

*Ottokar Luban (Berlin, Germany – International Rosa-Luxemburg-Society)*

## **"Novel Perspectives on the German Revolution of 1918/19"**

The German Revolution of November 1918 is considered until today by the historians of the old Federal Republic of Germany as a kind of automatic result of the mutiny of the sailors of the German Imperial War Fleet. The workers should have had no crucial share in this revolutionary development only following and supporting the mutinying seamen who swept victoriously like a revolutionary wave from the port cities of the Northern and Baltic Sea to the northern, northwestern and western part of the German Empire.

The well organized partly armed mass uprising in the capital city of Berlin by a clandestine network of left shop stewards supported by the USPD<sup>1</sup> and the Spartacus Group<sup>2</sup> was either played down or even ignored though it ended successfully in the seize of power in Berlin on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1918.

Exemplary for this position is the statement by Susanne Miller in her standard work on the history of the SPD which describes the successful revolutionary mass demonstration in Berlin as a “protest rally without any organizational preparations”.<sup>3</sup> Other well reputed West-German scholars e.g. Eberhard Kolb and Heinrich August Winkler came to similar evaluations.<sup>4</sup> The same tendency we find in monographs by US American scholars David W. Morgan and Eric D. Weitz.<sup>5</sup>

But analyzing the events in detail a different image is coming up: The only left group in Germany with a revolutionary potential were the shop stewards in the Union of the Metal Industry who were in opposition to the right wing union bureaucrats and the chairmen. This was a close community who had grown together in informal gatherings in the pubs after official union meetings practicing the traditional solidarity of the workers. Under the leadership of the lathe operator Richard Müller<sup>6</sup> and in cooperation with the USPD and the

Spartacus Group they were responsible for the strikes in Berlin in June 1916, in April 1917, and January 1918 claiming bread and peace. Since spring 1918 the shop stewards – now headed by the plumber Emil Barth<sup>7</sup> who replaced the drafted Richard Müller - felt that they had to prepare not only for another mass strike but for an armed uprising to end the war by all means. Yet they expected a promising revolutionary situation in Germany not sooner than in January 1919.

But in late September 1918 the German High Command with the prominent generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff<sup>8</sup> had to confess the military defeat to the shocked public who was - due to the official positive propaganda - not prepared for such bad news. This caused a fundamental political crisis of confidence in the authorities of the Kaiserreich.<sup>9</sup> Additionally a discussion on the abdication of the Kaiser caused by the conditions for an armistice by the US President Wilson undermined the traditional German deference to authority.

In this increasing favorable situation for a revolutionary mass movement the shop stewards (I will use further on the name “Revolutionary Shop Stewards” though it came into use after the 9<sup>th</sup> of November) intensified their preparations joined by two leading USPD leftists Ernst Däumig the representative for the imprisoned USPD party secretary Dittmann and the Member of Parliament Georg Ledebour, later by the Spartacist Karl Liebknecht and the USPD chairman Hugo Haase. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards with their leaders Richard Müller and Emil Barth were fixed on the plan to have a well organized big blow a revolutionary mass strike with armed demonstrations from the plants into the inner city of Berlin with occupation of the public buildings. Revolutionaries in other cities and regions should try the same at an appointed date. In a leaflet distributed in the last October week they operated already under the name “Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat” (Workers’ and Soldiers’

Council). Prerequisite was the readiness of the workers for a revolutionary mass action. This situation was recognized at sessions on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of November by the delegates of the factories in the revolutionary committee not sooner than for the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. Messengers to the provincial towns with the information on the uprising date 11<sup>th</sup> November came back to Berlin with the news that most of the left comrades in those cities saw no favorable attitude for revolutionary actions.<sup>10</sup>

There were several reasons for the lack of a sufficient revolutionary mood of the proletarian masses. At the end of September 1918 the General Ludendorff recommended to Kaiser Wilhelm II a new constitution as a parliamentary monarchy in the hope to get better conditions for the armistice. And since the beginning of October Germany had a new chancellor Prince Max von Baden who was responsible to the parliament promising a liberal policy and a soon armistice. The MSPD<sup>11</sup> sent two members Gustav Bauer and Philipp Scheidemann as secretaries of state into the new government.

From the 4<sup>th</sup> of November the revolutionary wave with the mutinying sailors of the German War fleet spread from Kiel and other German coast cities including Hamburg and Bremen to the western German cities Cologne, Hannover and Brunswick, and late at night on the 7<sup>th</sup> to Munich. The new government and the old imperial authorities made strong efforts to keep away the revolutionary movement from the capital city of Berlin hoping that the revolutionary energy will fade away soon. With arrests of left socialists, military presence in the Berlin streets, arresting the arriving sailors, isolation of the capital from northern and western Germany (cut off train and telephone connections) and an intensive antirevolutionary propaganda the authorities tried to intimidate the workers.

These antirevolutionary measures were strongly supported by an intensive antirevolutionary propaganda of the Majority Social Democracy with almost

daily appeals in their newspapers to keep calm in order not to endanger the possibility of an armistice. Most important was the influence on the MSPD shop stewards with daily meetings with the party leaders especially with Friedrich Ebert. It looks as if the MSPD leaders had taken care of their comrades in the factories since summer 1918 and intensified this contact in the weeks before the Novemberrevolution so that the impact on the workers in the Berlin factories by the left shop stewards on the one hand and the right wing shop stewards on the other hand was quite balanced.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November the situation for the revolutionaries who were prepared for the uprising on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November escalated dramatically when the Berlin police arrested the revolutionary leader Ernst Däumig and confiscated his briefcase with all the plans for the 11<sup>th</sup> November uprising. The members of the revolutionary committee now could have gone underground and wait until the 11<sup>th</sup> of November or even longer. But though the troops were still in the streets and the revolutionary leaders were scattered all over different sites of the city and also they had to fear more arrests all of the militants decided spontaneously to call for the uprising on the next day, the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, publishing and distributing 2 relevant leaflets. Emil Barth even succeeded to organize a meeting of the rank and file giving orders for the armed mass demonstrations from the factories to the inner city.

In the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> of November the revolutionary leaders on the one hand and the governing old powers including the Majority Social Democrats on the other hand were quite uncertain whether the workers would follow the call for revolutionary mass demonstrations. Now the accurate detailed preparations of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the intensive left leaflet agitation helped to encourage the masses to go out of the factories, to form armed demonstrations and to move to the inner city convincing the soldiers in

the barracks to join them and to occupy the public buildings. At noon of the 9<sup>th</sup> of November it was clear the revolutionary workers had seized power in Berlin. But while the leading revolutionaries marched with the demonstrating workers making speeches and occupying public buildings the MSPD leaders who had still tried to calm down the workers in the morning issue of the party journal "Vorwärts" were waiting in the Reichstag house for news from the revolutionary mass movement absolutely determined not only to join but to lead – in case of a successful revolution - the revolutionaries in order to control the further development. At noon under the impression of the victorious revolutionary masses Ebert as head of a MSPD group ultimately demanded the handover of the government to the MSPD and the title of Chancellor was transferred from Max von Baden to the SPD leader Friedrich Ebert who announced the formation of a new government comprised of SPD and USPD representatives. Though the revolutionary leaders succeeded the next day to have an election of councils in the factories and in the barracks they failed to get a majority of the soldiers' councillors and had to admit parity among the workers' councillors in the institution of the "Vollzugsrat" which was elected by the assembly of the Berlin workers' and soldiers' councillors and should have the control over the revolutionary government with 3 MSPD- and three USPD-members.

Nevertheless: that a special value should be attached to the revolutionary seizure of power in the capital city was expressed by the German historian Susanne Miller: "Decisive for the destiny of the revolution was Berlin."<sup>12</sup> The German revolutionaries achieved with the armistice on 11 November the very soon end of the fighting, the immediate abdication of all of the ruling aristocrats, the dukes, kings and the Kaiser, and the establishment of workers' and soldiers' councils as the new governmental system though only lasting for little more than two months until the election of the National assembly on 19 January

1919. Instead of a half absolute state system, a monarchy with a mighty Kaiser and a weak parliament, Germany now had a democracy – but due to the strong antirevolutionary efforts by the MSPD yet not as a basic democratic council system but as a bourgeois parliamentary democracy a republic without any real fundamental social change.

---

<sup>1</sup> After the party split in the spring of 1917 the expelled opponents of a policy of supporting the imperial government founded the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany), the USPD.

<sup>2</sup> The radical left inner party group around Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Franz Mehring, Karl Liebknecht, Leo Jogiches, Wilhelm Pieck and others.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Miller: *Burgfrieden und Klassenkampf. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Düsseldorf 1974, p.81.

<sup>4</sup> Ottokar Luban: *Spartakusgruppe, revolutionäre Obleute und die politischen Massenstreiks in Deutschland während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, in: id.: *Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratiekonzept. Ihre Kritik an Lenin und ihr politisches Wirken 1913 – 1919*, Leipzig 2008, pp. 167f.

<sup>5</sup> David W. Morgan: *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution. A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922*, London: Ithaca, 1975, p.121; Eric D. Weitz: *Creating German Communism, 1890 – 1990. From Popular Protest to Socialist State*, Princeton, New Jersey, pp.84f.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Müller (1880-1943). See the biography: Ralf Hoffrogge: *Working Class Politics in the German Revolution. Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement*, Chicago 2015, especially pp. 27–60.

<sup>7</sup> Emil Barth (1879-1941)

<sup>8</sup> Paul von Hindenburg (1847 – 1934), Generalfeldmarschall and Chief of the High Command (Oberste Heeresleitung), 1916 – 1918; Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937), General, deputy of Hindenburg, 1916-1918. Under the state of siege and due to their reputation both practiced not only the military but also the governmental power in Germany during the last two war years.

<sup>9</sup> Volker Ullrich: *Die nervöse Großmacht. Aufstieg und Untergang des deutschen Kaiserreichs 1871-1918*, pp. 557-567.

<sup>10</sup> For all of the revolutionary events: Luban: *Novemberrevolution*, p. 62 – 67; Morgan, pp. 107 – 112; Hoffrogge, pp. 27 – 60; also: Pierre Broué: *The German Revolution, 1917 – 1923*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2006, pp.126–190.

<sup>11</sup> After the foundation of the USPD, the SPD was often referred to as the *Mehrheits-SPD*, or Majority SPD (MSPD). To distinguish clearly the two parties after April 1917 I use throughout the abbreviation MSPD.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, p. 79.