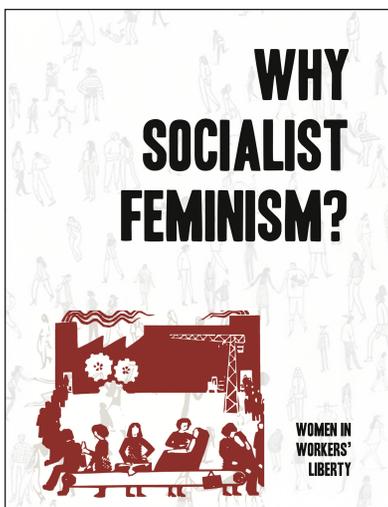
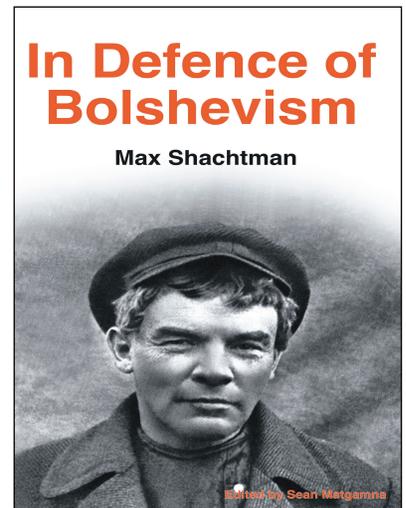
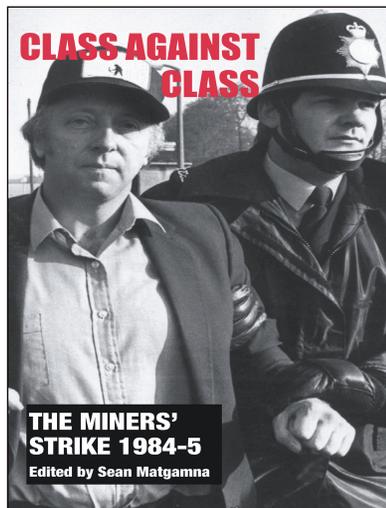
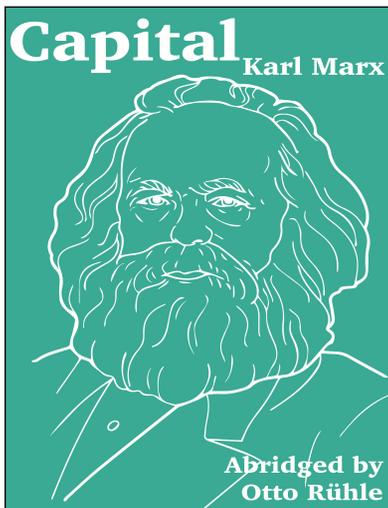
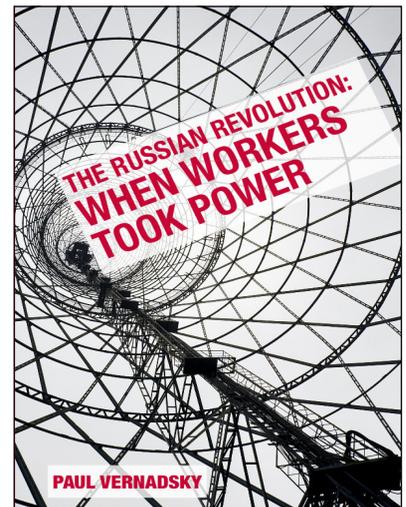
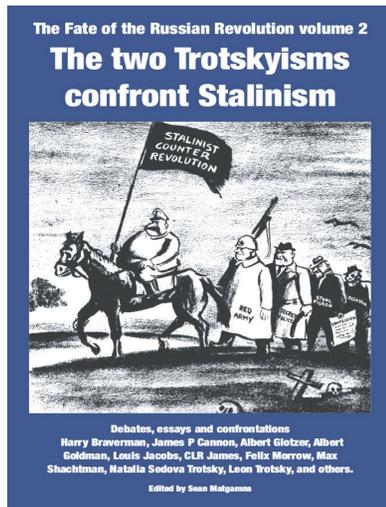
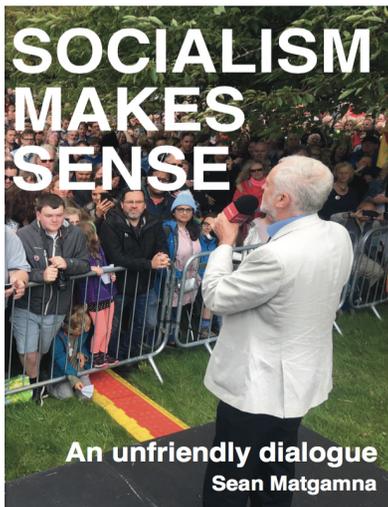
*This collection, edited and introduced by Sean Matgamna, includes a big article by Shachtman on Lenin and Luxemburg, Trotsky's article 'Hands off Rosa Luxemburg!', and Luxemburg's own 1906 article in which she clearly aligned herself with the Bolsheviks rather than the Mensheviks.*

Rosa Luxemburg's writings are engaging and sharp. There are many selections in English and much of their content is on the Marxist Internet Archive. Verso has published three volumes so far a Luxemburg "Complete Works" in English, with many new translations: there is an 8-volume "Collected Works" in German, but it omits a lot of Luxemburg's writings. The best biographies are by Peter Nettle and Paul Frölich.

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## THE BEGINNING

# 1. The Beginning

*18 November 1918*

The revolution has begun. What is needed now is not jubilation about what has been achieved nor triumphalism about the defeat of the enemy but the strictest self-criticism and an indefatigable concentration of energy in order to continue the work which has begun. What has been achieved is small and the enemy has not been defeated.

What has been achieved? The monarchy has been swept away, and the highest powers of government have passed into the hands of workers' and soldiers' representatives. But the monarchy was never the real enemy. It was only a façade, a frontispiece of imperialism. It was not the Hohenzollerns who unleashed the world war, who set alight all four corners of the world, and who brought Germany to the brink of the abyss.

Like every bourgeois government, the monarchy was only the executive agent of the ruling classes. The imperialist bourgeoisie, capitalist class-rule – that is the criminal who must be called to account for the carnage. The abolition of the rule of capital and the realisation of a socialist order of society: this and nothing less than this, is the historical theme of the current revolution.

This mighty act cannot be accomplished in a single moment of time by a few decrees passed down from above. It can be carried out only through the conscious action of the mass of urban and rural workers. It can be guided through storms and reach its harbour only as a result of the highest intellectual maturity and the inexhaustible idealism of the popular masses.

The goal of the revolution clearly shows the path to be followed – the task gives rise to the method. All power into the hands of the working masses, into the hands of the workers' and soldiers' councils, protection of the work of the revolution from its enemies who lie in wait. This is what must guide all measures taken by the revolutionary government.

Like a compass, every step and every act of the government must point in the one direction: Extension and renewal of the local workers' and soldiers' councils so that the first chaotic and impulsive manifestations of their creation are replaced by a conscious process of understanding their role in the goals, tasks and paths of the revolution. These representative bodies of the masses to be in permanent session, and real political power to be transferred from the small committee of the Executive Council to the broader basis of the workers' and soldiers' councils.

Immediate convocation of a national parliament of workers and soldiers in order to constitute the proletarians of all Germany as a class and as a compact political power, to act as the guardian of the revolution and give further impetus to its work.

Immediate organisation of the rural proletariat and smallholders – not the “farmers” – who, as a class, have been outside of the revolution until now.

Creation of a proletarian Red Guard for the permanent protection of the revolution and training a workers' militia so that the entire proletariat is ready to stand guard at all times.

Dissolution of the old organs of the absolutist-military police state: administration, justice and army.

Immediate confiscation of dynastic wealth, property and estates as a provisional initial measure to guarantee food for the people, since hunger is the most dangerous ally of the counter-revolution.

Immediate convocation of a Workers' World Congress in Germany in order to sharply and distinctly emphasise the socialist and international character of the revolution, for the future of the German revolution is anchored solely in the International, the world revolution of the proletariat.

This list comprises only the first necessary steps. But what is the current revolutionary government doing?

It is leaving the state intact from top to bottom as an administrative organ in the hands of yesterday's pillars of Hohenzollern absolutism and tomorrow's tools of the counter-revolution.

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It is convening the constituent National Assembly and thereby creates a bourgeois counter-weight to the representation of the workers and soldiers; in doing so it is shunting the revolution onto the tracks of a bourgeois revolution and spiriting away the socialist goals of the revolution.

It is doing nothing to destroy the continuing power of capitalist class rule.

It is doing everything it can to placate the bourgeoisie, to proclaim the sacred nature of private property, and to safeguard the inviolability of capital.

It is leaving in peace the counter-revolution to gather its forces at every stage without appealing to the masses and without loudly warning the people.

Law! Order! Order! Law! This is what reverberates from all directions and from all the government's proclamations. These are the cheers which echo from all quarters of the bourgeoisie.

The outcry against the bogeyman of "anarchy" and "putschism" – that well-known hellish music of the bourgeoisie, which is concerned only for its money-coffers, property and profits – strikes the loudest note of the day. But the revolutionary workers' and soldiers' government peacefully tolerates this general march towards the launch of an offensive against socialism. In fact, in both word and deed, it participates in it.

The result of the first week of the revolution is as follows: nothing fundamental has changed in the Hohenzollern state, the workers' and soldiers' government functions as the representative of the bankrupt imperialist government. Everything it does and does not do is determined by its fear of the working masses. Even before the revolution has gained in strength, impetus and momentum, its only vital force – its socialist and proletarian character – is being spirited away.

Order rules everywhere. The reactionary state of the civilised world will not become a revolutionary people's state within the space of 24 hours. Soldiers who yesterday acted as the gendarmes of reaction and murdered revolutionary proletarians in Finland, Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, and workers who calmly allowed this to happen – in the space of 24 hours they have not become standard-bearers of socialism with a clear understanding of their goals.

The picture of the German revolution corresponds to the inner maturity of conditions in Germany. Scheidemann-Ebert are the appointed government of the German revolution at its current stage. And the Independents who believe that they can achieve socialism with Scheidemann-Ebert and solemnly swear in the pages of *Freiheit* that a "purely socialist government" can be formed with them – they thereby demonstrate that they are the appropriate partners for this firm in this initial provisional stage.

But revolutions do not stand still. By their very nature they advance rapidly and outgrow themselves. The revolution is already being driven forwards from its initial stage by its internal contradictions. The current situation can be understood only as a beginning, as a condition which is unsustainable in the long term. If the counter-revolution is not to gain the upper hand all along the line, the masses must be on their guard.

A beginning has been made. What happens next is not in the hands of the dwarfs who want to hold up the course of the revolution and put a spoke in the wheel of world history. What is on the agenda of world history today is realisation of the ultimate goal of socialism.

The German revolution has entered upon the path marked out for it by this guiding light. Step by step, through storm and stress, through struggle and suffering, through misery and victory, it will advance to its goal.

It must!

Original: Der Anfang, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.3, 18 November 1918. Translation: Stan Crooke

# 2. A duty of honour

*18 November 1918*

We did not wish for amnesty, nor for pardon, in the case of the political prisoners, who had been the prey of the old order. We demanded the right to liberty, to agitation, to revolution for the hundreds of brave and loyal men who groaned in the jails and in the fortresses because, under the former dictatorship of Imperialist criminals, they had fought for the people, for peace, and for socialism.

They are all free now.

We find ourselves again in the ranks, ready for the battle.

It was not the clique of Scheidemann and his bourgeois allies, with Prince Max of Baden at their head that liberated us. It was the proletarian revolution that made the doors of our cells spring open.

But another class of unfortunate dwellers in those gloomy mansions has been completely forgotten. No one, at present, thinks of the pale and morbid figures which sigh behind prison walls because of offenses against ordinary law.

Nevertheless these are also the unfortunate victims of the infamous social order against which the revolution is directed – victims of the Imperialistic war which pushed distress and misery to the very limit of intolerable torture, victims of that frightful butchery of men which let loose all the vilest instincts.

The justice of the bourgeois classes had again been like a net, which allowed the voracious sharks to escape, while the little sardines were caught. The profiteers who have realised millions during the war have been acquitted or let off with ridiculous penalties. The little thieves, men and women, have been punished with sentences of draconian severity.

Worn out by hunger and cold, in cells which are hardly heated, these derelicts of society await mercy and pity.

They have waited in vain, for in his preoccupation with making the nations cut one another's throats and of distributing crowns, the last of the Hohenzollerns forgot these miserable people, and since the conquest of Liege there has been no amnesty, not even on the official holiday of German slaves, the Kaiser's birthday.

The proletarian revolution ought now, by a little ray of kindness, to illuminate the gloomy life of the prisons, shorten draconian sentences, abolish barbarous punishments – the use of manacles and whippings – improve, as far as possible, the medical attention, the food allowance, and the conditions of labour. That is a duty of honour!

The existing disciplinary system, which is impregnated with brutal class spirit and with capitalist barbarism, should be radically altered.

But a complete reform, in harmony with the spirit of socialism, can be based only on a new economic and social order; for both crime and punishment have, in the last analysis, their roots deep in the organisation of society. One radical measure, however, can be taken without any elaborate legal process. Capital punishment, the greatest shame of the ultra-reactionary German code, ought to be done away with at once. Why are there any hesitations on the part of this Government of workers and soldiers? The noble [Italian criminologist] Beccaria, two hundred years ago, denounced the ignominy of the death penalty. Doesn't its ignominy exist for you, Ledebour, Barth, Däumig?

You have no time, you have a thousand cares, a thousand difficulties, a thousand tasks before you? That is true. But mark, watch in hand, how much time would be needed to say: "Capital punishment is abolished!" Would you argue that, on this question also, long discussions followed by votes are necessary? Would you thus lose yourselves in the complications of formalism, in considerations of jurisdiction, in questions of departmental red tape?

## A DUTY OF HONOUR

Ah! How German this German revolution is! How argumentative and pedantic it is! How rigid, inflexible, lacking in grandeur!

The forgotten death penalty is only one little isolated detail. But how precisely the inner spirit, which governs the revolution, betrays itself in these little details!

Let one take up any ordinary history of the great French revolution. Let one take up the dry [historian] Mignet, for instance.

Can one read this book except with a beating heart and a burning brow? Can one, after having opened it, at no matter what page, put it aside before one has heard, with bated breath, the last chord of that formidable tragedy? It is like a symphony of Beethoven carried to the gigantic and the grotesque, a tempest thundering on the organ of time, great and superb in its errors as well as in its achievement, in victory as well as in defeat, in the first cry of naive joyfulness as well as in the final breath.

And now how is it with us in Germany?

Everywhere, in the small as in the great, one feels that these are still and always the old and sober citizens of the defunct Social-Democracy, those for whom the badge of membership is everything and the man and the spirit are nothing.

Let us not forget this, however. The history of the world is not made without grandeur of spirit, without lofty morale, without noble gestures.

Liebknecht and I, on leaving the hospitable halls which we recently inhabited – he, among his pale companions in the penitentiary, I with my dear, poor thieves and women of the streets, with whom I have passed, under the same roof, three years and a half of my life – we took this oath as they followed us with their sad eyes: “We shall not forget you!”

We demand of the executive committee of the Council of Workers and Soldiers an immediate amelioration of the lot of all the prisoners in the German jails!

We demand the excision of capital punishment from the German penal code!

During the four years of this slaughter of the peoples, blood has flowed in torrents. Today, each drop of that precious fluid ought to be preserved devotedly in crystal urns.

Revolutionary activity and profound humanitarianism – they alone are the true breath of socialism.

A world must be turned upside down. But each tear that flows, when it could have been spared, is an accusation, and he commits a crime who with brutal inadvertency crushes a poor earth-worm.

Original: Eine Ehrenpflicht, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.3, 18 November 1918

Source: *International Socialist Review*, Vol.30, No.1, January-February 1969, pp.5-6. Originally Maurice Berger, (1920) *Germany after the Armistice*. Marxist Internet Archive.

Translation: William L. McPherson

# 3. The National Assembly

20 November 1918

A unanimous call for the National Assembly, and an equally unanimous cry of fear at the thought of power in the hands of the working class.

This is what can be heard from the [newspapers] *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, the *Vossische* and *Vorwärts* through to the independent *Freiheit*, and from Reventlow, Erzberger and Scheidemann through to Haase and Kautsky.

The entire “people”, the entire “nation”, is to be called upon to determine by way of a majority decision the further destinies of the revolution.

As far as the open and disguised agents of the ruling classes are concerned, this slogan is a matter of course. But we will not enter into discussions with the guardians of capitalist wealth – neither in the National Assembly nor in relation to the National Assembly.

But in this decisive question even independent leaders are at one with the guardians of capital.

As explained by Hilferding in the pages of *Freiheit*, this is how they want to spare the revolution from the use of violence, and from civil war and all its horrors. Petty bourgeois illusions!

They conceive the course of the most powerful social revolution in the history of humanity as one in which various social classes come together, take part in a pleasant, relaxed and “dignified” discussion with one another, and then hold a vote – perhaps one still involving some famous parliamentary conventions.

When the capitalist class then becomes aware that it is in a minority, it will ruefully declare, being a well-disciplined parliamentary party, that there is nothing to be done; we can see that we have been outvoted! So be it! We bow down before this fact and hand over all our estates, factories and mines, all our fireproof money-coffers and handsome profits to the workers.

Truly, the species of Lamartines, Garniers, Pages, and Ledru-Rollins [French reformist politicians], the species of petty bourgeois illusionists and chatters of the year 1848 are not extinct. They have re-emerged – without glory or talent, and without the attraction of being something new – in the boring, pedantic, academic German version of Kautsky, Hilferding, and Haase.

These profound Marxists have forgotten the ABC of socialism.

They have forgotten that the bourgeoisie is not a parliamentary party but a ruling class which is in possession of all the means of economic and social power.

These gentlemen Junkers and capitalists are calm only as long as the revolutionary government makes do with sticking small cosmetic plasters over capitalist wage relations. They are well-behaved only as long as the revolution is well-behaved; as long as the vital nerve, the artery of bourgeois class rule (capitalist private property, the wage relation, and profit) remain untouched.

Once profit is attacked, once the days of private property are numbered, then that easy-going attitude is no more.

Once socialism becomes a serious force, the current idyll – in which wolves and sheep, and tigers and lambs, graze peacefully alongside one another, just as they did in Noah’s Ark – will not last a minute longer.

As soon as the much-vaunted National Assembly really decides to implement socialism in all respects and to eliminate every trace of the rule of capital, then the struggle gets underway as well.

If the bourgeoisie is delivered a blow to its heart – and its heart is to be found in its money-coffers – it will struggle to save its rule as a matter of life and death, it will unleash a thousand open and concealed forms of resistance against the socialist measures.

All of that is unavoidable. All of that must be fought through, repelled and crushed – with or without the National Assembly. The “civil war” which the fearful wish to banish from the revolution cannot be banished.

This is because civil war is just another name for class struggle. And to think that socialism

# THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY



*Die Freiheit ('Freedom') was the daily newspaper of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), edited by Rudolf Hilferding*

can be achieved without class struggle, that it can be achieved by way of a majority vote in parliament, is a laughable petty bourgeois illusion.

So what is to be achieved from this cowardly detour of the National Assembly?

The position of the bourgeoisie is strengthened. The proletariat is weakened and confused by empty illusions. And time and energy are lost and squandered in “discussions” between wolves and lambs.

In short, assistance is provided to all those elements whose purpose and intention are to deprive the proletarian revolution of its socialist goals, to emasculate that revolution, and to reduce it to a bourgeois-democratic revolution.

But the question of the National Assembly is not a question of whether or not to exploit an opportunity. Nor is it a question of what is more “convenient”. It is a question of principle, a question of the socialist understanding per se of the revolution.

In the great French Revolution the first decisive step was undertaken in July of 1789, when the separate Estates came together in a single National Assembly. This decision impacted on the entire subsequent course of events. It was the symbol of the victory of a

new bourgeois social order over the medieval feudal society of Estates.

In the same way, the new socialist order of society which is to be achieved by the current proletarian revolution and the class character of its actual tasks are symbolised by the class character of the political institution which is to carry out those tasks: the workers’ parliament, the representative body of the urban and rural proletariat.

The National Assembly is an outdated legacy of bourgeois revolutions, an empty shell lacking in content, a supposed requirement left over from the times of petty bourgeois illusions in a “united people” and in the “liberty, equality and fraternity” of the bourgeois state.

Today, whoever raises the call for a National Assembly is consciously or unconsciously turning the revolution back to the historical stage of bourgeois revolutions. He is either a covert agent of the bourgeoisie or an unconscious ideologist of the petty bourgeoisie.

The struggle for the National Assembly is being conducted under the slogan of democracy or dictatorship! The socialist leaders obediently adopt even this slogan of counter-revolutionary demagoguery, without noticing that this either-or is a demagogic falsehood.

Today it is not a question of democracy or dictatorship. The question which history has placed on the agenda is: bourgeois democracy or socialist democracy. Because dictatorship of the proletariat is democracy in a socialist sense.

Dictatorship of the proletariat is not a matter of bombs, putsches, riots and “anarchy”, as the agents of capitalist profit consciously misrepresent it. It is the use of all the means of political power to achieve socialism and to expropriate the capitalist class – in the interests of, and by the will of, the revolutionary majority of the proletariat. That is to say: in the spirit of socialist democracy.

Without the conscious will and the conscious deed of the majority of the proletariat – no socialism! In order to sharpen this consciousness, steel this will, organise this deed, what is needed is a class institution: the national parliament of the urban and rural proletariat.

The convocation of such a representative body of the working class in place of the traditional National Assembly of bourgeois revolutions is in itself already an act of class struggle, a break

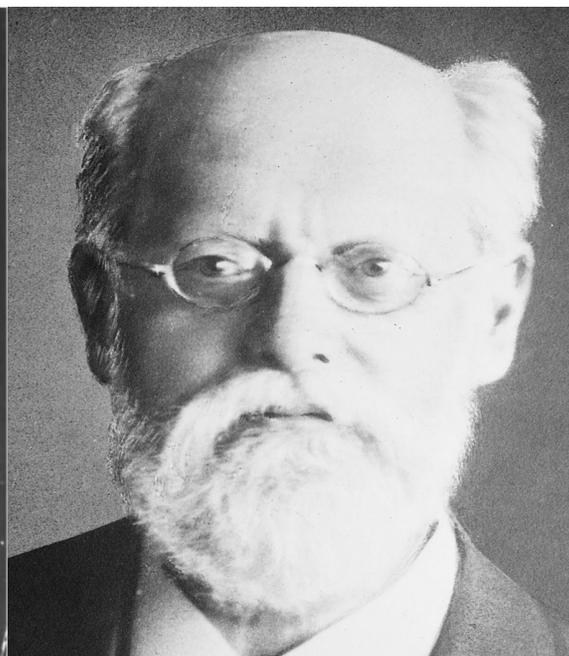
## THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

with the historical past of bourgeois society, a powerful means to arouse the proletarian masses, and a first open blunt declaration of war on capitalism.

No excuses, no ambiguities – the dice must be cast. Parliamentary cretinism was a weakness yesterday. It is an ambiguity today. And tomorrow it will be a betrayal of socialism.

Original: Die Nationalversammlung, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.5, 20 November 1918

Translation: Stan Crooke



*Top lefthand corner: Rudolf Hilferding was the editor of the USPD paper. He called on the party to focus on elections to the National Assembly but also supported workers' councils (as a supplement to the Assembly).*

*Top righthand corner: Karl Kautsky rationalised the SPD's increasingly reformist parliamentary practice and its accommodation to the bureaucratic trade union leaderships in the decade before the First World War. In 1917 he joined the USPD.*

*Bottom lefthand corner: Hugo Haase, a member of the USPD who left the Council of the People's Deputies in protest when Friedrich Ebert called on the army to violently suppress the revolutionary People's Naval Division in the Christmas clashes.*

## **4. A Call to the Workers of the World**

*25 November 1918. By Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin*

Proletarians! Men and Women of Labour! Comrades!

The revolution in Germany has come! The masses of the soldiers who for years were driven to slaughter for the sake of capitalistic profits; the masses of workers, who for four years were exploited, crushed, and starved, have revolted. Prussian militarism, that fearful tool of oppression, that scourge of humanity – lies broken on the ground. Its most noticeable representatives, and therewith the most noticeable of those guilty of this war, the Kaiser and the Crown Prince, have fled from the country. Workers' and Soldiers' Councils have been formed everywhere.

Workers of all countries, we do not say that in Germany all power actually lies in the hands of the working people, that the complete triumph of the proletarian revolution has already been attained. There still sit in the government all those socialists who in August 1914 abandoned our most precious possession, the [Socialist] International, who for four years betrayed the German working class and the International.

But, workers of all countries, now the German proletarian himself speaks to you. We believe we have the right to appear before your forum in his name. From the first day of this war we endeavoured to do our international duty by fighting that criminal government with all our power and branding it as the one really guilty of the war.

Now at this moment we are justified before history, before the International and before the German proletariat. The masses agree with us enthusiastically, constantly widening circles of the proletariat share the conviction that the hour has struck for a settlement with capitalistic class rule.

But this great task cannot be accomplished by the German proletariat alone; it can only fight and triumph by appealing to the solidarity of the proletarians of the whole world.

Comrades of the belligerent countries, we are aware of your situation. We know full well that your governments, now that they have won the victory, are dazzling the eyes of many strata of the people with the external brilliancy of their triumph. We know that they thus succeed through the success of the murdering in making its causes and aims forgotten.

But we also know that in your countries the proletariat made the most fearful sacrifices of flesh and blood, that it is weary of the dreadful butchery, that the proletarian is now returning to his home, and is finding want and misery there, while fortunes amounting to billions are heaped up in the hands of a few capitalists. He has recognised, and will continue to recognise, that your governments, too, have carried on the war for the sake of the big money bags. And he will further perceive that your governments, when they spoke of "justice and civilisation" and of the "protection of small nations," meant capitalist profits as surely as did ours when it talked about the "defence of home"; and that the peace of "justice" and of the "League of Nations" are but a part of the same base brigand that produced the peace of Brest-Litovsk. Here as well as there the same shameless lust for booty, the same desire for oppression, the same determination to exploit to the limit the brutal preponderance of murderous steel.

The Imperialism of all countries knows no "understanding," it knows only one right – capital's profits: it knows only one language – the sword: it knows only one method – violence. And if it is now talking in all countries, in yours as well ours, about the "League of Nations," "disarmament," "rights of small nations," "self-determination of the peoples," it is merely using the customary lying phrases of the rulers for the purpose of lulling to sleep the watchfulness of the proletariat.

## A CALL TO THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD

Proletarians of all countries! This must be the last war! We owe that to the twelve million murdered victims, we owe that to our children, we owe that to humanity.

Europe has been ruined by this damnable slaughter. Twelve million bodies cover the gruesome scenes of this imperialistic crime. The flower of youth and the best man power of the peoples have been mowed down. Uncounted productive forces have been annihilated. Humanity is almost ready to bleed to death from the unexampled blood-letting of history. Victors and vanquished stand at the edge of the abyss. Humanity is threatened with famine, a stoppage of the entire mechanism of production, plagues, and degeneration.

The great criminals of this fearful anarchy, of this unchained chaos – the ruling classes – are not able to control their own creation. The beast of capital that conjured up the hell of the world war is incapable of banishing it, of restoring real order, of insuring bread and work, peace and civilisation, justice and liberty, to tortured humanity.

What is being prepared by the ruling classes as peace and justice is only a new work of brutal force from which the hydra of oppression, hatred and fresh bloody wars raises its thousand heads.

Socialism alone is in a position to complete the great work of permanent peace, to heal the thousand wounds from which humanity is bleeding, to transform the plains of Europe, trampled down by the passage of the apocryphal horseman of war, into blossoming gardens, to conjure up ten productive forces for every one destroyed, to awaken all the physical and moral energies of humanity, and to replace hatred and dissension with internal solidarity, harmony, and respect for every human being.

If representatives of the proletarians of all countries could but clasp hands under the banner of Socialism for the purpose of making peace, then peace would be concluded in a few hours. Then there will be no disputed questions about the left bank of the Rhine, Mesopotamia, Egypt or colonies. Then there will be only one people: the toiling human beings of all races and tongues. Then there will be only one right: the equality of all humanity. Then there will be only one aim: prosperity and progress for everybody.

Humanity is facing the alternative: Dissolution and downfall in capitalist anarchy, or regeneration through the social revolution. The hour of fate has struck. If you believe in socialism, it is now time to show it by deeds. If you are socialists, now is the time to act.

Proletarians of all countries, if we now summon you for a common struggle it is not done for the sake of the German capitalists who, under the label of “German nation,” are trying to escape the consequences of their own crimes: it is being done for your sake as well as for ours. Remember that your victorious capitalists stand ready to suppress in blood our revolution, which they fear as they do their own. You yourselves have not become any freer through the “victory,” you have only become still more enslaved. If your ruling classes succeed in throttling the proletarian revolution in Germany, and in Russia, then they will turn against you with redoubled violence. Your capitalists hope that victory over us and over revolutionary Russia will give them the power to scourge you with a whip of scorpions.

Therefore the proletariat of Germany looks toward you in this hour. Germany is pregnant with



*Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg*

## A CALL TO THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD

the social revolution, but socialism can only be realised by the proletariat of the world.

And therefore, we call to you: “Arise for the struggle! Arise for action! The time for empty manifestos, platonic resolutions, and high-sounding words is gone! The hour of action has struck for the International!” We ask you to elect Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils everywhere that will seize political power, and together with us, will restore peace.

Not Lloyd George and Poincare, not Sonnino, Wilson, and Erzberger or Scheidemann, must be allowed to make peace. Peace must be concluded under the waving banner of the Socialist world revolution.

Proletarians of all countries! We call upon you to complete the work of socialist liberation, to give a human aspect to the disfigured world and to make true those words with which we often greeted each other in the old days and which we sang as we parted: “And the Internationale shall be the human race”.

Original: An die Proletarier aller Länder, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.10, 25 November 1918

Source: *The Revolutionary Age*, Vol.I No.29, 3 May 1919. Marxist Internet Archive

Translation: A. Lehrer



*Revolutionaries holding a placard saying “Brothers! Don’t shoot!”, January 1919*

# 5. The Acheron in Motion

*27 November 1918*

The pretty little plans for a well-behaved, tame and “constitutional” German revolution which preserves “law and order” and regards the protection of capitalist private property as its primary and most pressing task – this little plan is going to the dogs. The depths have begun to stir!

On its surface, in government circles, an amicable and peaceful agreement with the bourgeoisie is being maintained by all possible means. In its depth the mass of the proletariat is rising up and shakes a threatening fist: the strikes have begun! There are strikes in Upper Silesia, the workers in Daimler are on strike, etc. But this is just the beginning. By its very nature the movement will unleash ever larger and ever more powerful waves.

And how could it be otherwise? A revolution has taken place. Workers, proletarians – whether in uniform or in overalls – have made it. In the government there are socialists, representatives of the workers. But what has changed for the mass of the workers in terms of their daily wages and living conditions? Nothing at all, or as good as nothing at all! No sooner have a few miserable concessions been made here and there than the employers attempt to spirit away from the proletariat even these trifles.

The masses are consoled with the promise of the golden fruits which are to fall into their lap from the National Assembly. Through long debates, through wordy speeches and decisions by parliamentary majorities, we are to meekly and “peacefully” creep into the promised land of socialism. The healthy class instinct of the proletariat rebels against the schema of parliamentary cretinism. “The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself,” is how the Communist Manifesto puts it.

And “working class” does not mean a few hundred elected representatives who determine the destiny of society by way of speeches and counter-speeches. Even less so does it mean the two or three dozen leaders who hold office in the government. Working class means the broad mass itself. It is only through active participation by the masses in the overthrow of capitalist relations that the socialisation of the economy can be prepared. Instead of waiting for government decrees to bring us happiness, or waiting for the decisions of the much-vaunted National Assembly, the masses instinctively resort to the only effective means which leads to socialism: the struggle against capital.

Until now the government has devoted all its energies to castrating the revolution, to reducing it to a political one, and to establishing class harmony by raising an outcry against the threats to “law and order”. The mass of the proletariat is calmly knocking down this house of cards of revolutionary class harmony and waving the feared banner of class struggle. The strike movement which is now beginning is proof that the political revolution has penetrated into the social foundations of society. The revolution recalls its own original purpose, it pushes aside the paper backdrop of some people being replaced by others, it pushes aside the decrees which have hitherto not yet made the slightest difference to the social relation between capital and labour, and it itself emerges onto the stage of history.

The bourgeoisie certainly feels that its Achilles heel has been touched here, that the farce of meaningless actions by the government has now come to an end, and that in its place there now begins in deadly seriousness the face-to-face struggle of two mortal enemies. This is the reason for the pallid fear and the hoarse anger directed at the strikes. This is the reason for the fevered efforts of the trade union leaders who have subordinated themselves to the bourgeoisie to catch the gathering hurricane in the nets of their old bureaucratic-official methods and to paralyse and enchain the masses. Vain efforts! In the period of political stagnation which preceded the world war the petty chains of trade union diplomacy in the service of capital admirably proved their value. In the period of revolution they will fail miserably.

## THE ACHERON IN MOTION

Every bourgeois revolution in modern times was accompanied by a turbulent strike movement: just as much in France at the close of the eighteenth century and in the July and February revolutions as in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. In a society based on exploitation and oppression, every great social upheaval naturally gives rise to violent class conflicts. As long as bourgeois class society remains in a state of equilibrium as a result of its parliamentary routinism, the proletarian will also patiently walk the treadmill of waged labour, and his strikes will have the character of no more than minor corrections to a system of wage slavery which appears to be unshakeable.

But as soon as that class equilibrium has been shattered by a revolutionary storm, strikes cease to be gentle ripples on the surface and become potential tidal waves. The depths themselves begin to stir. The slave rebels not just against the painful pressure of his chains but against the chains themselves. This was so in all bourgeois revolutions to date. On the completion of these revolutions, which always resulted in the consolidation of bourgeois class society, the proletarian slave rebellions generally collapsed and the proletarian returned demoralised to the treadmill.

In the current revolution the strikes which have just broken out are not a “trade union” struggle for trifles, concerned only with the details of the wages system. They are the natural response of the masses to the mighty convulsions experienced by capital as a result of the collapse of German imperialism and the brief revolution of the workers and soldiers. They are the first beginnings of a generalised conflict between capital and labour in Germany, they herald the onset of the mighty and direct struggle between classes, the outcome of which can only be the end of the wages system and the introduction of the socialist economy. They release the vital social force of the current revolution: the revolutionary class energy of the proletarian masses. They inaugurate the period of direct activity by the broadest masses – that activity which the socialisation decrees and measures of any representative body or government can do no more than accompany.

This strike movement which is now getting underway is also the sharpest criticism by the masses of the fanciful illusions about the National Assembly entertained by their so-called “leaders”. They already have the “majority” – the striking proletarians in the factories and mines! What idiots these people are! Why haven’t they invited their boss to a small “debate”, in order to out-vote them with an “overwhelming majority” and then achieve all their demands without a hitch and “in good order”? Is it not, after all, for the time being, formally a matter of genuine trifles, of purely superficial features of the wages system? Let Herr Ebert or Haase try to approach the striking miners of Upper Silesia with such a stupid plan. They can be guaranteed an appropriate response. But what bursts like a soap bubble on the occasion of a demand for mere trifles is supposed to be capable of achieving the downfall of the entire social structure.

Merely through their emergence onto the scene of the social class struggle the proletarian masses have gone beyond all the previous shortcomings, the lack of resolve and the timidity of the revolution. They are now dealing with the matters at hand.

The depths have begun to stir, and the dwarfs who play their silly games at the head of the revolution will either tumble head over heels or will finally learn to understand the colossal significance of the world-historical drama in which they are participants.

Original: Der Acheron in Bewegung, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.12, 27 November 1918

Translation: Stan Crooke

The title is an allusion to famous lines in the Latin poet Virgil: *flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo* – “If I cannot deflect the will of Heaven, I shall move the underworld”. Ferdinand Lassalle used it on the cover of his book, *The Italian War and the Tasks of Prussia: A Voice of Democracy* (1859). Engels’ preface to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto quotes the declaration “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself”, MECW 26 p.517, from Marx, (October 1864) *The International Workingmen’s Association, General Rules*, MECW 20: 14

# 6. The Socialisation of Society

*4 December 1918*

The revolution that has just begun can have but one outcome: the realisation of socialism! The working class, in order to accomplish its purpose, must, first of all, secure entire political control of the state. But to the socialist, political power is only a means to an end. It is the instrument with which labour will achieve the complete, fundamental reconstruction of our entire industrial system.

Today all wealth, the largest and most fruitful tracts of land, the mines, the mills, and the factories belong to a small group of Junkers and private capitalists. From them the great masses of the labouring class receive a scanty wage in return for long hours of arduous toil, hardly enough for a decent livelihood. The enrichment of a small class of idlers is the purpose and end of present-day society. To give to modern society and to modern production a new impulse and a new purpose - that is the foremost duty of the revolutionary working class.

To this end, all social wealth, the land and all that it produces, the factories and the mills must be taken from their exploiting owners to become the common property of the entire people. It thus becomes the foremost duty of a revolutionary government of the working class to issue a series of decrees making all important instruments of production national property and placing them under social control.

But this is only the first step. The most difficult task, the creation of an industrial state upon an entirely new foundation, has only just begun. Today production in every manufacturing unit is conducted by the individual capitalist independently of all others. What and where commodities are to be produced, where, when, and how the finished product is to be sold, is decided by the individual capitalist owner. Nowhere does labour have the slightest influence upon these questions. It is simply the living machine that has its work to do. In a socialist state of society all this will be changed. Private ownership of the means of production and subsistence must disappear.

Production will be carried on not for the enrichment of the individual but solely for the creation of a supply of commodities sufficient to supply the wants and needs of the working class. Accordingly factories, mills, and farms must be operated upon an entirely new basis, from a wholly different point of view. In the first place, now that production is to be carried on for the sole purpose of securing to all a more humane existence, of providing for all plentiful food, clothing and other cultural means of subsistence, the productivity of labour must be materially increased. Farms must be made to yield richer crops, the most advanced technical processes must be introduced into the factories, of the mines only the most productive, for the present, must be intensively exploited. It follows, therefore, that the process of socialisation will begin with the most highly developed industries and farm lands. We need not, and will not, deprive the small farmer or artisan of the bit of land or the little workshop from which he ekes out a meagre existence by the work of his own hands. As time goes by he will realise the superiority of socialised production over private ownership and will come to us of his own accord.

In order that all members of society may enjoy prosperity, all must work. Only he who performs useful service to society, manual or mental, will be entitled to a share of products for the satisfaction of his needs and desires. Idleness must cease and in its stead will come universal compulsory labour for all who are physically capable. Obviously those who are unable to work, children, invalids and the aged, must be supported by society. But not as it is done to-day, by niggardly charity. Bountiful sustenance, socialised education for the children, comfortable care for the aged, public health service for the sick - these must form an important part of our social structure.

For the same reason, i.e., in the interest of general welfare, society will be more economical, more rational in the utilisation of its commodities, its means of production and its labour power.

Waste such as we find today on every hand, must cease. The production of munitions and other

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implements of warfare must pass out of existence, for a socialist state of society needs no tools of murder. Instead the precious materials and the enormous labour power that were devoted to this purpose will be used for useful production. The manufacture of useless and costly foolishness for the edification of wealthy idlers will stop. Personal service will be prohibited, and the labour power thus released will find more useful and more worthy employment.

While we are thus creating a nation of workers where all must be productively employed for the general welfare, labour itself must be completely revolutionised. Today labour in industry, on the farm and in the office is usually a torture and a burden to the proletarian. Men and women work because they must in order to obtain the necessities of life. In a socialist state of society, where all work together for their own well-being, the health of the individual worker, and his joy in his work must be conscientiously fostered and sustained. Short hours of labour not in excess of the normal human capacity must be established; recreation and rest periods must be introduced into the workday, so all may do their share, willingly and joyously.

But the success of such reforms depends upon the human beings who will carry them out. Today the capitalist with his whip stands behind the working-man, in person or in the form of a manager or overseer. Hunger drives the worker to the factory, to the Junker, or the farm-owner into the business office. Everywhere, the employer sees to it that no time is wasted, no material squandered, and that good, efficient work is done.

In a socialist state of society the capitalist with his whip disappears. Here all working men are free and on an equal footing, working for benefit and enjoyment, tolerating no waste of social wealth, rendering honest and punctual service. To be sure, every socialist plant needs its technical superintendents who understand its workings, who are able to supervise production so that everything runs smoothly, to assure an output commensurate with the labour power expended by organising the process of manufacture according to most efficient methods. To insure successful production the individual working-man must follow his instructions entirely and willingly, must maintain discipline and order, and cause no friction or confusion.

In a word: the worker in a socialist industrial state, must show that they can work decently and diligently, without capitalists and slave-drivers behind their back; that of their own volition they can maintain discipline and do their best. This demands mental discipline, moral stamina; it demands a feeling of self-respect and responsibility, a spiritual rebirth of the worker.

Socialism cannot be realised with lazy, careless, egotistic, thoughtless, and shiftless men and women. A socialist state of society needs people of whom everyone is full of enthusiasm and fervour for the general welfare, full of a spirit of self-sacrifice and sympathy for their fellow human beings, full of courage and tenacity, and the willingness to dare even against the greatest odds.

But we need not wait centuries or decades until such a race of human beings shall grow up. The struggle, where the revolution will teach the proletarian masses idealism, has given them mental ripeness, courage and perseverance, clearness of purpose and a self-sacrificing spirit; all this being necessary for victory. While we are enlisting fighters for the revolution, we are creating socialist workers for the future, workers who can become the basis of a new social state.

The young people of the proletariat are ordained to carry out this great work as the true foundation of the socialist state. They must show, even now, that they are equal to the great task of bearing the future of the human race upon their shoulders. There is still an old world to be overthrown. A new world must be built!

Original: Der Sozialisierung der Gesellschaft, *Junge Garde*, 4 December 1918

Source: *The Class Struggle*, Vol III, No.3, August 1919. Marxist Internet Archive

Translation: Not known

## WHAT DOES THE SPARTACUS LEAGUE WANT?

# 7. What does the Spartacus League Want?

*14 December 1918*

On the ninth of November, workers and soldiers smashed the old German regime. The Prussian sabre's mania of world rule had bled to death on the battlefields of France. The gang of criminals who sparked a worldwide conflagration and drove Germany into an ocean of blood had come to the end of its rope. The people – betrayed for four years, having forgotten culture, honesty, and humanity in the service of the Moloch [evil god], available for every obscene deed – awoke from its four-year long paralysis, only to face the abyss.

On the 9 November, the German proletariat rose up to throw off the shameful yoke. The Hohenzollerns were driven out; workers' and soldiers' councils were elected.

But the Hohenzollerns were no more than the front men of the imperialist bourgeoisie and of the Junkers. The class rule of the bourgeoisie is the real criminal responsible for the World War, in Germany as in France, in Russia as in England, in Europe as in America. The capitalists of all nations are the real instigators of the mass murder. International capital is the insatiable god Baal, into whose bloody maw millions upon millions of steaming human sacrifices are thrown.

The World War confronts society with the choice: either continuation of capitalism, new wars, and imminent decline into chaos and anarchy, or abolition of capitalist exploitation.

With the conclusion of world war, the class rule of the bourgeoisie has forfeited its right to existence. It is no longer capable of leading society out of the terrible economic collapse which the imperialist orgy has left in its wake.

Means of production have been destroyed on a monstrous scale. Millions of able workers, the finest and strongest sons of the working class, slaughtered. Awaiting the survivors' return stands the leering misery of unemployment. Famine and disease threaten to sap the strength of the people at its root. The financial bankruptcy of the state, due to the monstrous burdens of the war debt, is inevitable.

Out of all this bloody confusion, this yawning abyss, there is no help, no escape, no rescue other than socialism. Only the revolution of the world proletariat can bring order into this chaos, can bring work and bread for all, can end the reciprocal slaughter of the peoples, can restore peace, freedom, true culture to this martyred humanity. Down with the wage system! That is the slogan of the hour! Instead of wage labour and class rule there must be collective labour. The means of production must cease to be the monopoly of a single class; they must become the common property of all. No more exploiters and exploited! Planned production and distribution of the product in the common interest. Abolition not only of the contemporary mode of production, mere exploitation and robbery, but equally of contemporary commerce, mere fraud.

In place of the employers and their wage slaves, free working comrades! Labour as nobody's torture, because everybody's duty! A human and honourable life for all who do their social duty. Hunger no longer the curse of labour, but the scourge of idleness!

Only in such a society are national hatred and servitude uprooted. Only when such a society has become reality will the earth no more be stained by murder. Only then can it be said: This war was the last.

In this hour, socialism is the only salvation for humanity. The words of the Communist Manifesto flare like a fiery menetekel [sign of impending doom] above the crumbling bastions of capitalist society: Socialism or barbarism!

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### II

The establishment of the socialist order of society is the mightiest task which has ever fallen to a class and to a revolution in the history of the world. This task requires a complete transformation of the state and a complete overthrow of the economic and social foundations of society.

This transformation and this overthrow cannot be decreed by any bureau, committee, or parliament. It can be begun and carried out only by the masses of people themselves.

In all previous revolutions a small minority of the people led the revolutionary struggle, gave it aim and direction, and used the mass only as an instrument to carry its interests, the interests of the minority, through to victory. The socialist revolution is the first which is in the interests of the great majority and can be brought to victory only by the great majority of the working people themselves.

The mass of the proletariat must do more than stake out clearly the aims and direction of the revolution. It must also personally, by its own activity, bring socialism step by step into life.

The essence of socialist society consists in the fact that the great labouring mass ceases to be a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscious, free, and autonomous direction.

From the uppermost summit of the state down to the tiniest parish, the proletarian mass must therefore replace the inherited organs of bourgeois class rule – the assemblies, parliaments, and city councils – with its own class organs – with workers' and soldiers' councils. It must occupy all the posts, supervise all functions, measure all official needs by the standard of its own class interests and the tasks of socialism. Only through constant, vital, reciprocal contact between the masses of the people and their organs, the workers' and soldiers' councils, can the activity of the people fill the state with a socialist spirit.

The economic overturn, likewise, can be accomplished only if the process is carried out by proletarian mass action. The naked decrees of socialisation by the highest revolutionary authorities are by themselves empty phrases. Only the working class, through its own activity, can make the word flesh. The workers can achieve control over production, and ultimately real power, by means



*Revolutionary soldiers in Berlin on 9 November 1918*

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of tenacious struggle with capital, hand-to-hand, in every shop, with direct mass pressure, with strikes and with the creation of its own permanent representative organs.

From dead machines assigned their place in production by capital, the proletarian masses must learn to transform themselves into the free and independent directors of this process. They have to acquire the feeling of responsibility proper to active members of the collectivity which alone possesses ownership of all social wealth. They have to develop industriousness without the capitalist whip, the highest productivity without slave drivers, discipline without the yoke, order without authority. The highest idealism in the interest of the collectivity, the strictest self-discipline, the truest public spirit of the masses are the moral foundations of socialist society, just as stupidity, egotism, and corruption are the moral foundations of capitalist society.

All these socialist civic virtues, together with the knowledge and skills necessary to direct socialist enterprises, can be won by the mass of workers only through their own activity, their own experience.

The socialisation of society can be achieved only through tenacious, tireless struggle by the working mass along its entire front, on all points where labour and capital, people and bourgeois class rule, can see the whites of one another's eyes. The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself.

### III

During the bourgeois revolutions, bloodshed, terror, and political murder were an indispensable weapon in the hand of the rising classes.

The proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing. It does not need these weapons because it does not combat individuals but institutions, because it does not enter the arena with naïve illusions whose disappointment it would seek to revenge. It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mould the world forcibly according to its ideal, but the action of the great massive millions of the people, destined to fulfil a historic mission and to transform historical necessity into reality.

But the proletarian revolution is at the same time the death knell for all servitude and oppression. That is why all capitalists, Junkers, petty bourgeois, officers, all opportunists and parasites of exploitation and class rule rise up to a man to wage mortal combat against the proletarian revolution.

It is sheer insanity to believe that capitalists would good-humouredly obey the socialist verdict of a parliament or of a national assembly, that they would calmly renounce property, profit, the right to exploit. All ruling classes fought to the end, with tenacious energy, to preserve their privileges. The Roman patricians and the medieval feudal barons alike, the English cavaliers and the American slave dealers, the Wallachian boyars and the Lyonnais silk manufacturers – they all shed streams of blood, they all marched over corpses, murder, and arson, instigated civil war and treason, in order to defend their privileges and their power.

The imperialist capitalist class, as last offspring of the caste of exploiters, outdoes all its predecessors in brutality, in open cynicism and treachery. It defends its holiest of holies, its profit and its privilege of exploitation, with tooth and nail, with the methods of cold evil which it demonstrated to the world in the entire history of colonial politics and in the recent World War. It will mobilise heaven and hell against the proletariat. It will mobilise the peasants against the cities, the backward strata of the working class against the socialist vanguard; it will use officers to instigate atrocities; it will try to paralyse every socialist measure with a thousand methods of passive resistance; it will force a score of Vendées [local reactionary uprisings] on the revolution; it will invite the foreign enemy, the murderous weapons of Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Wilson into the country to rescue it – it will turn the country into a smoking heap of rubble rather than voluntarily give up wage slavery.

All this resistance must be broken step by step, with an iron fist and ruthless energy. The violence of the bourgeois counter-revolution must be confronted with the revolutionary violence of

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the proletariat. Against the attacks, insinuations, and rumours of the bourgeoisie must stand the inflexible clarity of purpose, vigilance, and ever ready activity of the proletarian mass. Against the threatened dangers of the counter-revolution, the arming of the people and disarming of the ruling classes. Against the parliamentary obstructionist manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie, the active organisation of the mass of workers and soldiers. Against the omnipresence, the thousand means of power of bourgeois society, the concentrated, compact, and fully developed power of the working class. Only a solid front of the entire German proletariat, the south German together with the north German, the urban and the rural, the workers with the soldiers, the living, spirited identification of the German Revolution with the International, the extension of the German Revolution into a world revolution of the proletariat can create the granite foundations on which the edifice of the future can be constructed.

The fight for socialism is the mightiest civil war in world history, and the proletarian revolution must procure the necessary tools for this civil war; it must learn to use them – to struggle and to win.

Such arming of the solid mass of labouring people with all political power for the tasks of the revolution - that is the dictatorship of the proletariat and therefore true democracy. Nowhere the wage slave sits next to the capitalist, the rural proletarian next to the Junker in fraudulent equality to engage in parliamentary debate over questions of life or death, but where the million-headed proletarian mass seizes the entire power of the state in its calloused fist – like the god Thor his hammer – using it to smash the head of the ruling classes: that alone is democracy, that alone is not a betrayal of the people.

In order to enable the proletariat to fulfil these tasks, the Spartacus League demands:

### **I. As immediate measures to protect the revolution:**

1. Disarmament of the entire police force and of all officers and non-proletarian soldiers; disarmament of all members of the ruling classes.

2. Confiscation of all weapons and munitions stocks as well as armaments factories by workers' and soldiers' councils.

3. Arming of the entire adult male proletarian population as a workers' militia. Creation of a Red Guard of proletarians as an active part of the militia for the constant protection of the Revolution against counter-revolutionary attacks and subversions.

4. Abolition of the command authority of officers and non-commissioned officers. Replacement of the military "cadaver discipline" [slavish, unthinking obedience] by voluntary discipline of the soldiers. Election of all officers by their units, with right of immediate recall at any time. Abolition of the system of military justice.

5. Expulsion of officers and capitulationists from all soldiers' councils.

6. Replacement of all political organs and authorities of the former regime by delegates of the workers' and soldiers' councils.

7. Establishment of a revolutionary tribunal to try the chief criminals responsible for starting and prolonging the war, the Hohenzollerns, Ludendorff, Hindenburg, Tirpitz, and their accomplices, together with all the conspirators of counter-revolution.

8. Immediate confiscation of all foodstuffs to secure the feeding of the people.

### **II. In the political and social realm:**

1. Abolition of all principalities; establishment of a united German Socialist Republic.

2. Elimination of all parliaments and municipal councils, and takeover of their functions by workers' and soldiers' councils, and of the latter's committees and organs.

3. Election of workers' councils in all Germany by the entire adult working population of both sexes, in the city and the countryside, by enterprises, as well as of soldiers' councils by the troops (officers and capitulationists excluded). The right of workers and soldiers to recall their representatives at any time.

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4. Election of delegates of the workers' and soldiers' councils in the entire country to the central council of the workers' and soldiers' councils, which is to elect the executive council as the highest organ of the legislative and executive power.

5. Meetings of the central council provisionally at least every three months – with new elections of delegates each time – in order to maintain constant control over the activity of the executive council, and to create an active identification between the masses of workers' and soldiers' councils in the nation and the highest governmental organ. Right of immediate recall by the local workers' and soldiers' councils and replacement of their representatives in the central council, should these not act in the interests of their constituents. Right of the executive council to appoint and dismiss the people's commissioners as well as the central national authorities and officials.

6. Abolition of all differences of rank, all orders and titles. Complete legal and social equality of the sexes.

7. Radical social legislation. Shortening of the labour day to control unemployment and in consideration of the physical exhaustion of the working class by world war. Maximum working day of six hours.

8. Immediate basic transformation of the food, housing, health and educational systems in the spirit and meaning of the proletarian revolution.

### III. Immediate economic demands:

1. Confiscation of all dynastic wealth and income for the collectivity.

2. Repudiation of the state and other public debt together with all war loans, with the exception of sums of certain level to be determined by the central council of the workers' and soldiers' councils.

3. Expropriation of the lands and fields of all large and medium agricultural enterprises; formation of socialist agricultural collectives under unified central direction in the entire nation. Small peasant holdings remain in the possession of their occupants until the latter's voluntary association with the socialist collectives.

4. Expropriation by the council republic of all banks, mines, smelters, together with all large enterprises of industry and commerce.

5. Confiscation of all wealth above a level to be determined by the central council.

6. Takeover of the entire public transportation system by the councils' republic.

7. Election of enterprise councils in all enterprises, which, in coordination with the workers' councils, have the task of ordering the internal affairs of the enterprises, regulating working conditions, controlling production and finally taking over direction of the enterprise.

8. Establishment of a central strike commission which, in constant collaboration with the enterprise councils, will furnish the strike movement now beginning throughout the nation with a unified leadership, socialist direction and the strongest support by the political power of the workers' and soldiers' councils.

### IV. International tasks

Immediate establishment of ties with the fraternal parties in other countries, in order to put the socialist revolution on an international footing and to shape and secure the peace by means of international brotherhood and the revolutionary uprising of the world proletariat.

### V. That is what the Spartacus League wants!

And because that is what it wants, because it is the voice of warning, of urgency, because it is the socialist conscience of the Revolution, it is hated, persecuted, and defamed by all the open and secret enemies of the Revolution and the proletariat.

Crucify it! shout the capitalists, trembling for their cashboxes.

Crucify it! shout the petty bourgeois, the officers, the anti-Semites, the press lackeys of the bourgeoisie, trembling for their fleshpots under the class rule of the bourgeoisie.

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Crucify it! shout the Scheidemanns, who, like Judas Iscariot, have sold the workers to the bourgeoisie and tremble for their pieces of silver.

Crucify it! repeat like an echo the deceived, betrayed, abused strata of the working class and the soldiers who do not know that, by raging against the Spartacus League, they rage against their own flesh and blood.

In their hatred and defamation of the Spartacus League, all the counter-revolutionaries, all enemies of the people, all the anti-socialist, ambiguous, obscure, and unclear elements are united. That is proof that the heart of the revolution beats within the Spartacus League, that the future belongs to it.

The Spartacus League is not a party that wants to rise to power over the mass of workers or through them.

The Spartacus League is only the most conscious, purposeful part of the proletariat, which points the entire broad mass of the working class toward its historical tasks at every step, which represents in each particular stage of the Revolution the ultimate socialist goal, and in all national questions the interests of the proletarian world revolution.

The Spartacus League refuses to participate in governmental power with the lackeys of the bourgeoisie, with the Scheidemann-Eberts, because it sees in such collaboration a betrayal of the fundamentals of socialism, a strengthening of the counter-revolution, and a weakening of the revolution.

The Spartacus League will also refuse to enter the government just because Scheidemann-Ebert are going bankrupt and the Independents, by collaborating with them, are in a dead end street.

The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat's conscious affirmation of the views, aims, and methods of struggle of the Spartacus League.

The proletarian revolution can reach full clarity and maturity only by stages, step by step, on the Golgotha-path of its own bitter experiences in struggle, through defeats and victories.

The victory of the Spartacus League comes not at the beginning, but at the end of the revolution: it is identical with the victory of the great million-strong masses of the socialist proletariat.

Proletarian, arise! To the struggle! There is a world to win and a world to defeat. In this final class struggle in world history for the highest aims of humanity, our slogan toward the enemy is: Thumbs on the eyeballs and knee in the chest!

Original: Was will der Spartakusbund, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.29, 14 December 1918

Source: Dick Howard (1971) *Selected Political Writings, Rosa Luxemburg*. Monthly Review Press.  
Marxists Internet Archive

Translation: Martin Nicolaus

The term "socialism or barbarism" recalls Marx (1848) Communist Manifesto: "either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." MECW 6: 481; and Karl Kautsky (1892) *The Class Struggle (The Erfurt Programme)*: "capitalist civilization cannot continue: we must either move forward into socialism or fall back into barbarism." 1910: 118

Luxemburg probably recalled the expression "Thumbs on the eyeballs and knee in the chest" from Ferdinand Lassalle, *What Now? Second Lecture on the Constitution* (1863)

# 8. The Elections to the National Assembly

*23 December 1918*

After their glorious “victory” at the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils Ebert’s people think that their master stroke against the power of the councils, against the proletarian revolution and socialism, has been successful.

They will be proven wrong. It is now a matter of ensuring this plan of the counter-revolution comes to nothing, of stymieing this action by the defenders of capitalism by means of the revolutionary action of the masses.

Just as we used the infamous Prussian three-class franchise in order to fight against the parliament based on that franchise from within that parliament, so too we will use the National Assembly elections to fight against the National Assembly. But this is certainly the limits of the analogy. Today, for genuine advocates of the revolution and socialism, participation in the National Assembly can have nothing in common with the traditional approach, the customary “use of parliament” in order to achieve so-called “positive gains”.

There is no need for the old routinism of parliament, no need to touch up legislative proposals with minor amendments and cosmetic changes, no need to “assess our strength” and stage a review of our supporters. No need for whatever reasons may be found in all the well-known clichés from the age of the bourgeois-parliamentary treadmill, or may be found in the vocabulary of Haase and his comrades. We are now in the midst of a revolution. And the National Assembly is a counter-revolutionary stronghold built in opposition to the revolutionary proletariat. It is therefore a matter of attacking this stronghold and razing it to the ground.

The National Assembly elections and the platform of the National Assembly must be used to mobilise the masses against the National Assembly and rally them for the sharpest of struggles. Not to make laws with the bourgeoisie and its protectors but to drive the bourgeoisie and its protectors out of the temple, to storm the stronghold of the counter-revolution and to victoriously raise above it the banner of proletarian revolution – that is why participation in the elections is needed.

Is a majority needed in the National Assembly to accomplish this? This is believed only by those who subscribe to parliamentary cretinism and who want to decide the fate of the revolution and socialism through parliamentary majorities. Even the fate of the National Assembly itself is not decided by the parliamentary majority in the National Assembly but by the proletarian masses outside, by the factories, and on the street.

It would suit the gentlemen around Ebert-Haase, the Junkers, the capitalists and their hangers-on if they could be left to their own devices and the revolutionary proletarians made do with playing the role of onlookers, calmly watching the proceedings while their fate is decided.

Nothing will come of this calculation. However quickly and discreetly they may have accomplished their counter-revolutionary work – thanks to the Mameluke [slave] congress of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils – this was and still is a calculation lacking the decisive factor.

That factor is the proletarian mass, the real bearer of the revolution and its socialist tasks. It is the masses which have to decide the course and the fate of the National Assembly. What happens in the National Assembly and what becomes of the National Assembly depends on the revolutionary activity of the masses. The most decisive factor is to be found in the action outside, which must hammer furiously on the doors of the counter-revolutionary parliament. But even the elections themselves, and the action of the revolutionary representatives of the mass in the National Assembly, must serve the cause of the revolution.

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Ruthless and vocal denunciation of all the tricks and ruses of the esteemed gathering, exposure to the masses of their counter-revolutionary labours at every stage, appeals to the masses to decide and to intervene – these are the tasks of participation in the National Assembly.

The bourgeois gentlemen, headed by the Ebert government, want to use the National Assembly to banish and paralyse class struggle and to sidestep revolutionary decisions. In defiance of this plan, the class struggle should storm into the National Assembly itself, it should use the elections and the deliberations of the National Assembly precisely in order to accelerate the revolutionary decision.

We are approaching stormy times. Unemployment and economic conflicts will grow incessantly in the coming weeks and months. The great confrontation between capital and labour which carries within itself the future of the revolution and which permits of no other outcome than the destruction of capitalist class rule and the triumph of socialism: this confrontation will ensure that the mood and activity of the masses throughout the country will increase with every day that passes.

According to the plan of Ebert's people, the National Assembly is to act as a dam against this revolutionary flood. It is therefore a matter of directing that flood right into, and through the midst of, the National Assembly in order to sweep away that dam.

Electoral activity and the forum of this counter-revolutionary parliament should become a means to educate, gather together and mobilise the revolutionary mass, a stage in the struggle for the establishment of proletarian dictatorship.

The storming of the gates of the National Assembly by the masses, the clenched fist of the revolutionary proletariat which rises up in the midst of the gathering, the waving of the banner which proclaims in fiery letters: All Power to the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils – that is our participation in the National Assembly.

Proletarians, comrades – to work! There is no time to lose. Today the ruling classes still feel triumphant as a result of the victorious action of the Ebert government in the Congress of Councils. They await in expectation 19 January as the return of their unfettered class rule.

Let them not celebrate too soon. The ides of March have not yet passed, and not even the ides of January. The future belongs to the revolution, everything must be at its service – including the elections to the National Assembly.

Original: Die Wahlen zur Nationalversammlung, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.38, 23 December 1918

Translation: Stan Crooke



# 9. Our Programme and the Political Situation

31 December 1918

Comrades: Our task today is to discuss and adopt a programme. In undertaking this task we are not actuated solely by the consideration that yesterday we founded a new party and that a new party must formulate a programme. Great historical movements have been the determining causes of today's deliberations. The time has arrived when the entire socialist programme of the proletariat has to be established upon a new foundation. We are faced with a position similar to that which was faced by Marx and Engels when they wrote the Communist Manifesto seventy years ago. As you all know, the Communist Manifesto dealt with socialism, with the realisation of the aims of socialism, as the immediate task of the proletarian revolution...

But between that point of development, that beginning in the year 1848, and our own views and our immediate task, there lies the whole evolution, not only of capitalism, but in addition that of the socialist labour movement. Above all, there have intervened the aforesaid developments in Germany as the leading land of the modern proletariat. This working class evolution has taken a peculiar form. When, after the disillusionments of 1848, Marx and Engels had given up the idea that the proletariat could immediately realise socialism, there came into existence in all countries socialist parties inspired with very different aims. The immediate objective of these parties was declared to be detail work, the petty daily struggle in the political and industrial fields. Thus, by degrees, would proletarian armies be formed, and these armies would be ready to realise socialism when capitalist development had matured. The socialist programme was thereby established upon an utterly different foundation, and in Germany the change took a peculiarly typical form. Down to the collapse of 4 August 1914, the German Social Democracy took its stand upon the Erfurt Programme [1891], and by this programme the so-called immediate minimal aims were placed in the foreground, whilst socialism was no more than a distant guiding star. Far more important, however, than what is written in a programme is the way in which that programme is interpreted in action. From this point of view, great importance must be attached to one of the historical documents of the German labour movement: the Preface written by Fredrick Engels for the 1895 re-issue of Marx's *Class Struggles in France*...

In this Preface Engels demonstrated, as an expert in military science, that it was a pure illusion to believe that the workers could, in the existing state of military technique and of industry, and in view of the characteristics of the great towns of today, successfully bring about a revolution by street fighting. Two important conclusions were drawn from this reasoning. In the first place, the parliamentary struggle was counterposed to direct revolutionary action by the proletariat, and the former was indicated as the only practical way of carrying on the class struggle. Parliamentarism, and nothing but parliamentarism, was the logical sequel of this criticism.

Secondly, the whole military machine, the most powerful organisation in the class state, the entire body of proletarians in military uniform, was declared on a priori grounds to be absolutely inaccessible to socialist influence. When Engels' Preface declares that, owing to the modern development of gigantic armies, it is positively insane to suppose that proletarians can ever stand up against soldiers armed with machine guns and equipped with all the other latest technical devices, the assertion is obviously based upon the assumption that anyone who becomes a soldier becomes thereby once and for all one of the props of the ruling class. I must remind you of the well-known fact that the Preface in question was written by Engels under strong pressure on the part of the parliamentary group. At that date in Germany, during the early 1890s after the Anti-Socialist law had been annulled, there was a strong movement toward the left, the movement of those

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who wished to save the party from becoming completely absorbed in the parliamentary struggle. Bebel and his associates wished for convincing arguments, backed up by Engels great authority; they wished for an utterance which would help them to keep a tight hand upon the revolutionary elements. It was characteristic of party conditions at the time that the socialist parliamentarians should have the decisive word alike in theory and in practice. They assured Engels, who lived abroad and naturally accepted the assurance at its face value, that it was absolutely essential to safeguard the German labour movement from a lapse into anarchism, and in this way they constrained him to write in the tone they wished. Thenceforward the tactics expounded by Engels in 1895 guided the German Social Democrats in everything they did and in everything they left undone, down to the appropriate finish of 4 August 1914. The Preface was the formal proclamation of the nothing-but-parliamentarism tactic. Engels died the same year and had, therefore, no opportunity for studying the practical consequences of his theory. Those who know the works of Marx and Engels, those who are familiarly acquainted with the genuinely revolutionary spirit that inspired all their teachings and all their writings, will feel positively certain that Engels would have been one of the first to protest against the debauch of parliamentarism, against the frittering away of the energies of the labour movement, which was characteristic of Germany during the decades before the war.

The 4 August did not come like thunder out of a clear sky; what happened on the 4 August was not a chance turn of affairs, but was the logical outcome of all that the German Socialists had been doing day after day for many years. Engels and Marx, had it been possible for them to live on into our own times, would, I am convinced, have protested with the utmost energy, and would have used all the forces at their disposal to keep the party from hurling itself into the abyss. But after Engels death in 1895, in the theoretical field the leadership of the party passed into the hands of Kautsky. The upshot of this change was that at every annual congress the energetic protests of the left wing against a purely parliamentarist policy, its urgent warnings against the sterility and the danger of such a policy, were stigmatised as anarchism, anarchising socialism, or at least anti-Marxism. What passed officially for Marxism became a cloak for all possible kinds of opportunism, for persistent shirking of the revolutionary class struggle, for every conceivable half-measure. Thus the German Social Democracy, and the labour movement, the trade union movement as well, were condemned to pine away within the framework of capitalist society. No longer did German socialists and trade unionists make any serious attempt to overthrow capitalist institutions or put the capitalist machine out of gear.

But we have now reached the point, comrades, when we are able to say that we have rejoined Marx, that we are once more advancing under his flag. If today we declare that the immediate task of the proletariat is to make socialism a living reality and to destroy capitalism root and branch, in saying this we take our stand upon the ground occupied by Marx and Engels in 1848; we adopt a position from which in principle they never moved. It has at length become plain what true Marxism is, and what substitute Marxism has been. I mean the substitute Marxism which has so long been the official Marxism of the Social Democracy. You see what Marxism of this sort leads to, the Marxism of those who are the henchmen of Ebert, David and the rest of them. These are the official representatives of the doctrine which has been trumpeted for decades as Marxism undefiled. But in reality Marxism could not lead in this direction, could not lead Marxists to engage in counter-revolutionary activities side by side with such as Scheidemann. Genuine Marxism turns its weapons against those also who seek to falsify it. Burrowing like a mole beneath the foundations of capitalist society, it has worked so well that the larger half of the German proletariat is marching today under our banner, the storm-riding standard of revolution. Even in the opposite camp, even where the counter-revolution still seems to rule, we have adherents and future comrades-in-arms...

What has the war left of bourgeois society beyond a gigantic rubbish heap? Formally, of course, all the means of production and most of the instruments of power, practically all the decisive instruments of power, are still in the hands of the dominant classes. We are under no illusions here.

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But what our rulers will be able to achieve with the powers they possess, over and above frantic attempts to re-establish their system of spoliation through blood and slaughter, will be nothing more than chaos. Matters have reached such a pitch that today mankind is faced with two alternatives: it may perish amid chaos; or it may find salvation in socialism. As the outcome of the Great War it is impossible for the capitalist classes to find any issue from their difficulties while they maintain class rule. We now realise the absolute truth of the statement formulated for the first time by Marx and Engels as the scientific basis of socialism in the great charter of our movement, in the Communist Manifesto. Socialism will become an historical necessity. Socialism is inevitable, not merely because the proletarians are no longer willing to live under the conditions imposed by the capitalist class, but, further, because if the proletariat fails to fulfil its duties as a class, if it fails to realise socialism, we shall crash down together to a common doom.

Here you have the general foundation of the programme we are officially adopting today, draft of which you have all read in the pamphlet, *What does Spartacus Want?* Our programme is deliberately opposed to the leading principle of the Erfurt Programme; it is deliberately opposed to the separation of the immediate and so-called minimal demands formulated for the political and economic struggle, from the socialist goal regarded as a maximal programme. It is in deliberate opposition to the Erfurt Programme that we liquidate the results of seventy years evolution, that we liquidate, above all, the primary results of the war, saying we know nothing of minimal and maximal programmes; we know, only, one thing, socialism; this is the minimum we are going to secure. I do not propose to discuss the details of our programme. This would take too long, and you will form your own opinions upon matters of detail. The task that devolves upon me is merely to sketch the broad lines wherein our programme is distinguished from what has hitherto been the official programme of the German Social Democracy. I regard it, however, as of the utmost importance that we should come to an understanding in our estimate of the concrete circumstances of the hour, of the tactics we have to adopt, of the practical measures which must be undertaken, in view of the probable lines of further development. We have to judge the political situation from the outlook I have just characterised, from the outlook of those who aim at the immediate realisation of socialism, of those who are determined to subordinate everything else to that end. Our Congress, the Congress of what I may proudly call the only revolutionary socialist party of the German proletariat, happens to coincide in point of time with the crisis in the development of the German revolution. "Happens to coincide," I say; but in truth the coincidence is no chance matter. We may assert that after the occurrences of the last few days the curtain has gone down upon the first act of the German revolution. We are now in the opening of the second act, and it is our common duty to undertake self-examination and self-criticism. We shall be guided more wisely in the future, and we shall gain additional impetus for further advances, if we study all that we have done and all that we have left undone. Let us, then carefully scrutinise the events of the first act in the revolution...

The weeks that have elapsed between 9 November and the present day have been weeks filled with multiform illusions. The primary illusion of the workers and soldiers who made the revolution was their belief in the possibility of unity under the banner of what passes by the name of socialism. What could be more characteristic of the internal weakness of the revolution of 9 November than the fact that at the very outset the leadership passed in no small part into the hands of the persons who a few hours before the revolution broke out had regarded it as their chief duty to issue warnings against revolution – to attempt to make revolution impossible – into the hands of such as Ebert, Scheidemann and Haase. One of the leading ideas of the revolution of 9 November was that of uniting the various socialist trends. The union was to be effected by acclamation. This was an illusion which had to be bloodily avenged, and the events of the last few days have brought a bitter awakening from our dreams; but the self-deception was universal, affecting the Ebert and Scheidemann groups and affecting the bourgeoisie no less than ourselves.

Another illusion was that affecting the bourgeoisie during this opening act of the revolution. They believed that by means of the Ebert-Haase combination, by means of the so-called socialist

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government, they would really be able to bridle the proletarian masses and to strangle the socialist revolution. Yet another illusion was that from which the members of the Ebert-Scheidemann government suffered when they believed that with the aid of the soldiers returned from the front they would be able to hold down the workers and to curb all manifestations of the socialist class struggle. Such were the multifarious illusions which explain recent occurrences. One and all, they have now been dissipated. It has been plainly proved that the union between Haase and Ebert-Scheidemann under the banner of "socialism" serves merely as a fig-leaf for the decent veiling of a counter-revolutionary policy. We ourselves, as always happens, in revolutions, have been cured by our self-deceptions. There is a definite revolutionary procedure whereby the popular mind can be freed from illusion, but, unfortunately, the cure involves that the people must be blooded. In revolutionary Germany, events have followed the course characteristic of all revolutions. The bloodshed in Chausseestrasse on 6 December, the massacre of 24 December, brought the truth home to the broad masses of the people. Through these occurrences they came to realise that what passes by the name of a socialist government is a government representing the counter-revolution. They came to realise that anyone who continues to tolerate such a state of affairs is working against the proletariat and against socialism...

It had been expected of Ebert and Scheidemann that they would prove themselves strong men, successful lion tamers. But what have they achieved? They have suppressed a couple of trifling disturbances, and as a sequel the hydra of revolution has raised its head more, resolutely than ever. Thus disillusionment is mutual, nay universal. The workers have completely lost the illusion which, had, led them to, believe that a union between Haase and Ebert-Scheidemann would amount to a socialist government. Ebert and Scheidemann have lost the illusion which had led them to imagine that with the aid of proletarians in military uniform they could permanently keep down proletarians in civilian dress. The members of the middle class have lost the illusion that, through the instrumentality of Ebert, Scheidemann and Haase, they can humbug the entire socialist revolution of Germany as to the ends it desires. All these things have a merely negative force, and there remains from them nothing but the rags and tatters of destroyed illusions. But it is in truth a great gain for the proletariat that naught beyond these rags and tatters remains from the first phase of the revolution, for there is nothing so destructive as illusion, whereas nothing can be of greater use to the revolution than naked truth...

The first act is over. What are the subsequent possibilities? There is, of course, no question of prophecy. We can only hope to deduce the logical consequences of what has already happened, and thus to draw conclusions as to the probabilities of the future, in order that we may adapt our tactics to these probabilities...

It was typical of the first period of the revolution down to 24 December that the revolution remained exclusively political. Hence the infantile character, the inadequacy, the half-heartedness, the aimlessness, of this revolution. Such was the first stage of a revolutionary transformation whose main objective lies in the economic field, whose main purpose it is to secure a fundamental change in economic conditions. Its steps were as uncertain as those of a child groping its way without knowing whither it is going; for at this stage, I repeat, the revolution had a purely political stamp. But within the last two or three weeks a number of strikes have broken out quite spontaneously. Now, I regard it as the very essence of this revolution that strikes will become more and more extensive, until they constitute at last the focus of the revolution. Thus we shall have an economic revolution, and therewith a socialist revolution. The struggle for socialism has to be fought out by the masses, by the masses alone, breast to breast against capitalism; it has to be fought out by those in every occupation, by every proletarian against his employer. Thus only can it be a socialist revolution...

Socialism will not be and cannot be inaugurated by decrees; it cannot be established by any government, however admirably socialistic. Socialism must be created by the masses, must be made by every proletarian. Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there must the chains be broken. That only is socialism, and thus only can socialism be brought into being.

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What is the external form of struggle for socialism? The strike, and that is why the economic phase of development has come to the front in the second act of the revolution. This is something on which we may pride ourselves, for no one will dispute with us the honour. We of the Spartacus Group, we of the Communist Party of Germany, are the only ones in all Germany who are on the side of the striking and fighting workers. You have read and witnessed again and again the attitude of the Independent Socialists towards strikes. There was no difference between the outlook of *Vorwärts* and the outlook of *Freiheit*. Both journals sang the same tune: Be diligent, socialism means hard work. Such was their utterance while capitalism was still in control! Socialism cannot be established thus wise, but only by carrying on an unremitting struggle against capitalism. Yet we see the claims of the capitalists defended, not only by the most outrageous profit-snatchers, but also by the Independent Socialists and by their organ, *Freiheit*; we find that our Communist Party stands alone in supporting the workers against the exactions of capital. This suffices to show that all are today persistent and unsparing enemies of the strike, except only those who have taken their stand with us upon the platform of revolutionary communism.

The conclusion to be drawn is not only that during the second act of the revolution strikes will become increasingly prevalent; but, further, that strikes will become the central feature and the decisive factors of the revolution, thrusting purely political questions into the background. The inevitable consequence of this will be that the struggle in the economic field will be enormously intensified... Thus Ebert and Scheidemann are coming to the point when a counter-revolutionary movement will display itself. They will be unable to quench the fires of the economic class struggle, and at the same time with their best endeavours they will fail to satisfy the bourgeoisie. There will be a desperate attempt at counter-revolution, perhaps an unqualified militarist dictatorship under Hindenburg, or perhaps the counter-revolution will manifest itself in some other form; but in any case, our heroes will take to the woods...

It is far from easy to say what will happen to the National Assembly during the second act of the revolution. Perchance, should the Assembly come into existence, it may prove a new school of education for the working class. But it seems just as likely that the National Assembly will never come into existence. Let me say parenthetically, to help you to understand the grounds upon which we were defending our position yesterday, that our only objection was to limiting our tactics to a single alternative. I will not reopen the whole discussion, but will merely say a word or two lest any of you should falsely imagine that I am blowing hot and cold with the same breath. Our position today is precisely that of yesterday. We do not propose to base our tactics in relation to the National Assembly upon what is a possibility but not a certainty. We refuse to stake everything upon the belief that the National Assembly will never come into existence. We wish to be prepared for all possibilities, including the possibility of utilising the National Assembly for revolutionary purposes should the assembly ever come into being. Whether it comes into being or not is a matter of indifference, for whatever happens the success of the revolution is assured...

We can say, without hesitation, that the German trade union leaders and the German Social-Democrats are the most infamous scoundrels the world has ever known...

What general tactical considerations must we deduce from this? How can we best deal with the situation with which we are likely to be confronted in the immediate future? Your first conclusion will doubtless be a hope that the fall of the Ebert-Scheidemann government is at hand, and that its place will be taken by a declared socialist proletarian revolutionary government. For my part, I would ask you to direct your attention, not to the apex, but to the base. We must not again fall into the illusion of the first phase of the revolution, that of 9 November; we must not think that when we wish to bring about a socialist revolution it will suffice to overthrow the capitalist government and to set up another in its place. There is only one way of achieving the victory of the proletarian revolution. We must begin by undermining the Ebert-Scheidemann government, by destroying its foundations through a revolutionary mass struggle on the part of the proletariat. Moreover, let me remind you of some of the inadequacies of the German revolution, inadequacies which have not been overcome with the close of the first act of the revolution. We are far

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from having reached a point when the overthrow of the government can ensure the victory of socialism. I have endeavoured to show you that the revolution of 9 November was, before all, a political revolution; whereas the revolution which is to fulfil our aims, must, in addition, and mainly, be an economic revolution. But further, the revolutionary movement was confined to the towns, and even up to the present date the rural districts remain practically untouched. Socialism would prove illusory if it were to leave our present agricultural system unchanged. From the broad outlook of socialist economics, manufacturing industry cannot be remodelled unless it be quickened through a socialist transformation of agriculture. The leading idea of the economic transformation that will realise socialism is an abolition of the contrast and the division between town and country. This separation, this conflict, this contradiction, is a purely capitalist phenomenon, and it must disappear as soon as we place ourselves upon the socialist standpoint.

If socialist reconstruction is to be undertaken in real earnest, we must direct attention just as much to the open country as to the industrial centres, and yet as regards the former we have not even taken the first steps. This is essential not merely because we cannot bring about socialism without socialising agriculture; but also because, while we may think we have reckoned to the last reserves of the counter-revolution against us and our endeavours, there remains another important reserve which has not yet been taken into account: I refer to the peasantry. Precisely because the peasants are still untouched by socialism, they constitute an additional reserve for the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. The first thing our enemies will do when the flames of the socialist strikes begin to scorch their heels will be to mobilise the peasants, who are fanatical devotees of private property. There is only one way of making headway against this threatening counter-revolutionary power. We must carry the class struggle into the country districts; we must mobilise the landless proletariat and the poorer peasants against the richer peasants.

From this consideration we must deduce what we have to do to, insure the success of the revolution. First and foremost, we have to extend in all directions the system of workers councils. What we have taken over from 9 November are mere weak beginning, and we, have not wholly taken over even these. During the first phase of the revolution we actually lost extensive forces that were acquired at the very outset. You are aware that the counter-revolution has been engaged in the systematic destruction of the system of workers and soldiers councils. In Hesse, these councils have been definitely abolished by the counter-revolutionary government; elsewhere, power has been wrenched from their hands. Not merely, then, have we to develop the system of workers and soldiers councils, but we have to induce the agricultural labourers and the poorer peasants to adopt this system. We have to seize power, and the problem of the seizure of power assumes this aspect; what, throughout Germany, can each workers and soldiers council achieve? There lies the source of power. We must mine the bourgeois state and we must do so by putting an end everywhere to the cleavage in public powers, to the cleavage between legislative and executive powers. These powers must be united in the hands of the workers and soldiers councils.

Comrades, we have here as extensive field to till. We must build from below upward, until the workers and soldiers councils gather so much strength that the overthrow of the Ebert-Scheidemann or any similar government will be merely the final act in the drama. For us the conquest of power will not be effected at one blow. It will be a progressive act, for we shall progressively occupy all the positions of the capitalist state, defending tooth and nail each one that we seize. Moreover, in my view and in that of my most intimate associates in the party, the economic struggle, likewise, will be carried on by the workers councils. The settlement of economic affairs; and the continued expansion of the area. Of this settlement, must be in the hands of the workers councils. The councils must have all power in the state. To these ends must we direct our activities in the immediate future, and it is obvious that, if we pursue this line, there cannot fail to be an enormous and immediate intensification of the struggle. For step by step, by hand to hand fighting, in every province, in every town, in every village, in every commune, all the powers of the state have to be transferred bit by bit from the bourgeoisie to the workers and soldiers councils.

But before these steps can be taken, the members of our own party and the proletarians in

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general, must be schooled and disciplined. Even where workers' and soldiers' councils already exist, these councils are as yet far from understanding the purposes, for which they exist. We must make the masses realise that the workers' and soldiers' council has to be the central feature of the machinery of state, that it must concentrate all power within itself, and must utilise all powers for the one great purpose of bringing about the socialist revolution. Those workers who are already organised to form workers' and soldiers' councils are still very far from having adopted such an outlook, and only isolated proletarian minorities are as yet clear as to the tasks that devolve upon them. But there is no reason to complain of this, for it is a normal state of affairs. The masses must learn how to use power, by using power. There is no other way. We have, happily, advanced since the days when it was proposed to "educate" the proletariat socialistically. Marxists of Kautsky's school are, it would seem still living in those vanished days. To, educate the proletarian masses socialistically meant to deliver lectures to them, to circulate leaflets and pamphlets among them. But it is not by such means that the proletarians will be schooled. The workers, today, will learn in the school of action.

Our Scripture reads: In the beginning was the deed. Action for us means that the workers and soldiers councils must realise their mission and must learn how to become the sole public authorities throughout the realm. Thus only can we mine the ground so effectively as to make everything ready for the revolution which will crown our work. Quite deliberately, and with a clear sense of the significance of our words, did some of us say to you yesterday, did I in particular say to you: "Do not imagine that you are going to have an easy time in the future!" Some of the comrades have falsely imagined me to assume that we can boycott the National Assembly and then simply fold our arms. It is impossible, in the time that remains, to discuss this matter fully, but let me say that I never dreamed of anything of the kind. My meaning was that history is not going to make our revolution an easy matter like the bourgeois revolutions. In those revolutions it sufficed to overthrow that official power at the centre and to replace a dozen or so of persons in authority. But we have to work from beneath. Therein is displayed the mass character of our revolution, one which aims at transforming the whole structure of society. It is thus characteristic of the modern proletarian revolution, that we must effect the conquest of political power, not from above, but from beneath.

The 9 November was an attempt, a weakly half-hearted, half-conscious and chaotic attempt, to overthrow the existing public authority and to put an end to ownership rule. What is now incumbent upon us is that we should deliberately concentrate all the forces of the proletariat for an attack upon the very foundations of capitalist society. There, at the root, where the individual employer confronts his wage slaves; at the root where all the executive organs of ownership rule confront the object of this rule, confront the masses; there step by step, we must seize the means of power from the rulers, must take them into our own hands. Working by such methods, it may seem that the process will be a rather more tedious one than we had imagined in our first enthusiasm. It is well, I think, that we should be perfectly clear as to all the difficulties and complications in the way of revolution. For I hope that, as in my own case, so in yours also, the augmenting tasks we have to undertake will neither abate zeal nor paralyse energy. Far from it, the greater the task, the more fervently will you gather up your forces. Nor must we forget that the revolution is able to do its work with extraordinary speed. I shall make no attempt to foretell how much time will be required. Who among us cares about the time, so long only as our lives suffice to bring it to pass? Enough for us to know clearly the work we have to do; and to the best of my ability I have endeavoured to sketch, in broad outline, the work that lies before us.

Abridged from the original: Unser Programm und die politische Situation, 31 December 1918  
Speech at the Founding Conference of the Communist Party of Germany held in Berlin

Source: *New International*, Vol.9 Nos.1-3, January-March 1943

Translation: Eden and Cedar Paul

# 10. What are the Leaders Doing?

*7 January 1919*

In the fiery atmosphere of revolution people and things mature with incredible speed.

It was only just three weeks ago, when the national conference of the workers' and soldiers' councils ended, that Ebert-Scheidemann appeared to be at the zenith of their power. The representative body of the revolutionary masses of the workers and soldiers of all Germany had blindly submitted itself to their leadership.

The convocation of the National Assembly, the sidelining of "the street", the downgrading of the Executive Council and, thereby, the workers' and soldiers' councils to impotent phantoms – what a triumph of the counter-revolution all along the line! The fruits of 9 November appeared to have been squandered and bargained away, the bourgeoisie could again breathe easily, the masses were perplexed, disarmed, angry and yet despairing. Ebert-Scheidemann considered themselves to be at the pinnacle of power.

Blind fools! Not even twenty days have passed since then and overnight their apparent power has begun to totter. The masses are the real power, the real power by virtue of their interests, by virtue of historical necessity, by virtue of the iron "must" of history.

Even if they are temporarily chained and their organisations are formally robbed of any power, they need only stir themselves into action and stiffen their backbones, and already the ground trembles beneath the feet of the counter-revolution.

Anyone present at yesterday's mass demonstration in the Siegesallee, anyone who shared the solid revolutionary convictions, the magnificent mood and energy of the masses, had to come to the conclusion: as a result of the education they have received in recent weeks and from recent events, the proletarians have undergone an enormous political development. They have become conscious of their power, and the only thing lacking is making use of this power.

At this moment in time, as they incessantly bleat about "putsches", Ebert-Scheidemann and those for whom they work – the bourgeoisie – are experiencing the same disappointment as the last Bourbon did when, in response to his cry of outrage about the "rebellion" of the people of Paris, he was told by his minister: "Sire, that is not a rebellion, it is a revolution." Yes, it is a revolution, with all manner of chaotic developments on its surface, with its alternation of ebbs and flows, with momentary surges aimed at a seizure of power, and equally momentary retreats by the revolutionary wave.

And through all these apparent zigzags the revolution victoriously wins through, step by step, and advances unstoppably.

The masses must learn to struggle and act in the struggle itself. And that is what can be felt today: to a very great extent, the workers of Berlin have learnt to act. They long for decisive action, for clarity, and for far-reaching initiatives. They are not the same as they were on 9 November. They know what they want and what they should do.

But are their leaders, the executive organs of their will, up to the tasks confronting them? Have the energy and determination of the revolutionary independent workplace representatives and the trade union shop stewards in the big enterprises increased in the meantime? Have the energy and determination of the radical elements in the USPD increased? Has their ability to act kept pace with the growing energy of the masses? We fear that we cannot answer this question with a simple "yes". We fear that the leaders are still the same as they were on 9 November and have learnt only little.

24 hours have passed since the Ebert government took action against Eichhorn. The masses

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have enthusiastically followed the appeal issued by their leaders, they have spontaneously achieved the reinstatement of Eichhorn through their own strength, they have spontaneously occupied the offices of “*Vorwärts*” at their own initiative, and they have taken control of the bourgeois editorial offices and the WTB [Wolff’s Telegraphic Bureau].

As far as possible, they have armed themselves. They await further instructions and actions from their leaders.

But what have the latter done and decided in the meantime? What steps have they taken in order to safeguard the victory of the revolution in this tense situation, in which the fate of the revolution will be decided at least for the next period ahead? We see and hear nothing! It may be the case that the workers’ shop stewards are engaged in profound and extensive discussions. But now it is a matter of taking action.

Ebert-Scheidemann are certainly not wasting their time with discussions. They are certainly not asleep. With the usual energy and caution of counter-revolutionaries they are quietly preparing their intrigues. They are sharpening their sword in order to take the revolution by surprise and inflict a mortal blow on it.

Other spineless elements are certainly already diligently at work, paving the way for “negotiations” and securing compromises in order to throw a bridge across the bloody abyss which has opened up between the masses of workers and soldiers and the Ebert government and thereby lead the revolution astray into a “compromise” with its mortal enemies.

No time is to be lost. Sweeping measures must be taken right now. Clear and immediate directives must be issued to the masses and to the revolutionary soldiers, the correct goals must be set for their energy and their keenness to fight.

The vacillating elements among the troops can be won for the sacred cause of the people only through resolute and unambiguous action on the part of the revolutionary bodies.

Act! Act! Courageously, resolutely and consistently – that is the damned duty and obligation of the revolutionary workplace representatives and the genuinely socialist party leaders. Disarm the counter-revolution, arm the masses, occupy all positions of power. Act speedily!

The revolutions demands this. Its hours count for months in world history, and its days for years. May the organs of the revolution be conscious of the heavy duties which they bear!

Original: Was machen die Führer, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.7, 7 January 1919

Translation: Stan Croke

# 11. House of Cards

*13 January 1919*

On smoking ruins, amidst pools of blood and the corpses of murdered “Spartacists”, the heroes of “order” are rushing to consolidate their rule anew. The Ebert government arouses itself convulsively in order to entrench its power: from now on, it will rule by the bayonet.

Fully in the manner of the Caesars, Ebert stages reviews of his troops and addresses them: in sight of the dead and wounded lying on the streets of Berlin he passes on “the thanks of the government to the brave soldiers” and entrusts them with the task of protecting the National Assembly with their weapons.

In his Order of the Day of 11 January the “supreme commander” Noske takes up the old and well-known refrain of Hindenburg, von Kessel and all the lackeys of the Hohenzollern regime:

“In the east armed bands of Spartacists in cars are plundering one house after another. ... The last mask – that this is supposedly a political movement – has fallen. Robbery and plunder have revealed themselves to be the ultimate and sole goal of the rebellion.”

The patience of the government is exhausted, and now the “heavy artillery” and machine guns are to have their say. “The unity of the working class must succeed against the Spartacists,” concludes the bloodstained upstart.

This is how the Scheidemanns hope that with the material help of the counter-revolutionary military and the moral support of the bourgeoisie they will be able to establish anew their governmental powers over the corpses of Berlin’s revolutionary workers.

But there is a flaw in this calculation. The military and the bourgeoisie who today help Ebert-Scheidemann out of the mess they are in want to enjoy the fruits of the bloody harvest themselves.

These elements wanted to support the “socialist” government only as long as they were able to believe that they could hold the proletarian masses in check by waving a counterfeit banner and could strangle the revolution and socialism by “moral” influences.

The last week has ripped open the gaping abyss between the Ebert government and the revolution. Today it is clear that Ebert-Scheidemann can rule only by means of bayonets. But if that it is the case, then the bayonets will also want to rule without Ebert-Scheidemann.

The bourgeoisie will not make do with half measures. It is calling for the open proclamation of the dictatorship of the sabre, for the complete restoration of the old “order”.

“The right place for the rebels is in front of a court martial or in prison,” cries the *Tagliche Rundschau* until it is hoarse, “and they do not deserve to be at liberty. ... The restoration of peace, the restoration of order, must be carried out down to the last detail. The police, which has hardly existed since 9 November, must be restored to their previous strength and their previous importance. The police force must be armed again and be accorded full powers.” At the same time the leader of the Noske Guards, Colonel Reinhardt, declares: he will impose martial law, he does not have to take orders from anybody, not even from the government, he is a soldier and it is up to him alone to make decisions.

And the 3rd Guards Regiment declares at its own initiative that it is “determined” to “bring about through force of arms” the National Assembly. In Berlin and its suburbs officers are carrying out arrests on their own authority.

Thus does the counter-revolutionary officers corps rebel against the Ebert government and makes clear to it that matters were meant to be the other way around: Ebert-Scheidemann were to save the bourgeoisie, not the bourgeoisie save Ebert-Scheidemann.

If it comes to the point that the bourgeoisie must save the “socialist” government from the revolutionary working class, then it is game over – then the bourgeoisie will decide, and not without good reason, that it has more capable candidates for the dictatorship of the sabre than the

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upstarts Ebert and Noske.

On the third side, the party of Haase is seeking to use the crisis in order to create a coalition government of “all socialist tendencies”, in line with Haase’s fig-leaf-politics of drowning all the internal contradictions of the revolution in an undifferentiated hodgepodge, concealing all conflicts, and dissolving the masses’ readiness to struggle in a rotten compromise.

Only the “compromised leaders” – Ebert, Scheidemann, Landsberg, Noske – must leave the scene, only a change of personnel should take place, while the policies of Scheidemann will continue to steer the course, and “all socialist tendencies” should form a joint government on the basis of those policies.

In view of the corpses of murdered proletarians, in view of the bloody orgies of the Scheidemanns, the Spartacists today – even far more so than ever in the past – have only scorn and a clenched fist for this wretched policy of compromise and betrayal of the revolutionary cause.

This means that the expression used by the Haase people – the coalition of “all socialist tendencies” – really amounts to the earlier well-known combination of the Scheidemanns and the Independents.

The re-establishment of the Ebert-Haase government, but with new names – that is all that the great “unity” palaver of the USPD amounts to. And the more vehemently Ebert-Scheidemann are abused today in “*Freiheit*”, so all the more surely is the shameless collapse of the USPD being prepared behind this spurious cannonade.

Despite all the lessons which it has been taught, and although it has already been compelled to abandon, on 28 December, the partnership with the Scheidemanns, the USPD simply wants to return to this partnership, albeit with different names at the top table.

The current crisis therefore gives rise to three combinations: Ebert-Scheidemann want to preserve the status quo: their own rule based on the bayonets of the bourgeoisie.

The USPD wants to turn the clock back to 9 November, to an Ebert-Haase government, but under a different name.

The bourgeoisie at last wants to change things to the way they were before 9 November, to a straightforward dictatorship of the sabre.

All three combinations are houses of cards simply by virtue of the fact that all three of them amount to stages which have already been overtaken and superseded.

The revolution does not allow itself to be turned back and recast in an earlier form – neither as it was on 9 November, and even far less so as it was in the wonderful times before 9 November. And just as little can it be trapped in a dead end in the shadow of Ebert’s sceptre.

The entire political meaning and historical content of the crisis of the last week lies precisely in the fact that the revolution is driven forwards by virtue of its inner strength and logical development, because what is involved is the serious matter of the conquest of power by the proletariat and the achievement of socialism, whereas the factors holding back its development continue to seek to block its advance.

Even if the use of brute force allows these hostile forces to win the upper hand for the moment, they are completely powerless to prevent the further development and triumphal advance of the revolution.

And the clearest expression of that is the fact that not a single combination capable of lasting any length of time can be established on the ruins of this week. Whatever may emerge tomorrow or the following day as a result and as a resolution of the crisis, it will be a short-term measure, a house of cards.

If the naked violence of machine guns or the ambiguity of the deception practised by the USPD gain the upper hand – then, after only the shortest period of time, the primeval forces of the revolution, the economic struggles, will put an end to all these calculations.

Again and again the revolution will place on the agenda the basic problem: the overall reckoning between labour and capital. And this reckoning is a world-historical conflict between two mortal enemies which can be fought out only in a long struggle for power, eye to eye, and chest to



# 12. Order Prevails in Berlin

14 January 1919

“Order prevails in Warsaw!” declared Minister Sebastiani to the Paris Chamber of Deputies in 1831, when after having stormed the suburb of Praga, Paskevich’s marauding troops invaded the Polish capital to begin their butchery of the rebels.

“Order prevails in Berlin!” So proclaims the bourgeois press triumphantly, so proclaim Ebert and Noske, and the officers of the “victorious troops,” who are being cheered by the petty-bourgeois mob in Berlin waving handkerchiefs and shouting “Hurrah!” The glory and honour of German arms have been vindicated before world history. Those who were routed in Flanders and the Argonne have restored their reputation with a brilliant victory – over three hundred “Spartacists” in the *Vorwärts* building. The days when glorious German troops first crossed into Belgium, and the days of General von Emmich, the conqueror of Liege, pale before the exploits of Reinhardt and Co. in the streets of Berlin. The government’s rampaging troops massacred the mediators who had tried to negotiate the surrender of the *Vorwärts* building, using their rifle butts to beat them beyond recognition. Prisoners who were lined up against the wall and butchered so violently that skull and brain tissue splattered everywhere. In the sight of glorious deeds such as those, who would remember the ignominious defeat at the hands of the French, British, and Americans? Now “Spartacus” is the enemy, Berlin is the place where our officers can savour triumph, and Noske, “the worker,” is the general who can lead victories where Ludendorff failed.

Who is not reminded of that drunken celebration by the “law and order” mob in Paris, that Bacchanal of the bourgeoisie celebrated over the corpses of the Communards? That same bourgeoisie who had just shamefully capitulated to the Prussians and abandoned the capital to the invading enemy, taking to their heels like abject cowards. Oh, how the manly courage of those darling sons of the bourgeoisie, of the “golden youth,” and of the officer corps flared back to life against the poorly armed, starving Parisian proletariat and their defenceless women and children. How these courageous sons of Mars, who had buckled before the foreign enemy, raged with bestial cruelty against defenceless people, prisoners, and the fallen.

“Order prevails in Warsaw!” “Order prevails in Paris!” “Order prevails in Berlin!” Every half-century that is what the bulletins from the guardians of “order” proclaim from one centre of the world-historic struggle to the next. And the jubilant “victors” fail to notice that any “order” that needs to be regularly maintained through bloody slaughter heads inexorably toward its historic destiny; its own demise.

What was this recent “Spartacus week” in Berlin? What has it brought? What does it teach us? While we are still in the midst of battle, while the counterrevolution is still howling about their victory, revolutionary proletarians must take stock of what happened and measure the events and their results against the great yardstick of history. The revolution has no time to lose, it continues to rush headlong over still-open graves, past “victories” and “defeats,” toward its great goal. The first duty of fighters for international socialism is to consciously follow the revolution’s principles and its path.

Was the ultimate victory of the revolutionary proletariat to be expected in this conflict? Could we have expected the overthrow of Ebert-Scheidemann and the establishment of a socialist dictatorship? Certainly not, if we carefully consider all the variables that weigh upon the question. The weak link in the revolutionary cause is the political immaturity of the masses of soldiers, who still allow their officers to misuse them, against the people, for counterrevolutionary ends. This alone shows that no lasting revolutionary victory was possible at this juncture. On the other hand, the immaturity of the military is itself a symptom of the general immaturity of the German revolution.

The countryside, from which a large percentage of rank-and-file soldiers come, has hardly

## ORDER PREVAILS IN BERLIN

been touched by the revolution. So far, Berlin has remained virtually isolated from the rest of the country. The revolutionary centres in the provinces – the Rhineland, the northern coast, Brunswick, Saxony, Württemberg – have been heart and soul behind the Berlin workers, it is true. But for the time being they still do not march forward in lockstep with one another, there is still no unity of action, which would make the forward thrust and fighting will of the Berlin working class incomparably more effective. Furthermore, there is – and this is only the deeper cause of the political immaturity of the revolution – the economic struggle, the actual volcanic font that feeds the revolution, is only in its initial stage. And that is the underlying reason why the revolutionary class struggle, is in its infancy.

From all this that flows the fact a decisive, lasting victory could not be counted upon at this moment. Does that mean that the past week's struggle was an "error"? The answer is yes if we were talking about a premeditated "raid" or "putsch." But what triggered this week of combat? As in all previous cases, such as 6 December and 24 December, it was a brutal provocation by the government. Like the bloodbath against defenceless demonstrators in Chausseestrasse, like the butchery of the sailors, this time the assault on the Berlin police headquarters was the cause of all the events that followed. The revolution does not develop evenly of its own volition, in a clear field of battle, according to a cunning plan devised by clever "strategists."

The revolution's enemies can also take the initiative, and indeed as a rule they exercise it more frequently than does the revolution. Faced with the brazen provocation by Ebert-Scheidemann, the revolutionary workers were forced to take up arms. Indeed, the honour of the revolution depended upon repelling the attack immediately, with full force in order to prevent the counter-revolution from being encouraged to press forward, and lest the revolutionary ranks of the proletariat and the moral credit of the German revolution in the International be shaken.

The immediate and spontaneous outpouring of resistance from the Berlin masses flowed with such energy and determination that in the first round the moral victory was won by the "streets."

Now, it is one of the fundamental, inner laws of revolution that it never stands still, it never becomes passive or docile at any stage, once the first step has been taken. The best defence is a strong blow. This is the elementary rule of any fight but it is especially true at each and every stage of the revolution. It is a demonstration of the healthy instinct and fresh inner strength of the Berlin proletariat that it was not appeased by the reinstatement of Eichhorn (which it had demanded), rather the proletariat spontaneously occupied the command posts of the counter-revolution: the bourgeois press, the semi-official press agency, the *Vorwärts* office. All these measures were a result of the masses' instinctive realisation that, for its part, the counter-revolution would not accept defeat but would carry on with a general demonstration of its strength.

Here again we stand before one of the great historical laws of the revolution against which are smashed to pieces all the sophistry and arrogance of the petty USPD variety "revolutionaries" who look for any pretext to retreat from struggle. As soon as the fundamental problem of the revolution has been clearly posed – and in this revolution it is the overthrow of the Ebert-Scheidemann government, the primary obstacle to the victory of socialism – then this basic problem will rise again and again in its entirety. With the inevitability of a natural law, every individual chapter in the struggle will unveil this problem to its full extent regardless of how unprepared the revolution is ready to solve it or how unripe the situation may be. "Down with Ebert-Scheidemann!" – this slogan springs forth inevitably in each revolutionary crisis as the only formula summing up all partial struggles. Thus automatically, by its own internal, objective logic, bringing each episode in the struggle to a boil, whether one wants it to or not.

Because of the contradiction in the early stages of the revolutionary process between the task being sharply posed and the absence of any preconditions to resolve it, individual battles of the revolution end in formal defeat. But revolution is the only form of "war" – and this is another peculiar law of history – in which the ultimate victory can be prepared only by a series of "defeats."

What does the entire history of socialism and of all modern revolutions show us? The first spark of class struggle in Europe, the revolt of the silk weavers in Lyon in 1831, ended with a heavy de-

## ORDER PREVAILS IN BERLIN

feat; the Chartist movement in Britain ended in defeat; the uprising of the Parisian proletariat in the June days of 1848 ended with a crushing defeat; and the Paris commune ended with a terrible defeat. The whole road of socialism – so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned – is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory! Where would we be today without those “defeats,” from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? Today, as we advance into the final battle of the proletarian class war, we stand on the foundation of those very defeats; and we can do without any of them, because each one contributes to our strength and understanding.

The revolutionary struggle is the very antithesis of the parliamentary struggle. In Germany, for four decades we had nothing but parliamentary “victories.” We practically walked from victory to victory. And when faced with the great historical test of 4 August 1914, the result was the devastating political and moral defeat, an outrageous debacle and rot without parallel. To date, revolutions have given us nothing but defeats. Yet these unavoidable defeats pile up guarantee upon guarantee of the future final victory.

There is but one condition. The question of why each defeat occurred must be answered. Did it occur because the forward-storming combative energy of the masses collided with the barrier of unripe historical conditions, or was it that indecision, vacillation, and internal frailty crippled the revolutionary impulse itself?

Classic examples of both cases are the February revolution in France on the one hand and the March revolution in Germany on the other. The courage of the Parisian proletariat in the year 1848 has become a fountain of energy for the class struggle of the entire international proletariat. The deplorable events of the German March revolution of the same year have weighed down the whole development of modern Germany like a ball and chain. In the particular history of official German Social Democracy, they have reverberated right up into the most recent developments in the German revolution and on into the dramatic crisis we have just experienced.

How does the defeat of “Spartacus week” appear in the light of the above historical question? Was it a case of raging, uncontrollable revolutionary energy colliding with an insufficiently ripe situation, or was it a case of weak and indecisive action?

Both! The crisis had a dual nature. The contradiction between the powerful, decisive, aggressive offensive of the Berlin masses on the one hand and the indecisive, half-hearted vacillation of the Berlin leadership on the other is the mark of this latest episode. The leadership failed. But a new leadership can and must be created by the masses and from the masses. The masses are the crucial factor. They are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the challenge, and out of this “defeat” they have forged a link in the chain of historic defeats, which is the pride and strength of international socialism. That is why future victories will spring from this “defeat.”

“Order prevails in Berlin!” You foolish lackeys! Your “order” is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will “rise up again, clashing its weapons,” and to your horror it will proclaim with trumpets blazing:

I was, I am, I shall be!

Original: Die Ordnung herrscht in Berlin, *Die Rote Fahne*, No.14, 14 January 1919

Source: Marxist Internet Archive

Translation: Marcus

## GLOSSARY

# GLOSSARY

**Artelt, Karl** (1890-1981) Metalworker. SPD member from 1908. Member of USPD. Led mutiny in Kiel and Baltic sailors' council in November 1918. Joined KPD in 1920.

**Baden, Max von** (1867-1929) last chancellor of the Kaiserreich; handed his office to Friedrich Ebert on 9 November 1918.

**Barth, Emil** (1879-1941) Metalworker, SPD member, then USPD. Headed strikes in January 1918. Member of Executive of Councils, People's Commissar in November-December 1918, disowned.

**Brandler, Heinrich** (1881-1967) Building worker. Trade-union activist 1897. Joined SPD in 1901. Building workers' union leader in Hamburg, Bremen and Chemnitz. Active in Socialist Youth. Expelled from SPD in 1915, became Spartacist, joined USPD in 1917. In Chemnitz founded the most powerful local organisation of KPD(S). Took Levi's place as KPD chair in 1921.

**Class Struggle** Bi-monthly Marxist theoretical magazine published in New York City by the Socialist Publication Society. Editors included Eugene Debs, Louis Fraina and Ludwig Lore. Left wing voice within the Socialist Party of America. Final issue published by the Communist Labor Party of America.

**Clemenceau, Georges** (1841-1929) prime minister of France from 1917 to 1920.

**Däumig, Ernst** (1868-1922) Joined SPD before war; journalist on *Vorwärts* in 1911. Joined opposition in 1914. Co-founder of USPD and chief editor of *Freiheit* in 1917-18. Coopted into revolutionary stewards. Member of Executive of Councils in November 1918, opposed formation of KPD(S). Opposed putsch in January 1919. Briefly KPD member 1920-21.

**Duncker, Herman** (1874-1960) SPD member from 1893, journalist in 1903, travelling speaker, then in 1911 taught with Luxemburg at Central Party School. Member of internationalist nucleus in August 1914, Internationale group and then of Spartacus League. Member of KPD(S) Zentrale at its foundation.

**Duncker, Käte** (1871-1953) Teacher, SPD member from 1900, associated with Clara Zetkin. Part of internationalist nucleus, on Zentrale in 1918, where she was in charge of work amongst women.

**Eberlein, Hugo** (1887-1944) Industrial draughtsman, trade-unionist in 1905. SPD member from 1906. Member of opposition nucleus in August 1914. Joined USPD in 1917. Member of Zentrale in November 1918 in charge of finances, active in workers' council in Neukölln. Elected to KPD(S) Zentrale at its foundation. KPD delegate to the First Congress of the Communist International.

**Ebert, Friedrich** (1871-1925) SPD chair 1913-1919, member of the Council of People's Delegates, and first president of the Weimar Republic, 1919-1925. The Stalin of Social Democracy.

**Eichhorn, Emil** (1863-1925) Glassworker. SPD member from 1881. Party full-timer 1893, head of its press office during 1908-17. Joined USPD in 1917, organised its press office, and led information section of Soviet Rosta agency. On 9 November 1918, occupied the police headquarters and surrounded himself with worker activists. His dismissal on 5 January 1919 sparked January uprising and repression. On USPD Left, joined KPD in 1920.

**Erzberger, Matthias** (1875-1921) prominent politician of the Catholic German Centre Party. Signed the armistice of 1918 for the German government; murdered by reactionaries in 1921.

**Freiheit** [Freedom] USPD daily newspaper, 1918-1922.

Freikorps Reactionary military units formed by soldiers returning from World War I; used by the SPD to quell radical uprisings.

**Frölich, Paul** (1884-1953) Worked as office worker in commerce. SPD member from 1902. Studied at SPD schools. Journalist from 1908. Associated with Bremen militants, Knief, Radek and Pannekoek. In 1914 journalist on Bremen Bürgerzeitung. Joint founder of Arbeiterpolitik. Leader of IKD, spokesperson for leftists at KPD(S) Foundation Congress, and elected to Zentrale. Took part in Bavarian Revolution and spent some time in clandestinity.

**Haase, Hugo** (1863-1919) The 'poor people's lawyer'. SPD member in 1897. SPD chair in 1911. Reichstag fraction in 1912. Opposed vote for war credits in 1914, but submitted to discipline. Spoke for centrist minority from 1916. Leader of USPD from its foundation, People's Commissar in November-December 1918. Leader of USPD Right, assassinated on Reichstag steps by nationalist.

**Hilferding, Rudolph** (1877-1941) Qualified medical doctor. Economist. Author of the book Finance Capital (1910). SPD school tutor. Pacifist during the war. Joined USPD, editor of *Freiheit*. Later rejoined SPD and became a government minister.

# GLOSSARY

**Hindenburg, Paul von** (1847-1934) Chief of the general staff in 1916. President of Germany from 1925.

**IKD (Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands)**, organisation of the 'left radicals' in 1918, successor to the ISD.

**ISD (Internationale Sozialisten Deutschlands)**, organisation of the 'left radicals' before 1918.

**International Socialist Review**, magazine of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), United States. Former Trotskyists who became Castroites in the late 1970s.

**Jogiches, Leo** (1867-1919) Joined clandestine revolutionary movement as teenager. In Switzerland 1890, met Rosa Luxemburg. Founded with her Polish Social-Democratic Party. Member of internationalist nucleus in 1914, co-editor of Spartacus Letters, organiser of Spartacus League, supported entry into USPD. Opposed foundation of KPD(S) and immediate break from USPD. Elected to Zentrale at Founding KPD Congress. Opposed Liebknecht's policy in January 1919. Arrested and murdered in March 1919.

**Kautsky, Karl** (1854-1938) Central SPD theorist; rationaliser of the leadership's line. Co-founded the USPD in 1917; returned to the SPD in 1922.

**Knief, Johann** (1880-1919) Teacher. SPD journalist in Bremen. Organiser of opposition in 1914, founded Arbeiterpolitik in 1916, then in ISD, which became IKD in 1918. Emigrated to Holland, polemicised against Spartacists, whom he condemned for joining USPD. Hostile to fusion with Spartacus League, refused to be delegate to Foundation Congress of KPD(S). Died April 1919.

**KPD(S) Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands** (Spartakusbund), name of the Communist Party from January 1919 to November 1920.

**Lassalle, Ferdinand** (1825-1864) Leader of the General German Workers' Association, a forerunner of the SPD.

**Ledebour, Georg** (1850-1947) Teacher, actor, journalist. SPD deputy. Member of USPD in 1917 and of its Berlin organisation in 1918, leader of circle of revolutionary stewards. Joint chair of Revolutionary Committee in January 1919.

**Levi, Paul** (1883-1930) Lawyer. SPD member from 1906. Defended Luxemburg in 1913. Member of the internationalist nucleus in 1914. Conscripted, discharged in 1916, settled in Switzerland, associated with Radek, then with Lenin. Leader of Spartacus League in 1918. Member of Zentrale, close collaborator of Luxemburg. Opposed initiatives of Liebknecht in January 1919, and made head of Zentrale in March.

**Leviné, Eugen** (1883-1919) Born in St Petersburg. Socialist Revolutionary in 1905 revolution. Continued studies in Germany, joined SPD. Joined USPD, worked in Russian Rosta agency. Member of Spartacus League, organiser in Rhineland, delegate to councils congress. Entrusted with reorganising KPD(S) in Bavaria, purging pro-anarchist leftists. Leader of second Soviet Republic in Munich, condemned to death and shot.

**Liebknecht, Karl** (1871-1919) Son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, SPD founder. Lawyer. SPD member since 1900, leader of Socialist Youth, sentenced for anti-militarist activity. Deputy in Reichstag in 1912, voted for war credits in August 1914 under fraction discipline, then standard-bearer of revolutionary opposition to war. Leader of Spartacus League, then of KPD(S) at its foundation. One of those who inspired uprising of January 1919. Arrested and murdered by his captors.

**Lloyd George, David** (1863-1945) Prime minister of the UK and head of the wartime coalition from 1916 to 1922.

**Ludendorff, Erich** (1865-1937) German general; appointed as Hindenburg's deputy in 1916. Later involved in both the Kapp Putsch of 1920 and the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923.

**Luxemburg, Rosa** (1871-1919) Born in Poland. Emigrated to Zürich in 1888, met Jogiches and with him founded Polish Social-Democratic Party. Settled in Germany. Opposed revisionists. In Poland during 1905 Revolution. Lecturer in central SPD school in Berlin from 1907. Broke with Kautsky and centre tendency of SPD in 1912. In August 1914 organised resistance to social-chauvinism, founded Internationale group. Twice imprisoned, freed in November 1918. Edited *Die Rote Fahne*. Member of Zentrale. Murdered along with Liebknecht.

**Marchlewski, Julian** (1866-1925) Born in Poland. Underground activist in 1888. Took part in formation of Polish Social-Democratic Party with Luxemburg. Settled in Germany 1893. Member of Spartacist nucleus, imprisoned during 1916-18, freed as Russian citizen abroad at request of Soviet government.

**Mehring, Franz** (1846-1919) Writer and liberal journalist, joined SPD in period of anti-socialist persecution. Author of works of history and literary criticism. Editor of *Leipziger Volkszeitung* and editorial writer in *Die Neue Zeit*. Associated with Luxemburg, joined her when she broke from Kautsky. Member of internationalist nucleus in 1914, Spartacist. KPD(S) member. Died a few weeks later.

## GLOSSARY

**Meyer, Ernst** (1887-1930) Joined SPD in 1908. Journalist on *Vorwärts* 1913. Oppositionist in August 1914. Spartacus League leader. On Zentrale in 1918, elected to KPD(S) Zentrale at its foundation. Principal party leader with Levi.

**Müller, Richard** (1890-1943). Metalworkers' union leader in Berlin. Organised network of revolutionary shop stewards, led strikes in June 1916, April 1917 and January 1918. Conscripted. President of Executive of Councils in November 1918. Opposed entry of revolutionary stewards into KPD(S). Protested against initiatives which led to January uprising. Led strikes March 1919 in Berlin. Leader of left opposition in trade unions and USPD. Joined KPD in 1920.

**National Assembly** German parliament.

**New International** Monthly magazine of the heterodox Trotskyist group, the Workers Party/ ISL, led by Max Shachtman, 1940-58.

**Noske, Gustav** (1868-1946) SPD politician, first minister of the Reichswehr after the revolution; mainly responsible for the military crushing of workers' uprisings in Germany from 1918 to 1920.

**Pieck, Wilhelm** (1876-1960) Carpenter. Trade unionist in 1894, SPD member 1895. During 1906-10 in apparatus of Bremen party. In Berlin in 1910 responsible for Party education. Member of Internationale group in 1914. Coopted by Liebknecht to circle of revolutionary shop-stewards. Elected to Zentrale of Spartacus League, then to KPD(S) Zentrale. With Liebknecht in January 1919.

**Poincare, Raymond** (1860-1934) President of France from 1913-20.

**Radek, Karl** (1885-1939) Active aged 18 in underground Polish socialist movement. Involved in 1905 Revolution. Wrote for SPD press in Leipzig and Bremen. Expelled from Polish Party in 1912 at instigation of Jogiches and Luxemburg, and from SPD in 1913. Participated in Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences, collaborated with Arbeiterpolitik, and played important role in forming Zimmerwald Left. Close to Bolsheviks. Secret mission to Berlin in December 1918, took part in Founding Conference of KPD(S). Unsuccessfully opposed initiatives of Liebknecht in January 1919.

**Revolutionary Age** was an American radical newspaper edited by Louis Fraina and published from November 1918 until August 1919. Originally the publication of the Boston branch of the Socialist Party, the paper evolved into the national organ of the left wing of the Socialist Party. Publication ceased in August 1919, when it was replaced by a weekly newspaper *The Communist*, official organ of the new Communist Party of America.

**Reventlow, Ernst** (1869-1943) German naval officer, journalist and nationalist politician. Later a Nazi. *Rote Fahne* [Red Flag] newspaper of the Spartacus League, later the KPD from 1918.

**Scheidemann, Philipp** (1865-1939): leading SPD politician; proclaimed the German Republic on November 9, 1918, and became its first minister president.

**Shop Stewards** (Revolutionäre Obleute) radical anti-war union organisers who played a major role in the German Revolution's council movement; the most prominent figures were Müller and Däumig. Socialist International Founded 1889 as workers' international. Split in 1914 due to national party leaders' support for the war.

**Sonnino, Sidney** (1847-1922) Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs during and after the First World War. SPD Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, name of the Social-Democratic Party

**Tirpitz, Alfred von** (1849-1930) German admiral

**USPD Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands**, Independent Social-Democratic Party. Formed in 1917. Voted by a majority to merge with the KPD in October 1920. A minority of members (but a majority of USPD members of parliament) then continued the USPD and merged into the SPD in 1922. After that, yet another minority continued a small USPD until it merged into a new group, the SAP, in 1931.

**Volksmarinedivision** Revolutionary unit of sailors in 1918-1919.

**Vorwärts** (Forward) main publishing organ of the SPD since 1876.

**Wilhelm II, Kaiser** (1859-1941) Germany's last Kaiser; ousted on 9 November, abdicated on 28 November 1918.

**Wilson, Woodrow** (1856-1924) US president 1913-21. Put forward 14 points for post-war order, including a League of Nations.

**Zetkin, Clara** (1857-1933) Teacher. Presented report on women at founding Congress of Second International in 1889. Secretary of Women's Secretariat of International, founder and chief editor of *Die Gleichheit* (Equality) SPD women's paper. Member of internationalist nucleus from August 1914, arrested 1915, removed from *Die Gleichheit* in 1916. In USPD as Spartacist in 1917, declared solidarity with Bolsheviks. Not present at KPD(S) Founding Congress, joined the party in March 1919.



**A collection of Rosa Luxemburg's writings from the German Revolution of 1918-9, many of them in new translations, and with an introduction. In November 1918 German workers overthrew the imperial government and ended the First World War. What began as a sailors' revolt within weeks saw workers' councils take charge of numerous German cities. A social democratic government took office amidst a situation of dual power, yet would end up sponsoring the murder of the revolutionary socialist leader Rosa Luxemburg by right-wing gangs.**

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