

A Revolution Betrayed?

The January 1919 Spartacist Uprising in Berlin seen from three perspectives: MSPD, USPD and Spartakusbund



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Figure 1: The city center of Berlin, map from 1921

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Introduction

On the morning of January 5th 1919, tens of thousands of workers took to the streets of Berlin. Two months earlier, the Berlin masses had filled the streets to witness not one, but two declarations of a new German republic. The 9th of November 1918 had brought the end of the Hohenzollern dynasty who had ruled Prussia for centuries, and the German Empire since 1871. That November day the social democrat Philipp Scheidemann declared the end of the dynasty, and the beginning of social democratic rule. The social democrats promised peace and social reform to the exhausted German nation after more than four years of brutal war and privations. The war had also taken its toll on the social democratic movement. Pacifists and radical socialists had split from the party to form their own movements. One of those radical socialists was Karl Liebknecht, and he would give a second declaration of a new republic on the 9th of November 1918. It was a German revolution, but from the very start of the revolution the socialist movement seemed to be irreconcilably divided. Two almost simultaneous declarations of a republic are proof of a fundamental struggle for power. A struggle that was fought under the surface of German society until it finally boiled over in January 1919. This thesis will analyse this struggle from the 9th of November 1918 to January 15th 1919.

The November Revolution of 1918 brought the end of monarchy throughout the German Empire, social and political reforms and the beginnings of a new social-democratic order. The Spartacist uprising of January 1919 began as a strike, ended in bloodshed and is often depicted as an attempt to defend the gains of the November revolution or even to instigate a second revolution. There is a debate whether the term ‘Spartacist Uprising’ covers the events of January 1919. It may give the impression that the Spartacists played a major, if not the major role in the uprising. This has been contested by historians like Winkler and Jones who both will be discussed later in this chapter¹. For this research the author chooses to continue the usage of this debatable description of the unrest of January 1919. First of all it is still a widely used term to describe these events. Secondly while the direct involvement of Karl Liebknecht and the Spartakusbund in planning and executing the January 1919 events is doubtful, there

¹ Jones, *Founding Weimar, Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (Cambridge, 2016) 173; Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* (Berlin, 1984) 122.

is still some historical validity in the claim that the Spartakusbund was a major factor in the weeks leading up to the January 1919 fighting.

For the purpose of clarity, the events between November 9th and January 15th will be described using the plural of the word revolution. For the clarity of this thesis the plural of revolution to describe the events between November 9th and January 15th will be used. The first German revolution of early November is the end of the Wilhelmine Empire, the old order and the birth of a new republic, the second revolution is the Spartacist Uprising in the eleven days between January 4th and January 15th 1919. This thesis discusses in this thesis are the two German revolutions and the chaotic period in between.

In this thesis the author will closely follow the three main left-wing movements which existed in German politics at the time: the Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands or MSPD, the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (USPD) and the Spartakusbund, or Spartacus League, between November 1918 and January 1919. All three movements are a result of the Great War and the schisms that followed the policies of the Social Democratic party during the war.

In the first chapter this thesis will go into greater depth concerning in the historical background of the events discussed. As the historiography shows there always was a fundamental discussion surrounding the Spartacist Uprising². Both the Spartacists and their opponents broadly construed each other as waging a counterrevolution; the other would bring untold misery and destruction to the German workers. The MSPD strove for a democratically elected national assembly, which in turn would draft a new constitution. Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the MSPD in November 1918, desired an orderly transition. He saw the necessity of continuation of the old social and political structures to a certain degree. Giving in to radical socialists would only strengthen the opposition, who would not refrain from violence if necessary, to the November revolution. Ebert and the moderate social democrats could and did point to Russia to see what radical revolution could do to a country.

² Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* (Köln, 2008) and Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* provide the interesting debates on this topic. More will be discussed later in this chapter but for now it suffices to say that the actions of Ebert and the MSPD on one side and Liebknecht with his Spartacists are heavily criticised.

The Spartakusbund had a diametrically opposed view on how the German November revolution should continue. They saw the Bolsheviks in Russia as a shining example, and they (especially Liebknecht) did not hesitate to say so in public. Only a Bolshevik revolution, so the Spartakusbund argued, could bring true social, economic and political justice to Germany. The old order had been bankrupted in the Great War, as were the moderate social democrats who supported the war effort. Due to their betrayal of the working class and international solidarity in August 1914 they were not fit to lead in the eyes of Liebknecht and his comrades.

Between the two extremes of German socialist politics stood the USPD. It united all socialists in the German Reichstag who opposed the war. The main weakness of the USPD lay in the fact that other than pacifism and opposition to the war there was little else to unite its members. Ideologically the party included moderates such as Hugo Haase but the Spartakusbund and other left wing radicals in Germany associated with the party as well. The USPD members in the Council of Deputies and many workers and soldiers councils were from the moderate wing³. During November and December 1918 they desperately tried to form a bridge between the radicals on the left and the moderate socialists of the MSPD.

The struggle between these three parties, which together bridged the entire spectrum of left-wing politics in Germany of 1918, is the focal point of this research. The Spartacist Uprising of January 1919 is the culmination of a tense period which began in early November 1918. This thesis will try to answer the following question to what extent was the Spartacist Uprising a revolution to defend the November revolution or a counter revolution which would only damage the gains of the November revolution?

To retrace the events of this period this thesis will turn towards a plethora of sources, both primary and secondary. The newspapers associated with the three left-wing movements, *Die Freiheit* for the USPD, *Vorwärts* for the MSPD and *Die Rote Fahne* for the Spartacus League, which vied for power in the months November 1918-January 1919 are excellent sources to deduce the official party lines of the groups involved, and if and how these party lines *evolved* as well.

³ Kolb & Schumann, *Die Weimarer Republik* (München, 2013) 11.

Several egodocuments written by key figures involved in the events, such as Gustav Noske, who would play an integral part in suppressing radical uprisings in Germany and author of *Vom Kiel bis Kapp* published in 1920, USPD activists Curt Geyer's autobiography *Die revolutionäre Illusion* published in 1976, The author originally wrote down his experiences in the preceding decade. His heirs gave the manuscript to the Institut für Zeitgeschichte who subsequently decided to publish it after some minor revisions. Though the events described by Geyer occurred several decades before he wrote them down it is still a useful source for this thesis. USPD leader Wilhelm Dittmann's *Erinnerungen* were originally published in Switzerland between 1939 and 1947. The version used for this research was republished in 1995 and provides an interesting insight in the social democratic politics during the Great War and the period discussed in this thesis. Further writings by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg will be used. Eduard Bernstein's *Die deutsche Revolution von 1918/19* published originally in 1922 but republished in 1998 with an extensive commentary by Heinrich August Winkler also provides an interesting perspective.

Secondary literature includes the works by Heinrich August Winkler on the German Revolution, Sebastian Haffner's polemic on the Revolution and various histories of Germany during that period such as Miller's *Die Bürde der Macht*, Eberhard Kolb and Dirk Schumann's *Die Weimarer Republik* and Burdick and Lutz' *The political institutions of the German Revolution 1918/19*⁴. Biographies on the major characters provide the necessary information on the personal backgrounds and the activities of these characters during the period between November 1918 and January 1919.

As is often the case in history there seems to be a peak of interest in a subject as soon as a marked anniversary of an events nears. During the latter half of the 1960's the German Revolution was in vogue. The fiftieth anniversary drew near at the time and the social upheaval of the 'Swinging Sixties' shed a new light on the existing ideas and discourse on the German Revolution and its leading characters. Quite a few sources date from that period, which requires any historian to treat them with a healthy dose of suspicion considering the time that has passed between the date of publication and the

⁴ Miller, S. *Die Bürde der Macht, die deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1918-1920* (Dusseldorf, 1978); Kolb, E. & Schumann, D. *Die Weimarer Republik* (8th. ed. München, 2013) ; Burdick, C.B. & Lutz, R.H. *The political institutions of the German Revolution* (New York, 1966)

time of writing of this thesis. As the one hundredth anniversary of the German Revolution is approaching a new wave of historical work and analyses is to be expected. Hopefully this thesis can provide a small part in the resurgence of this subject in history.

The events of the November Revolution and the Spartacist Uprising have always been controversial and a matter for debate. This is mainly due to the intense political nature of these events. Some contemporaries and later historians alike had harsh words for the leading social democrats of 1918-1919. Sebastian Haffner was very damning in his judgement of Friedrich Ebert and the MSPD government which mercilessly repressed the Spartacist Uprising in January 1919 and other left-wing revolts throughout Germany in 1919 and 1920. According to Haffner the Social Democratic leadership turned on the very same workers who had propelled them into power⁵. The first revolution, which brought down the monarchy, forced an end to the war and resulted in overwhelming support amongst the soldiers and workers for the social democrats. It was not an engineered revolution, but was a truly spontaneous revolution by the masses which supported social democracy⁶.

Haffner views the second revolution in January 1919 as an organic demand by the workers in Berlin to renew the promises and reinvigorate the hopes of November⁷. Karl Liebknecht was, in Haffner's eyes, a well-known socialist who lacked a powerful organisation. He was a controversial figure who inspired either love or intense hatred but he was at best a symbolic figure during the initial November revolution⁸.

Haffner can hardly be called a communist or Liebknecht sympathiser, but the title of the first edition of his book *Der Verrat* shows his contempt for the ultimate course of events and the MSPD leadership who played a crucial role in shaping these events. Especially the cooperation between Ebert and the conservative army command (Oberste Heeresleitung or OHL) riles Haffner. Ebert never was fond of radical revolution, and when on the 10th of November the army chief of staff Groener offered him the support of the still powerful armed forces, he was quick to seize that opportunity. In return for the army's support Groener demanded the end of council

⁵ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 10.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 69.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 155.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 100.

experimentation, radicalism and Bolshevism⁹. This opened the way to the use of the armed forces against any radical socialist movement, when- or wherever it might appear. Most notably this established a link between the MSPD and the Freikorps, right-wing paramilitary units consisting of recently demobilised soldiers. Their use by Gustav Noske, a leading MSPD member of parliament, during the Spartacist Uprising was enough to lead Haffner to the conclusion that the leading MSPD politicians (Ebert, Noske and Scheidemann) could never be called social democrats¹⁰.

Heinrich August Winkler was far milder for the Ebert government in his works on the German Revolutions of 1918/19. He points to the difficult political situation facing the MSPD government in these months¹¹. There was little room for manoeuvre and the MSPD hoped to achieve the desired social and political reforms through parliamentary and democratic means. They could not afford to alienate voters who were less inclined to radical social reforms¹². According to Winkler, Friedrich Ebert and the MSPD detested the prospect of a revolution, as parliamentary democracy, based on a constitution written by a democratically elected constitutional assembly, would be able to achieve the ends of socialism via democratic and peaceful means. Their revolution was the entrenchment of social and political rights such as universal suffrage in all of Germany, abolishment of the ruling aristocracies (although Ebert himself was apparently less keen on the abolishment of monarchy) and improved working conditions. Support for such changes was genuine according to Winkler.¹³ Attempts at achieving socialism through other, undemocratic means, were unwanted for several reasons. First of all the army leadership, on whom Ebert and the MSPD depended and with whom they had struck an accord since their conversation on November 10th, would be extremely hostile against any radical socialist seizure of power. Secondly it would be unlikely that the Entente powers would continue peace negotiations with a revolutionary socialist German government. The SPD desired peace and reconstruction, and in the transition from war to peace and reconstruction radical revolution could only bring more hardship¹⁴. The accord between Groener and Ebert was not an evil thing in itself according to Winkler. It would have been a chance to transform the armed forces

⁹ Ibidem, 120-121.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 166.

¹¹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* (Berlin, 1984) 68.

¹² Winkler, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Revolution von 1918/19* (Berlin, 1979) 52.

¹³ Ibidem, 49.

¹⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 39-40.

from a conservative bulwark to a loyal instrument of the new Republic¹⁵. Unfortunately the army was not the loyal force it could have been, something which is partly to blame on the naivité of the social democratic leadership according to Winkler¹⁶. The bloody suppression of the Spartacist Uprising, when Freikorps and loyal troops on the orders of MSPD leader Noske combatted the radical socialists in the streets of Berlin, was unavoidable and to a certain extent understandable.

Winkler's views on the radical left, especially the Spartakusbund are much harsher. They were radicals who did not understand the situation Germany was in, nor were they truly interested in the needs of the German people. They were simply dangerous revolutionary desperados¹⁷.

More recent works on the Revolutions of 1918/19 focus on the role of the ordinary German in the German Revolutions. In 'The crowd in the German Revolution 1918', a chapter of *Germany 1916-23, a revolution in context* Mark Jones writes that initial stages of the revolution in November 1918 had a truly spontaneous character which was expressed by occupying important spaces. The progress of which spaces were occupied (from meeting in woods and outskirts of German cities in the first few days to occupying city centres and administrative centres) showed the process of escalation of the revolution. While this thesis is not centrally concerned with the spatial element of the revolution, it is interesting to note that Mark Jones focusses on the masses, separate from the on goings of the political parties, leaders, monarchs and generals. In the aforementioned chapter Jones introduces a typology of five ideal types of the revolutionary German crowd: the crowd in formation or at dispersal, the assembly, the procession, the curious crowd and the confrontational crowd¹⁸. This typology is extremely useful for this thesis and in particular when discussing the January Spartacist uprising.

In *Founding Weimar* Mark Jones examines the issue of political violence, and the role rumour and fear played during the first few months after the November revolution¹⁹. During this period fear induced violence grew more brutal and

¹⁵ Ibidem, 69.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 107.

¹⁷ Winkler, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Revolution von 1918/19* 61.

¹⁸ Jones, 'The crowd in the German November revolution 1918' in '*Germany 1916-23*' 49-53.

¹⁹ Jones, '*Founding Weimar*'.

transformed considerably. Jones shows that violence inspired by fear was not new. During the Great War the German army had massacred civilians in Belgium and France during their victorious advance of August and early September 1914. The fear of so-called franc-tireurs, armed civilians who would launch guerrilla style attacks, was enough to kill 5,521 Belgian and 906 French civilians²⁰.

Fear was omnipresent on every side during the months of November, December and January 1918-1919. Revolutionaries feared devious counter revolution by officers and loyalist troops, and likewise wild rumours of Bolshevik revolutionaries, supported by or even directed from Moscow sent tremors down the spines of moderate and conservative politicians. Like the non-existent franc-tireurs in Belgium and France of 1914, the black hordes of reaction or Bolshevik professional revolutionaries were often simply figments of imaginations running wild. Politicians, and crowds, on all sides were affected by this fear. Jones borrows the concept of autosuggestion from Lefebvre's work on fear and the French revolution²¹. Autosuggestion is the explanation how 'self-generated beliefs allowed historical actors to truly and firmly believe that particular events were happening when they in fact were not.'²² Jones' use of autosuggestion in his work on the German revolution is invaluable and will be used by the author in this research as it sheds light on the escalation which occurred during the weeks leading up to the Spartacist Uprising. The role of autosuggestion will be used in an analysis of the incidents of the 6th of December, the night of the 23rd and 24th of December and the Uprising itself.

It is exactly the role and support of the Berlin workers who took to the street in November 1918 and once again in January 1919 which is a crucial element in this research. The element of betrayal of the November revolution has played a crucial role in historiography so far. Ebert is often accused of betraying the revolution, as Sebastian Haffner argues. On the other hand the conduct of the radical left, exemplified by the Spartakusbund, has equally been heavily criticised. The method to break this dichotomy in the historiography is to look at the most neglected agent in the German revolutions: the masses and how they were influenced. An interesting additional aspect is the role that fear played in the escalation of events through autosuggestion. This in order to

²⁰ Ibidem, 20.

²¹ Ibidem, 63-64.

²² Ibidem, 64.

answer the question posed earlier to what extent was the Spartacist Uprising a revolution to defend the November revolution or a counter revolution which would only damage the gains of the November revolution.

As stated before, a short overview of the years preceding 1918 will follow the introduction. The Great War and the Russian Revolution, and especially their effects on German social democracy will be the main subject of that chapter. This chapter will naturally be more descriptive although it will take a careful view on the written historiography and egodocuments such as Max von Baden's *Erinnerungen und Dokumente*. The second chapter will deal with the birth of the German republic; 'How did the SPD, USPD and the Spartakusbund adapt to the new Republic during its first weeks of existence?' The growing political tensions between the different socialist factions during December 1918 will be the topic of the third chapter. By looking at these escalating tensions, the ways that these tensions came to the surface and especially how each faction prepared for and behaved at the crucial Congress of Soldiers and Workers Councils from December 16th to December 21st 1918 the dynamic nature of German politics will be analysed. This will culminate in answering the sub question 'To what extent did the political positions and attitudes of the SPD, USPD and the Spartakusbund influence the Reichsrätekongress and the events of December 1918?' The fourth chapter will discuss the Spartacist Uprising, how it came to be and how a call for a strike ended in fighting on the streets of Berlin. It is most interesting to look at the support (or lack of) of the Spartakusbund among the working class of Berlin; 'How strong was the support for the Radical Left amongst the Berlin workers in January 1919?' The scale of the demonstrations and the subsequent nature of combat will be the defining parameters.

Chapter One

August 1914-November 1918: A prelude to revolution

In the years before November 1918 three historical events played an important role in the period discussed in this thesis. The first event was the Great War, the second event was the subsequent split in the social democratic movement in April 1917 and the third event was the Russian revolution of October 1917. It is important to briefly discuss these events and show how they contributed to the divisive nature of left wing politics in 1918 Germany. Lastly, this chapter will look at the crucial month of October 1918 and the rapid succession of events.

The outbreak of war

The Great War broke out over the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by a Serbian nationalist in June 1914 and political crisis that followed in July of that year. Germany supported Austria-Hungary as it was the last remaining ally on which the German Empire, feeling threatened by France in the west and Russia in the East, could depend²³. The complicated system of alliances and guarantees led to a relatively minor incident on the Balkans becoming a war that would engulf Europe and kill millions on battlefields spread across the globe.

For the German Social Democratic Party, the largest party in the Reichstag after the elections in 1912, war presented some difficult choices. Like socialist parties elsewhere, the SPD had maintained that any imperialist war would be opposed by the working class. Indeed, during the height of the July crisis, massive demonstrations against German intervention in the Austro-Serbian conflict was organised on the 28th of July by the SPD in Berlin²⁴. At the same time Russia, who had guaranteed Serbia's independence and would likely join the war against Austria-Hungary and Germany, was seen as the mortal enemy of progressiveness and liberty. The SPD loathed the autocratic regime ruling Russia. Pogroms against Jews and severe crackdowns on any form of dissent; tsar Nicholas II and his regime embodied reactionary politics²⁵. Russophobia was as old as Marxism itself. During the 1848 revolution Engels founded a newspaper

²³ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister, Duitsland en de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam, 2014) 81.

²⁴ Ibidem, 89.

²⁵ Dittmann, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995) 240.

with Marx. In the newspaper he argued for a revolutionary war against Russia, in the style of the post-1789 invasions of Germany by Revolutionary France²⁶. Engels' antipathy to Slavs and Russia in particular was pronounced as he saw Russia as the bulwark of reaction²⁷. Marx feared that one day Russian feudal hordes would overwhelm Europe, destroying Western civilisation and making all the progress of the relatively free working class of Europe²⁸.

As the Reichstag deliberated on the issuing of war credits on the 4th of August 1914, the argument of Russia's threat to world peace and progressiveness was put forward by the SPD leadership. Within a few days the social democrats had switched from non-intervention and international solidarity to supporting the war. 'In its hour of need we [the SPD] will not abandon the fatherland' as SPD parliamentary leader Hugo Haase declared in front of a jam-packed Reichstag²⁹. The relieved Emperor subsequently declared that from that day onwards he saw no parties, just Germans. This domestic peace amongst the political parties of Germany was dubbed the Burgfrieden³⁰.

Dissent within the SPD

A small group of 14 parliamentarians within the SPD opposed this turn, but they chose to abstain rather than vote against war credits to preserve party discipline. Amongst those who abstained was Karl Liebknecht, who according to Trotnow had three arguments why he abstained rather than voted against or protested more vehemently against the decision made. First of all Liebknecht was absent for the crucial second half of July, travelling first to Paris and then to Basel in Switzerland to meet with fellow socialists³¹. This trip had been planned long before and had little to do with the rising tensions in Europe. His travels abroad meant that he missed the crucial discussions and developments back home in Berlin. Liebknecht thus had a disadvantage in the crucial debate on the 3rd of August 1914³². Thirdly he shared the absolute hatred and revulsion for the oppressive Tsarist regime in Russia with the party leadership.

²⁶ McLellan, *Engels* (Glasgow, 1977) 45-46.

²⁷ Ibidem, 54.

²⁸ Padover, *Karl Marx, an intimate biography* (New York, 1978) 409.

²⁹ Prager, *Geschichte der U.S.P.D.* (Berlin, 1922) 24.

³⁰ Burgfrieden, term for the cessation of hostilities within a town or keep which is under siege. At the start of the war, when the first war credits were voted on without any public display of dissent, the German Emperor Wilhelm II said that from that day onwards he saw no parties, only Germans. This symbolized the beginning of the compliance of nearly all German parliamentarians with the war effort. See Dassen, *Sprong in het duister*, 119 & 125-126.

³¹ Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht, eine politische Biografie* (Köln, 1980) 183-184.

³² Ibidem, 186.

Liebkecht could hardly oppose a war when one of the main arguments was one he had been making for years³³. Thirdly Trotnow suspects that Liebkecht was quite simply taken aback by the ‘spirit of 1914’, when the frenzy and hysteria surrounding the outbreak of the war moved many³⁴.

As the mobile warfare of August 1914 turned into a stalemate in the trenches, his opposition against the war grew. In December 1914 he voted against new war credits³⁵. By 1916 he was expelled from the SPD³⁶. This happened after repeated and open opposition by Liebkecht against the war. In the meantime Liebkecht had formed Die Gruppe Internationale, which was renamed Die Spartacusbund after the November Revolution of 1918. Fellow co-founders included the Marxist and feminist theoretician Rosa Luxemburg. They would agitate against the war, and subsequently several leaders were imprisoned in 1916. On May 1st of that year Liebkecht, Luxemburg and their fellow radicals had organised a massive demonstration. Liebkecht was arrested before he could give his speech, he was only able to shout the slogans “Down with the war! Down with the government!” as he was arrested and dragged off³⁷. This demonstration and his imprisonment made him into a symbol of resistance of the war and the quest for peace³⁸.

On the 23rd of October 1918 Liebkecht was released from prison in the wave of general amnesties for political prisoners that followed the new Von Baden government. He was welcomed back in Berlin by a huge crowd of around 20.000 men at the Anhalter station in Berlin³⁹. A procession then continued to the newly established Soviet embassy in the center of Berlin, where the next day an official reception in honor of Liebkecht was organised by the Soviet ambassador Adolf Joffe⁴⁰. Rosa Luxemburg was released from prison in Breslau on the 8th of November 1918⁴¹. The Spartakusbund was a minor but nonetheless radical organisation. Sebastian Haffner called Karl Liebkecht “probably the most well-known socialist figure in Germany, who simply

³³ Ibidem, 186-187.

³⁴ Ibidem, 187.

³⁵ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister*, 197.

³⁶ Schmidt, *Spartakus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971) 117.

³⁷ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister*, 191-192.

³⁸ Ibidem, 192.

³⁹ Trotnow, *Karl Liebkecht* 249.

⁴⁰ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 68.

⁴¹ Trotnow, *Karl Liebkecht* 260.

had neither an organisation, either influence or power” which is a fitting description of the situation the members of the Spartakusbund found themselves in⁴².

The pacifist middle-ground

Other SPD parliamentarians disagreed with the course of the war and the role that the SPD played in the Burgfrieden. Already in December 1915 the first group of pacifists had voted against war credits, but at that time the party leadership managed to prevent an expulsion which would result in an irreconcilable split within the socialist movement in Germany⁴³. After a second rejection of war credits in April 1916 the party expelled the dissidents, who continued to form an own party faction in the Reichstag. At this time it consisted of 18 members of parliament⁴⁴. In April 1917 they founded the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or USPD for short. The loyalist SPD was henceforth known as the MSPD, or Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland, to prevent any confusion. While less radical than the Spartakusbund, which strove for a revolutionary solution (especially after the Bolshevik revolution) to the problems facing the workers of Germany, they were openly pacifist and pursued a peace without reparations or annexations.

As the opposition to the war grew over 1917 and 1918, so did the membership of the USPD. The SPD had been haemorrhaging members since the start of the war. At the start of the war the social democrats had over 1 million members. Between August 1914 and March 1915 that number dropped by 46%. By March 1916 this figure had dropped by another 26%, March 1917 saw a further decrease of 44%⁴⁵. The USPD grew rapidly to around 120.000 members by October 1917, with the MSPD having a little over 240.000 members at that time⁴⁶. Radical elements in German socialism like the Spartakusbund and the Revolutionäre Obleute (revolutionary shop stewards) were loosely affiliated with the USPD, but the USPD remained a primarily parliamentary party which engaged in extra-parliamentary activism to support its cause⁴⁷.

The Great War and the issue whether to support the war effort had thus split the mighty social democratic movement in three parts. The MSPD was still a powerful force in the Reichstag, although its support amongst the masses was slowly eroding,

⁴² Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 100.

⁴³ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister*, 197.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 197.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 197-198.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 198.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 199.

with the USPD in particular gaining support for its opposition against the war. The Spartakusbund was small, but its the revolutionary fervour could not be questioned.

Ten days that shook the world

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 in particular buoyed the radical elements of German socialism. The socialist world was closely interconnected before 1914, and many German socialists would be familiar with the names of the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution. Lenin and Karl Kautsky fought their intellectual battles in the social democratic magazine *Die Neue Zeit* in 1904⁴⁸. The internal struggles of the Russian socialist movement often filled the pages of *Vorwärts*. For example Lenin published an article attacking an earlier anonymous article (written by Trotsky) on the proceedings at the party congress of 1912 in *Vorwärts*⁴⁹.

As well as buoying the radicals, it struck fears in the moderate socialists of the USPD, MSPD, let alone the conservative elite of Germany⁵⁰. Their fear of a radical, Bolshevik inspired, revolution would haunt leaders of the social democrats, conservative parties and OHL throughout the period discussed in this research. Rumours of Bolshevik support for the Spartakusbund or even the USPD were abound during 1918, some of which proved to be true⁵¹. The phenomenon of workers and soldiers councils was also inspired by the Russian example. During the failed revolution of 1905 the first councils had been formed in St. Petersburg. During the February revolution of 1917 which toppled the Tsar the councils made a comeback⁵². In Russia Lenin and the Bolsheviks had managed to gain power through the councils, an inspiration and example to follow for the German radicals⁵³. The first German workers councils appeared during the growing unrest and strikes against the war in 1917 and early 1918⁵⁴.

The Russian Bolshevik revolution thus had a threefold effect on the November revolution in Germany and the Spartacist Uprising. First of all it inspired the radicals

⁴⁸ Schmidt, *Spartakus* 71.

⁴⁹ V.I. Lenin, *The Anonymous Writer in Vorwärts and the State of Affairs in the R.S.D.L.P.*
<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1912/mar/00d.htm>>

⁵⁰ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 69-74.

⁵¹ The Russian Bolsheviks expected, as Marxist doctrine stated, that world revolution would start in the developed world so they pinned their hopes on a revolution in Germany.

⁵² Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik* 3.

⁵³ Kolb, *Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* (Düsseldorf, 1962) 56.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 57-59; Ryder, *The German revolution of 1918/1919* (1967, Cambridge) 101.

that socialism through revolution was possible. Secondly, this inspiration was accompanied by material support for the radical left by Bolshevik Russia⁵⁵. Thirdly the spectre of a Bolshevik revolution haunted the moderate and conservative leadership, influencing the decisions made by these leading figures during the time period November 1918-January 1919⁵⁶.

After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, Imperial Germany and Bolshevik Russia were formally at peace, leaving the Bolsheviks able to concentrate on the brutal civil war and Germany on winning the war in the west. The course of the Russian civil war is of little further interest here, but it is important to discuss the failed hopes of the German army leadership and Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918. With reinforcements arriving from the Eastern Front, they hoped to break the French and British armies before massive numbers of Americans would start to let their weight influence the outcome of the war. The spring and summer offensives, though initially successful, failed in their strategic goal of breaking the British and French armies before the Americans could arrive in large numbers. By August 1918 the immensely powerful Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff privately admitted defeat⁵⁷.

On the 28th and 29th of September 1918 a conference of the German Oberste Heeresleitung (henceforth OHL), a parliamentary delegation and Kaiser Wilhelm II was held at the Imperial Headquarters in Spa. The situation, so declared the OHL openly for the first time, was desperate. Germany was defeated and peace would have to be sought with the Western Allies. The most promising course of action was to give the Reichstag a role in the Imperial Government, appoint a new Chancellor and pursue further, minor democratizing reforms⁵⁸. These steps in itself were a break with the past and quite radical. The Reichstag had never played a major role in the formation of a government, now a coalition of the three major parties (Zentrum, Fortschrittliche Volkspartei and most surprisingly the MSPD) would be formed under the notoriously liberal Prinz Max von Baden⁵⁹. Eberhard Kolb describes it as a revolution from above, initiated by the conservative leadership with two goals in mind. First of all the Western Allies, US President Woodrow Wilson in particular, would be more receptive to a request for an armistice from a democratic government than from the embodiments of German

⁵⁵ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 72.

⁵⁶ Geyer, *Die revolutionäre Illusion* (Stuttgart, 1976) 62-63.

⁵⁷ Hart, *The Great War* (London, 2014) 452.

⁵⁸ Kolb & Schumann, *Die Weimarer Republik* 3.

⁵⁹ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 201.

militarism; Ludendorff, Hindenburg and Wilhelm II. Secondly, the dishonorable task of negotiating peace and the subsequent blame would be placed on this democratic government, instead of the military leadership⁶⁰.

On the 3rd of October Max von Baden was appointed as Chancellor and he subsequently formed a coalition government which included the MSPD. The inclusion of the social democrats was controversial. Since the foundation of the party in the 1870s the social democrats were seen by the ruling elite as the greatest threat to the future of the Empire, a role which they gladly took upon them. Over the course of several decades the social democrats became less radical, and the conservative elites more accepting, with the social democratic support for the war and the Burgfrieden in 1914 as the high point of acceptance. To include social democrats in the government was a big step, and only after forceful argumentation by Von Baden and Ludendorff did the Kaiser acquiesce. There was much criticism from the other side of the political spectrum as well. The USPD vehemently opposed the MSPD cooperation with bourgeois parties⁶¹. Ebert, who did not take a ministerial position, and other MSPD leaders ignored this critique. Max von Baden wrote in his autobiography that he had little doubt that the MSPD would join the government⁶². The first and main priority of the new government was to seek an armistice with the Western Allies⁶³. The Western Allies however had little incentive to negotiate with a government, even a democratically supported government, as long as Wilhelm II still sat on the German throne⁶⁴. Over the course of October this became increasingly obvious to Max von Baden, his ministers and the OHL. The suggestion by Groener that the Kaiser could always decide to die an honorable death at the head of his troops was unsurprisingly rejected by his Majesty⁶⁵. But before matters could come to a head, a minor incident in German Fleet based in the North Sea changed everything.

On the 24th of October, the naval command had ordered a last-ditch attack on the British fleet which had been blockading Germany since August 1914. This order was given without consent or even knowledge of the government, and it was met with

⁶⁰ Kolb & Schumann, *Die Weimarer Republik* 3.

⁶¹ Miller, *Bürde der Macht* 37.

⁶² Von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente* (Berlin, 1927) 341-342.

⁶³ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 203.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 203.

⁶⁵ Hart, *The Great War* 464.

resistance amongst the sailors⁶⁶. The initial opposition to a futile last stand at sea quickly escalated to a full scale rebellion and revolution. Soldiers, sailors and workers formed a council in Kiel, which effectively took over control of the city by November 4th 1918. Gustav Noske was soon sent by the MSPD to Kiel in order to control the revolutionary fervour and prevent any escalation. He was welcomed by the council, the majority of which still saw him as one of their own, and he was named the new governor of Kiel⁶⁷. The port cities of Northern Germany were quickly taken over by spontaneous and enthusiastic soldiers- and workers councils⁶⁸. Within days the revolutionary fervour had spread across Germany, arriving in Berlin on the 9th of November 1918⁶⁹. While the nature of the unexpected revolution and its participants were very diverse, their goals were similar in many respects. Firstly, they wanted an immediate end to the war. Secondly, they demanded real democratisation, meaning abdication of Wilhelm and new elections. Thirdly, they wanted social reforms. These reforms would lead to a more social and egalitarian German society. In Berlin Max von Baden and Friedrich Ebert were terrified by the prospect of revolution getting out of control. A possible abdication of Wilhelm II and the end of the monarchy was distasteful in the eyes of Ebert⁷⁰. Contrary to his personal ideas, Ebert quickly reacted after the spread of revolution and demanded that government should now be handed over to the men who still had support amongst the masses: the social democrats. Max von Baden had come to the same conclusion, moreover he unilaterally announced the abdication of Wilhelm II and his son the Crown Prince⁷¹. Without having been able to foresee such an event, Ebert and the MSPD now had the golden opportunity to pursue the goals the social democrats had been fighting for since the 1870s.

In this brief overview it has been shown that the Great War had irreparably split the mighty social democratic party. The majority stayed loyal to the main party line that the war had to be supported. The pacifists amongst the SPD were thrown out of the party and formed the USPD in 1917. A more radical group had already left and formed the Spartakusbund in 1916. The Russian Revolution of October 1917 brought renewed

⁶⁶ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 203-204.

⁶⁷ Noske, *Vom Kiel bis Kapp* (Berlin, 1920), 25-26.

⁶⁸ Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik* 6.

⁶⁹ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 204.

⁷⁰ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 39.

⁷¹ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 204.

hope and fear to German politics. What if a Russian Bolshevik style revolution would occur in Germany? Some like the Spartakusbund hoped for and worked towards such a goal, others like the moderate socialists and conservatives were horrified by the prospect of revolution. In September and October 1918 the situation spiralled out of the control of the ruling conservative elites. Through some reforms they tried to keep a lid on the boiling pot caused by the hardships of the war, but in the end it had simply been too much. A sailor's mutiny escalated into a full-fledged revolution which brought the Wilhelmine Empire to its end. The conservative elite had been broken, for now, but it was not completely removed from power as the coming weeks and months would prove.

Chapter Two

November 1918: A new Germany is born

“Karl Liebknecht, Ledebour, Adolf Hoffmann und die ‘Revolutionäre Obleute’ hatten in Schöneberg in der Wohnung eines ‘unabhängigen’ Genossen übernachtet und standen früh auf, am 9. Novembe, um vom Fenster des Eckhauses zu beobachten, ob die Steglitzer Fabrikarbeiter kommen würden. Ob sie Kommen würden. Und siehe da, da kamen sie. Da marschieren sie näher. Da sangen sie. Die rote Fahne flog ihnen voran.”
Alexander Döblin⁷²

On November 9th, revolution arrived in Berlin. As was discussed in the previous chapter, it came on a wave of uprisings and revolutions spreading across Germany. The abdication of Wilhelm II was announced during the early afternoon, and soon it became apparent that the old order had collapsed completely. In the chaos of the moment, not one, but two separate declarations on the end of the monarchy and a new republic were given to the masses in Berlin. At 14.00 hours, from a window in the Reichstag, came the declaration of the social democrat Phillip Scheidemann. He announced the republic against the wishes of Ebert who apparently was upset with his close friend and colleague⁷³. It may have been a step too far for some, but the unpopularity of the monarchy and the revolutionary wave which spread across Germany would have ended the Wilhelmine Empire sooner or later. Two hours later, in a very similar move and setting, Karl Liebknecht had pronounced a ‘free and socialist republic’ from the window of the Berliner Stadtschloss⁷⁴. It was clear from the very beginning that this new republic and the course it would follow would be heavily contested. This chapter will examine how this struggle went in November in order to answer the question *‘How did the SPD, USPD and the Spartakusbund adapt to the new Republic during its first weeks of existence?’*

⁷² Döblin, *November 1918, Karl und Rosa*, (München, 1978) 102.

⁷³ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 48-49; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 84.

⁷⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 52; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 84.

A new Germany, a new government

After the tumultuous start of his Chancellery, Friedrich Ebert continued to form a government. He tried to include the bourgeois parties (Zentrum and Fortschritt Partei) which had formed the government of Max von Baden, but in this revolutionary hour he knew that he needed every possible socialist support in this revolutionary hour⁷⁵. The USPD was willing to provide this desired support, but the independents refused to govern with the bourgeois parties. Ebert was thus forced to form a government consisting of only the MSPD and the USPD. The three SPD members of the Council of People's Deputies (Rat von Volksbeauftragten) were Ebert himself, Phillip Scheidemann and Otto Landsberg. On behalf of the USPD Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann and Emil Barth entered the council as deputies. Ebert reacted scathingly against the suggestion that Karl Liebknecht and the radicals should somehow be included in the government⁷⁶. Wilhelm Dittmann wrote in his autobiography that Liebknecht was in fact invited to join the Council of Deputies but after initially accepting on the evening of the 9th of November he withdrew his candidacy on the morning of the 10th⁷⁷. Liebknecht's reasoning for his decision to withdraw his candidacy will be discussed later in this chapter. Emil Barth is often seen as the most radical of the People's Deputies, as he stood firmly on the left wing of the USPD and was one of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards.



Figure 2: The council of deputies as it was formed in November 1918

⁷⁵ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 95.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, 51.

⁷⁷ Dittmann, *Erinnerungen* 559-561.

The new government was announced on the 10th of November, to much acclaim from the masses represented in the workers and soldiers councils of Berlin. A meeting of the Berlin workers and soldiers councils that day supported the new government enthusiastically. The famous *Vorwärts* front page headline of that day proclaiming ‘Kein Brüderkampf!’ truly reflected the mood of the majority of the people of Berlin⁷⁸. The theme of socialist unity and fraternity was a recurring one during the next few months, as each side claimed to represent the workers in contrast to their opponents. It is interesting to see that the MSPD, USPD and Spartakusbund each claimed to be the sole representative and tried to claim the moral high ground in this debate.

The program of the new government was announced on the 12th of November. It consisted of the following nine points⁷⁹:

1. State of emergency to be ended.
2. Complete freedom of assembly, without any restrictions.
3. End of censorship.
4. Freedom of expression in word and print.
5. Freedom of religion.
6. Amnesty for all political prisoners.
7. End of labour conscription (Hilfsdienst).
8. End of oppressive relationships between worker and boss.
9. Reinstatement of labour rights and protections which had been suspended at the start of the war.

Furthermore the new government announced electoral reforms. All Germans over the age of 20 would be able to vote in all German (national as well as state) elections, previously this had been 25 and several German states had archaic election laws which skewed the vote in favour of the propertied classes. For example Prussia had an archaic three-classes voting system, which cemented the conservatives in the Prussian parliament⁸⁰. The expansion of suffrage included women, who for the first time got the right to vote in Germany. Further social and political reforms would be announced in the near future. These included measures to combat unemployment,

⁷⁸ *Vorwärts*, 10th of November 1918.

⁷⁹ Dittmann, *Erinnerungen* 572.

⁸⁰ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 90-91.

housing shortage and the 8-hour working day⁸¹. This was a thoroughly social democratic program, and one which was agreeable for the parliamentary factions and most of the members of the MSPD and the USPD. It contained points for which social democrats had been fighting for decades.

Vorwärts naturally reacted extremely positive and spoke of the importance of peace and cooperation amongst socialists in Berlin, the capital of Germany. “Berlin could not stay behind because everything depends on Berlin. Berlin must be the center of the new order otherwise all will go to hell. The soldiers must have food and establish order so the civil population has food as well. The socialist government of unity can achieve this. The soldiers and workers will follow enthusiastically!”⁸²

In more practical terms the deputies had a few major tasks at hand: the withdrawal of an army of 8 million men back to Germany, transitioning Germany from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy and society and prevent the complete collapse of the German nation-state. Winkler delicately describes the awkward position Ebert, Haase and the others were in by November 1918⁸³. They could not do rule, enact their reforms and move Germany towards a brighter future without the old bureaucracy, industrialists and officer corps who were thoroughly conservative. The new government had the need to balance their socio-political reforms with the need to keep Germany running and in the course of doing so had to compromise⁸⁴. Furthermore Ebert feared civil war if radical reforms were pushed through without support of the majority of the population. If he upset the still powerful middle class, industrialists or conservative army leadership he knew it would mean the end of his rule and his party and possibly civil war. The fear of civil war was not unjustified. Russia had been engulfed by a civil war for almost a year by November 1918⁸⁵. Hungary would be engulfed in civil war and foreign invasion in 1919⁸⁶. It was better to proceed carefully and look for a broad coalition to support the new republic rather than pursue a gung-ho, Bolshevik style revolution⁸⁷. The willingness to compromise is best illustrated by two political deals concluded in these first few days of the republic. The first is the well-known Ebert-

⁸¹ Dittmann, *Erinnerungen* 572.

⁸² *Vorwärts*, 11th of November 1918.

⁸³ Winkler, *Von den Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 68.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 14; Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 68.

⁸⁵ See Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (New York, 2007) for more on the Russian Civil War.

⁸⁶ Priestland, *De Rode Vlag, de wereldgeschiedenis van het communisme* (Amsterdam, 2009) 144-147

⁸⁷ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 68.

Groener pact dealing with civil-military relations in the new republic, the second is the Stinnes-Legien accord dealing with labour relations.

A pact and an accord

Ebert preferred a moderate program for the sake of continuity. He feared that radical demands and measures would only bring further chaos and disorder to Germany⁸⁸. This attitude is perhaps an explanation why Ebert reacted favourably to the phone call by General Groener, the new OHL commander who succeeded Ludendorff. On the night of the 10th of November Groener called the new Reichs Chancellor Ebert. The precise wordings of the phone call are unfortunately lost in time, but enough is known of the conversation to reconstruct this unlikely conversation. Groener offered the army's complete and utter support. He promised that the OHL would oversee an orderly and peaceful withdrawal of the army to Germany. In return he demanded no 'radical experiments' and a firm stance against 'Bolshevism'. Ebert accepted this offer, and it became known in history as the Ebert-Groener pact.

This pact, and the promise that traditional military discipline would be restored within the army (which meant no elected officers, preservation of rank insignia et cetera), was a clear victory for the conservative army leadership⁸⁹. There have been few episodes in Ebert's life which have been more controversial. The people had spontaneously and genuinely risen up against the war and the old conservative order, and now their social democratic representative made a deal with those responsible for the war effort, the pillar of Prussian conservatism: the officer corps. Herman Müller defends Ebert in his book on the November revolution⁹⁰. He states that Ebert was sincerely motivated by his love for justice and lawful progress, which he saw as being threatened by the prospect of a Bolshevik revolution and civil war. Ebert was, according to Müller, vehemently against any form of Bolshevism, as the Russian example showed that it could only lead to further suffering and bloodshed. Germany now needed stability, peace and a chance to recover from war. Kolb is similarly sympathetic when writing on the Ebert-Groener pact, which in his eyes should not be called a pact⁹¹. Under the dire circumstances of early November 1918 Ebert had little

⁸⁸ Mühlhausen, *Friedrich Ebert 1871-1925* (Bonn, 2015) 48.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 71.

⁹⁰ Müller, *Die Novemberrevolution* 76.

⁹¹ Kolb, *Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* 120-121.

chance but to come to some form of arrangement with the defeated, but not destroyed conservative OHL. It was, as Winkler points out, the only armed force capable of defending the new republic⁹². Plans to form a loyal republican armed force came to nothing due to the Ebert-Groener pact. Furthermore the split of the German social democratic movement brought additional complications to a republican militia. Would MSPD and USPD members in such a militia cooperate, even against fellow socialists? This was highly doubted and therefore the army was the sole official armed force the government could count on⁹³. It is perhaps not so much a betrayal of social democratic principles but rather political expediency in line with the expression ‘Keep your friends close but your enemies closer’.

A similar compromise, previously thought of as unlikely, was the agreement between the labour unions and German industrialists. This so-called Stinnes-Legien agreement, named after the two main negotiators, fell slightly outside the realm of politics. In fact, it was precisely because the German industrialists led by Hugo Stinnes had little faith in the new German government and its ability to protect their interests that on the night of the 12th of November the industrialists reached out to the labour unions for a unique compromise collective bargaining agreement. Gerald Feldmann extensively discusses the Stinnes-Legien agreement, the causes and the effects it had on German labour relations.

After the outbreak of the war in 1914 the economy was geared towards the war effort. In 1916 the economy was put under a rigid and direct control of the OHL. Erich Ludendorff and the OHL had exercised full control, setting production goals and forcing German workers into the auxiliary labour service (Hilfsdienst). During the summer and fall of 1918, as Germany’s armies collapsed, both the industrialists and the labour unions started to prepare for the inevitable end of the war and demobilisation⁹⁴. Hugo Stinnes and Carl Legien realised that the reintegration of more than 8 million soldiers into society and the simultaneous transition to peace would pose incredible problems for the German economy. Problems which the industrialists feared would cause a revolution⁹⁵. To prepare for this scenario they started informal talks, and notified Ludendorff and the Reichs Chancellor Max von Baden in October. The

⁹² Winkler, *Von den Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 69,

⁹³ Ibidem, 70.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, 75-76.

⁹⁵ Feldmann, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Weltwirtschaftskrise* 116.

revolution of the first week of November caught both the unions and the industrialists by surprise and it made most of their talks redundant. Both parties had to act quickly, and outside the government in which both had little trust. The German industrialists offered the unions several reforms⁹⁶. Firstly the immediate introduction of the 8-hour working day. Secondly recognition of the unions as the official representatives of the workers. Lastly the right for workers in companies which employed more than 50 men to form representative councils. In return they demanded that the unions would keep the radicals and the strikers under control. They feared above all the call for ‘socialisation’ or nationalisation of the German economy.

These reforms went further than the reforms which were initially discussed in October by the industrialists and union officials⁹⁷. Kolb called it ‘a policy of social reform to prevent socialisation’ which is a fitting description of the industrialist position⁹⁸. The industrialists were frightened by the events of 9th of November by the prospect of a Bolshevik revolution and were much more lenient with the labour unions than before that date⁹⁹.

Carl Legien and the labour unions also had much to gain from an agreement with the industrialists. An immediate introduction of the 8-hour working day was even better than the promise made by the provisional government to introduce such a reform from the 1st of January 1919 onwards. To be formally recognised by the German industrialists as the representatives of the German workers in any labour dispute was also a boon which the unions could not ignore. The Stinnes-Legien agreement was the textbook model of a collective bargaining agreement which covered most of the German industrial sectors. Its ramifications also went far beyond the factory floors and mineshafts. Strikes were a powerful and legitimate tool in any revolutionary situation. By placating the labour unions, the industrialists thus managed to take the sting out of any industrial revolutionary action. It was now up to the few individual radical workers, such as members of the Spartakusbund or the Revolutionäre Obleute, to agitate and incite the workers to further action. This proved to be quite difficult and certainly made the life of the radicals a lot harder.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, 122.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, 121.

⁹⁸ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 79.

⁹⁹ Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik* 14.

Difficult times for Spartakus

It was indeed a difficult period for the radical left, represented in this thesis by the Spartakusbund. They overestimated their support amongst the working classes and due to their weak organisation it was difficult for them to expand their power and influence. Their newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*, appeared for the first time on November 9th, and became a regular feature from the 16th of November onwards. The joint editors-in-chief were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht himself, the leaders of the Spartakusbund. *Die Freiheit*, the organ of the USPD and *Vorwärts*, the newspaper of the MSPD, were never as closely controlled by the main leadership as *Die Rote Fahne* was.

In October and November 1918 Karl Liebknecht had openly associated himself with the Russian Bolsheviks on multiple occasions. After his release from prison on the 23rd of October he had announced to the crowd celebrating his release that ‘The Bolsheviks can comfortably conclude ‘Liebknecht and we are on the same page’. We both strive for a dictatorship of the proletariat!’¹⁰⁰ On the 9th of November Liebknecht announced that the Bolshevik mission, which had been expelled from Germany earlier that week, had parted with the message that the German proletariat had “one month to achieve what we have achieved, otherwise we will turn away from you.”¹⁰¹ The Spartakusbund fundamentally disagreed with power being held by a parliamentary government. Power, so announced *Die Rote Fahne* on the 9th and repeated on the 20th of November, should lie with the councils, as they and they alone represent the working classes¹⁰². In the light of these announcements the fear of Bolshevik revolution and Ebert’s unwillingness to compromise with Liebknecht are understandable.

As has been discussed earlier in this research Liebknecht was initially offered a position as deputy but subsequently withdrew as a deputy from the council. Liebknecht had stated four demands which had to be met in order for him to join the Council of Deputies. His first demand was that the new republic should be a socialist republic. Secondly he wanted executive, legislative and judicial power to rest in the hands of the true people’s representatives: those elected in soldiers and workers councils. Thirdly he wanted to exclude all bourgeois parties from government. Lastly he wanted this

¹⁰⁰ Schmidt, *Spartakus* 127-128.

¹⁰¹ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 81

¹⁰² *Die Rote Fahne*, November 9th and November 20th

socialist government of unity to be a short-term government. Three days would be enough to sign an armistice with the Western Allies¹⁰³. These terms were unacceptable for the MSPD in particular, but Liebknecht withdrew his candidacy before these demands could be discussed¹⁰⁴.

Throughout November and into early December Liebknecht and the Spartakusbund engaged in a ferocious propaganda battle against the Deputies Council, warning against an imminent conservative counter revolution. On the 18th of November 1918 *Die Rote Fahne* denounced the Council of Deputies of a new Burgfrieden. “I know of no parties, only Germans’ so was the slogan at the start of the world war. [...] It led to the suffering of millions. [...] We know of no different capitalist parties anymore, we know only socialists! So it is said at the end of the world war. The flag of the new Burgfrieden has been raised. [...] Again the loudest proponents are Scheidemann and his consorts.”¹⁰⁵

The workers and soldiers councils of Berlin, the Vollzugsrat der Arbeiter und Soldatenräte Gross-Berlin, in whom Liebknecht and his comrades placed so much faith, did not seem to follow him. The Vollzugsrat was roughly evenly split between members of the MSPD and the USPD, with a handful of independents¹⁰⁶. On November 10th, the very same day Liebknecht withdrew as a deputy, he attended the central meeting of the Berlin soldiers and workers councils in Circus Busch. In a flaming speech he warned of counter revolution, and warned of threats against the November revolution. His speech was not received very well. His warning of threats against the revolution was interrupted by a voice shouting that Liebknecht himself was the biggest threat of them all. Others shouted slogans in favour of socialist unity. Only a small minority shared his views¹⁰⁷. As November went on *Die Rote Fahne* became more militant. On November 28th the headline read ‘Ebert’s high treason of the revolution!’¹⁰⁸.

The soldiers and workers councils

The question of the soldiers and workers councils, their make-up, ideals and power, is an important one to discuss. From the notes of the National Council Congress

¹⁰³ Schmidt, *Spartakus* 129.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 93-94.

¹⁰⁵ *Die Rote Fahne*, 18th of November 1918

¹⁰⁶ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 129.

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt, *Spartakus* 130.

¹⁰⁸ *Die Rote Fahne*, 28th of November 1918.

of December 1918 (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter) it is apparent that the majority of the soldiers- and workers representatives aligned themselves with the MSPD or USPD. The meeting of the Berlin councils in Circus Busch on the 10th of November was proof that Liebknecht and the radicals of the Spartakusbund had little support at the time. The workers and soldiers had more mundane goals than dreams of revolution. First of all they wanted peace. The four years of war had been brutal and devastating for Germany, and the soldiers and workers now wished an end to the fighting and a lasting, honorable peace¹⁰⁹. Secondly they desired social reforms and some degree of ‘socialisation’ of industries¹¹⁰. The first goal had been accomplished by the signing of the armistice on November 11th. The second goal was obtained through the Stinnes-Legien agreement and reforms announced by the Council of Deputies. These were real, concrete achievements which only helped to strengthen the position of the moderates amongst the USPD and the MSPD. The Spartacists had little else to offer than words which prophesied doom and further sacrifices.

An important issue connected to the very existence of the soldiers and workers councils was what role they had to play in the future of Germany. The Spartacists were in favour of a council republic, as were some on the left wing of the USPD. The Majority of the USPD and MSPD though did not see a legislative or executive future for the councils. Instead they preferred a national assembly (Nationalversammlung) which would draft the constitution of the new republic. It is interesting to note that even most councils themselves favoured a national assembly rather than giving themselves a greater role in the future of the republic¹¹¹.

There are several explanations for the councils refusing to give themselves a greater legislative and executive role. Most importantly they were quite simply not a political or a politicised body at this time. They consisted of workers and soldiers who had spontaneously risen up. The councils lacked the necessary class- and political consciousness to grasp the enormous potential for political power the soldiers and workers had with the councils. Only the radical left, primarily by the Spartakusbund and a few USPD members of the left wing of that party, wanted the new republic to be a council republic. As was the case in other crucial matters during the first few weeks of

¹⁰⁹ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 200.

¹¹⁰ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 141-142.

¹¹¹ Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik* 15.

the revolution, they stood alone. For now the preference of the majority of socialists and social democrats lay with elections for a national assembly. *Die Freiheit* and *Vorwärts* reported on the 17th of November that these elections for the assembly would be held in early February 1919, probably on the 2nd of that month¹¹². The elections for the national assembly would be the focal point of German politics for the next two-and-a-half months. The Spartakusbund was vehemently against the national assembly elections. *Die Rote Fahne* continued to attack the very idea of an national election in which bourgeois parties would be allowed to participate. “They [the MSPD and USPD] want a revolution via a national assembly: petit-bourgeois illusions!” so cried the newspaper of the Spartakusbund¹¹³.

Fears, rumours and the crowds

The fear of Bolshevism is a recurring theme in this chapter, and indeed this entire thesis. It has already been stated that Karl Liebknecht did not help matters by openly aligning himself with the Russian Bolsheviks, nor was it comforting for the moderates and conservatives that *Die Rote Fahne* frequently reported on Russian affairs, how the Bolshevik revolution was a model for the German workers to follow or that the radical left had access to hidden weapons caches in the forests surrounding Berlin¹¹⁴. Eduard Bernstein in his book refers to these articles in *Die Rote Fahne* and argues that this is exactly why Ebert’s hesitation and wariness towards the radical left was justified¹¹⁵.

In his funeral oration on the 20th of November 1918 for the seven fallen ‘martyrs’ of the November revolution in Berlin Liebknecht multiplied the fears that already existed of his radical influence on the course of the revolution and the workers of Berlin. Initially the day started rather ordinarily. A crowd of 30.000 to 35.000 mourners gathered in the south of Berlin on the Tempelhofer field¹¹⁶. Representatives of the Prussian government, the Council of Deputies and the Vollzugsrat all attended the gathering. From the Tempelhofer Field the crowd moved towards the Friedhof der

¹¹² *Die Freiheit*, 17th November 1918; *Vorwärts*, 17th November 1918.

¹¹³ *Die Rote Fahne*, 20th of November.

¹¹⁴ *Die Rote Fahne*, 9th of November 1918 on the secret weapons caches; *Die Rote Fahne*, 23rd of November 1918 on Russo-German affairs, and the future of a common socialist cause.

¹¹⁵ Bernstein, *Die Deutsche Revolution von 1918/19* 73.

¹¹⁶ Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 91.

Märzgefallenen in the east of the city¹¹⁷. At the cemetery Liebknecht, who with his fellow Spartakists had been denied a role on the Tempelhofer field, grabbed his chance and gave a rousing speech which ended with the apocalyptic call to action. “Found vigorously the rule of the working class! Be determined against all those who oppose the working class! Onwards to the proletarian and socialist revolution!”¹¹⁸

Die Rote Fahne linked the November martyrs with those who fell during the war. “Today seven bodies were carried through Berlin, today seven bodies were put in the ground. Seven bodies? Why such a grand funeral for seven bodies? So many have returned to dust over the last 50 months. They fell in their hundreds, in their thousands! They rest in the shallow graves of the Champagne, they lie in the water-soaked mud of Flanders, their bones bleach in the Mesopotamian deserts. They died, as they say, a hero’s death and death became an everyday thing. [...] They died for the insatiable profiteering capitalist. [...] The seven fell because of the henchmen of the capitalist. [...] Their death is not in vain but gave hope and promise.”¹¹⁹ In the aftermath of the funeral a group of radicals stormed the police station at Alexanderplatz, which resulted in three fatalities, the first since the November revolution¹²⁰.

Beside the blustering and agitation of the Spartacists themselves, this fear was deliberately fed by the remaining conservatives in the German state apparatus according to Wilhelm Dittmann. He mentions that the conservative bureaucracy and diplomatic corps ‘bombarded’ Ebert and the other deputies with notes warning of Bolshevik threats and how a Bolshevik revolution would severely damage Germany’s position in the peace negotiations in Versailles¹²¹. While an armistice had been signed on the 11th of November, 1918, a final peace treaty had yet to be signed. The Allies expressed openly that they would not deal with a revolutionary government, nor would vital shipments of food be sent¹²². The Western Allies had intervened directly in the Russian civil war, and it could not be doubted that they would intervene in a German one. The

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, 92.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, 93-94.

¹¹⁹ *Die Rote Fahne*, 20th of November 1918.

¹²⁰ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 95.

¹²¹ Dittmann, *Erinnerungen* 577.

¹²² Winkler, *Von den Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 73.

primary concern of Ebert and his fellow deputies was to bring peace to Germany; a Bolshevik revolution would only aggravate an already hopeless situation¹²³.

In these tense November days, the relationship between the MSPD and the USPD was a fragile one. While they agreed on several general points, differences still remained. Old grievances from the war seemed to have played a role. For example Müller writes that leading USPD member of the Reichstag Oskar Cohn accepted a large sum of money from the Soviet representative Joffe on the eve of the November revolution¹²⁴. This claim is unsubstantiated and cannot be found in any other work, but it does prove that even ten years after the events of 1918 hard feelings still existed between the different figures involved. Winkler mentions a similar rumour in which Emil Barth had received funds, not Oskar Cohn¹²⁵. It also gives a good reflection of the wild rumours that found fertile ground in these times of convulsion. The earlier abovementioned discussion on a republican militia also showed a lack of trust between the MSPD and the USPD. Power in the Council of Deputies might have been numerically balanced, but Ebert was the dominant force in governing Germany. Not only did they occupy the major ministries and other bureaucratic positions, Haase and the USPD seemed to be reluctant to press for a more egalitarian division of power¹²⁶.

The Berlin crowds had played an important role in the outbreak of the November revolution. It were the soldiers and workers and ordinary people who had taken to the streets during the first week of November and who had caused the overthrow of the old order. The new government did not know what to do with the masses. On one hand they had been propelled into their current positions by the masses, but they could easily lose control of the situation. Mark Jones writes that ideas on crowd psychology propagated by Gustave le Bon were very influential during the first decades of the 20th century¹²⁷. Le Bon wrote that crowd could turn the most civilized people into a mob of barbarians who let go of all their civility and embraced a feverish, beastly behaviour.

¹²³ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 196-197.

¹²⁴ Müller, *Die Novemberrevolution* 15.

¹²⁵ Winkler, *Von den Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 74.

¹²⁶ Kolb, *Arbeiterräte in der deutsche Innenpolitik* 122-124.

¹²⁷ Jones, *The crowd in the German November revolution 1918* 54.

People in general feared large crowds, and even more so during revolutionary times. It led to an overestimation of the danger of crowds during the November revolution¹²⁸. Ebert and Haase feared that a revolutionary crowd could spiral matters out of control¹²⁹. Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that Ebert and Haase, in name of the Council of Deputies, pleaded via publications in *Die Freiheit* and *Vorwärts*, that the crowds should return to their homes and workplaces and continue life as ordinarily as possible. Strikes in industries and transport sectors crucial to the supply of food, coal and other essential materials to Berlin were forbidden by the new government¹³⁰. Appeals for calm and restraint were motivated by the idea that only through peaceful means could the social democrats achieve their goals¹³¹. Jones identifies this appeal to leave the streets as a remarkable paradox. The crowds had propelled the MSPD and USPD into government. The power of the Council of Deputies rested on and derived from the revolutionary crowds. By calling on these crowds to disperse, Ebert had weakened their 'right to rule'¹³².

During the tumultuous weeks of November 1918, one can clearly see that the moderate socialists and social democrats of the USPD and MSPD had gained the upper hand. Not only did they have the organisation to bring the workers and soldiers behind their cause, through prudent negotiations and a bit of luck they had managed to strike a deal with two formidable powers in German society. The Ebert-Groener 'pact' had brought the conservative Prussian officer class in league with the new government. This proved to be a vital and faithful alliance in the coming months. Through the Stinnes-Legien agreement the social democratic unions had managed to gain immediate reforms on the factory floor: official representation of the workers by the unions, the right to form a workers council and the 8-hour working day.

Meanwhile the Spartakusbund had undoubtedly failed in November. They failed in their goal to form the Berlin soldiers and workers councils into a viable executive and legislative alternative to the parliamentary government of the MSPD and USPD. They failed in continuing the revolutionary momentum for their desired Bolshevik-style

¹²⁸ Ibidem, 54.

¹²⁹ Ibidem, 81-82

¹³⁰ Bernstein, *Die Deutsche Revolution von 1918/19* 68-70

¹³¹ Jones, *The crowd in the German November revolution 1918* 65.

¹³² Ibidem, 55-56.

revolution. They failed in gaining much support amongst the soldiers and workers. They failed to offer more than promises of a dictatorship of the proletariat, which would not come without struggle and sacrifice. After more than four years of appeals for more sacrifices it is understandable that these were not attractive arguments. Nonetheless their shadow loomed large over all the events of November. Moderates and conservatives alike feared the Spartacists, Bolshevism, revolution and anarchy, chaos and destruction. This fear is partly to be explained by scaremongering, but the open flirtation of Karl Liebknecht and the Spartakusbund with the Russian Bolsheviks did nothing to ease the minds of Ebert and his compatriots. It is remarkable to see how little confidence the MSPD and USPD had in their own position. They seemed to be able to rely on the army for support, the industrialists and labour unions had reached a compromise. The mutual distrust between the ruling parties created by the war still lingered. The crowds, urged on by Friedrich Ebert, had returned to their homes and factories. The situation was far from stable, and events in early December would soon prove that.

Chapter Three

December 1918: the pressure rises

“Die kein anderes Wort mehr kennen als Bluthund und selber im Blute waten. Die angeblich für die Revolution kämpfen und nichts anderes wollen als Vernichtung, Anarchie, Terror. Denen die russische Wüste und ihr hungerndes Volk noch nicht genug sind; die noch eine Wüste erstreben: Deutschland.”

Alexander Döblin¹³³

The young German republic was far from stable as November turned into December. The Council of Deputies formed by the MSPD and the USPD stood on shaky foundations. Trust between the two parties was slow to develop. The radical left, the Spartakusbund, were isolated from any position of power. Their leader, Karl Liebknecht, had taken the spotlight on the 9th of November by declaring a social republic from the balcony of the Berliner Stadtschloss, but one can quite cynically state that the rest of the month Liebknecht and his comrades had failed to expand the Spartacist power base amongst the soldiers and workers councils. An armistice had been signed with the Western Allies on the 11th of November, the loyalty of the armed forces to the new government had been secured through the Ebert-Groener pact and the possibility of labour tensions leading to revolution had been diminished through the Stinnes-Legien accord between German industrialists and labour unions. Agitation against the new republic continued in the background, as both the radical left (Spartakusbund) and the right (the Freikorps and their supporters in the armed forces) moved to undermine Ebert. This thesis will continue in this chapter by looking at several crucial events in December 1918. The situation in Berlin was tense, and matters soon came to a head. The question which is central to this chapter is ‘To what extent did the political positions and attitudes of the SPD, USPD and the Spartakusbund influence the Reichsrätekongress and the events of December 1918?’

¹³³ Döblin, *November 1918, Karl und Rosa* 162.

The 6th of December: a day of fear and rumour

On December 6th 1918 a series of incidents would catapult the already tense situation into full-blown combat on the streets of Berlin. In the afternoon of that fateful Friday a group of soldiers and sailors from various units stationed in and around Berlin marched to the Reichstag¹³⁴. Fully armed, they demanded to see Friedrich Ebert himself, who reluctantly agreed. One of the leaders was Feldwebel Spiro, who put forward several demands. First of all he wanted elections for the National Assembly as soon as possible, preferably before Christmas on the 20th of December. Secondly he ensured Ebert of his personal support, and the support of his men. Winkler reports that Spiro even claimed that the German people would support Ebert as President of Germany with dictatorial powers, and furthermore that he agitated strongly against the amateurs of the Berliner Vollzugsrat who were guilty of mismanagement¹³⁵. Ebert was cautious in his reaction, realising the precarious situation he was in. A crowd of armed soldiers and sailors is a more demanding crowd than Ebert was probably used to. He carefully stated that he did not want to intervene in the Vollzugsrat as an outsider. The Presidency was not for him only to decide, the Council of Deputies would have to agree with such a move¹³⁶.

Slightly disappointed with Ebert's reaction the soldiers and sailors left the Reichstag and moved on to the offices of *Die Rote Fahne*. The offices were thoroughly searched by the soldiers and sailors, who looked for evidence of Bolshevist conspiracies and plans for revolution¹³⁷. Almost simultaneously a group of 25 soldiers marched into a meeting of the Vollzugsrat and declared that all those who were present were under arrest¹³⁸. They claimed to act under orders of the Council of Deputies. When confronted by Emil Barth who ensured the soldiers and the members of the Vollzugsrat that such an order did not come from the government the situation de-escalated and the soldiers left. The news of their arrest had spread however, and combined with the actions of Spiro and his band of men did nothing to calm the nervous mood in Berlin.

Meanwhile on the outskirts of Berlin three meetings led by the Spartakusbund had been convened¹³⁹. Herman Müller describes these meetings as “meetings of the

¹³⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 97.

¹³⁵ Ibidem, 97.

¹³⁶ Ibidem, 97.

¹³⁷ Ibidem, 97.

¹³⁸ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 105.

¹³⁹ Ibidem, 105.

council of deserters and soldiers on leave”¹⁴⁰. After the end of the meetings the three groups merged to form a small demonstration which headed for the city center. The number of demonstrators is unknown but has been described as small¹⁴¹. When the demonstration neared the city center of Berlin they were stopped by a cordon of 60 soldiers. The soldiers had blocked the junction on the intersection of the Chausseestrasse and Invalidenstrasse with a chain and waited for the demonstration to approach their line¹⁴². A tense stand-off occurred. The demonstrators had weapons, but whether they fired the first shot is unknown. The result of this short but bloody confrontation was disastrous. A sizable crowd of onlookers had gathered to watch the confrontation, when the firing began they quickly tried to scatter. The passengers of a tram which coincidentally approached the junction were also caught in the crossfire. After a few minutes 16 people lay dead, 80 people were wounded¹⁴³.

The three incidents on December 6th were cause for massive anxiety and a fresh round of wild rumours in the media. When applying the theory of autosuggestion the course of events becomes understandable. The culminating final showdown at the junction of the Chausseestrasse and Invalidenstrasse would have never had happened if the Spartacist demonstrators did not believe that the Vollzugsrat was indeed arrested. This arrest of the Vollzugsrat was inspired by the fact that conservative officers and soldiers feared the spread of radical ideas and wished to counter them. It is remarkable that, the incident at the Chausseestrasse-Invalidenstrasse and the ransacking of the offices of *Die Rote Fahne* notwithstanding, the arrest and the initial confrontation of Ebert by Spiro and his men was relatively peaceful.

The debate who was to blame for this latest escalation soon started in *Die Rote Fahne*, *Vorwärts* and *Die Freiheit*. Liebknecht was accused by the MSPD of creating a situation which would spark the Bolshevik revolution he so desired. He had deliberately poisoned the minds of his followers, and their deaths and the deaths of the innocent bystanders and soldiers were on his hands, so proclaimed *Vorwärts*¹⁴⁴. *Die Rote Fahne* denounced the incidents as deliberate and pre-planned attempts by conservative forces to stage a counter revolution. Soldiers had been ordered to fire on their comrades, where was the proletarian solidarity in that? On the 7th of December *Die*

¹⁴⁰ Müller, *Die November Revolution* 144.

¹⁴¹ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 105.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, 105.

¹⁴³ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 106.

¹⁴⁴ *Vorwärts* 7th of December 1918.

Rote Fahne went even further and called on the workers to take to the streets and protest against the ‘massacre’. “In the streets of Berlin shots rang! Shotws were fired on a peaceful demonstrating, unarmed, group of soldiers who came from a gathering through the Chausseestrasse who had permission from the police commissar.”¹⁴⁵ *Die Freiheit* also expressed fierce criticism on the conduct of the troops who blocked the junction of the Chausseestrasse and Invalidenstrasse. “Suddenly and without warning machineguns fired on defenceless demonstrators, who left a gathering of their soldier’s council in a peaceful procession. A significant number of soldiers were killed or wounded.”¹⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that both *Die Freiheit* and *Die Rote Fahne* both stressed the unarmed and peaceful nature of the demonstration. They were portrayed as innocent victims of bloody counter-revolution.

The days after the 6th of December the Berlin masses took to the streets once again. On Sunday the 8th of December no less than sixteen demonstrations organised by the MSPD, four by the USPD, four by the bourgeois parties and one by the Spartakusbund¹⁴⁷. The Spartakusbund demonstration with 12-15.000 men was smaller compared to the demonstration staged by the MSPD, were some 20.000 were said to have gathered in the Lustgarten¹⁴⁸.

On December 10th ten frontline divisions marched through the city center of Berlin. Coming just days after the most severe unrest since the November revolution Friedrich Ebert gladly welcomed the soldiers back home¹⁴⁹. Their homeland had changed, it was now a Free Republic. The German people had thrown off the yoke of the old oppressors announced Ebert. “On your shoulders rests the future and unity of Germany!”¹⁵⁰

The parade was a demonstration of the army’s still considerable might. While during the revolution in November soldiers had followed the red flag in processions across public spaces throughout Germany, now the old black, white and red of the Imperial flag was proudly flown in the center of Berlin¹⁵¹. Jones reports that a huge crowd of 25.000 watched the soldiers pass through the Brandenburger Gate, while

¹⁴⁵ *Die Rote Fahne*, 7th of December

¹⁴⁶ *Die Freiheit*, 7th of December 1918

¹⁴⁷ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 116.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 116.

¹⁴⁹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 100

¹⁵⁰ *Ansprache an die Heimkerenden Truppen* http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/deu/Ebert_ger.pdf

¹⁵¹ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 123.

another 100.000 stretched along Unter den Linden¹⁵². Despite the open return of the army to the streets of Berlin General Groener complained that the units quickly melted away, for which he blamed Spartacist and USPD propaganda¹⁵³. Groener complained that the army was powerless if the government continued to do nothing to stop this incessant agitation by the radicals. “If authority is not restored,” so warned Groener “the entire army will collapse!”¹⁵⁴

A victory of moderation: Reichsrätekongress

On the 23rd of November a national congress of soldiers and workers (Reichskongress der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte or Reichsrätekongress) councils was announced. The Berliner Vollzugsrat invited soldiers and workers councils from all over Germany to send representatives to Berlin, where they would gather in the Prussian parliament to discuss crucial matters at hand¹⁵⁵. The congress would convene from the 16th of December to the 21st of December¹⁵⁶.

The manner in which representatives were elected deserves some attention. According to Kolb there was no centralised system for the election of representatives, much was left to the individual councils. The Vollzugsrat announced that, based on the census of 1910, one representative could be sent for every 200.000 inhabitants of an electoral district (Wahlkreis). The army could send a delegate per 100.000 soldiers¹⁵⁷. Similarly to the Berliner Vollzugsrat the representatives sent from all over Germany were not radical Bolsheviks. The precise number is different in Herwig’s article and in the works by Kolb and Winkler but they all agree on the fact that the vast majority were moderate if not conservative social democrats. Of the 514 delegates roughly 300 associated with the MSPD, 100 with the USPD and the rest was spread out from the liberals to the radicals and several independents¹⁵⁸. Herwig mentions a number of 489 delegates, of which the MSPD had 288. A much smaller group of 90 delegates were associated with the USPD. The liberal Democratic party had 25 delegates at the congress. The army sent 28 delegates. A group from the northern port cities caucused as

¹⁵² Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 120.

¹⁵³ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 100.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem, 100.

¹⁵⁵ Burdick & Lutz, *Political institutions of the German Revolution 1918-1919* 60.

¹⁵⁶ Herwig, *The First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and the Problem of Military Reforms* 152.

¹⁵⁷ Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* 198; Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung*, 100; Burdick & Lutz, *Political institutions of the German Revolution 1918-1919* 62.

¹⁵⁸ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 100.

the 'United Revolutionaries', they did not want to associate with any of the three main groups discussed in this research. There were 48 uncommitted delegates and a single delegate from a radical Bavarian group¹⁵⁹. What is extremely interesting to note is that, once again, Liebknecht and Luxemburg failed to capitalise on their revolutionary renown¹⁶⁰. They were not elected as delegates, with many votes apparently going to the revolutionary shop stewards¹⁶¹. A motion to allow Liebknecht and Luxemburg to attend the congress as observers with limited voting rights was rejected¹⁶².

Two important topics were on the agenda for the congress. Firstly the future of Germany and the elections for a national assembly¹⁶³. Secondly the question of socialisation of the German economy would be debated¹⁶⁴. The topic of military reform was not considered as crucial at this point and was not on the agenda but soon it would provide the main topic of debate at the congress and in the press.

As stated earlier the elections for the national assembly were planned for the 2nd of February, but there had been some pressure to move the date forward. One of the demands of the band of soldiers and sailors on the 6th of December 1918 was that the elections should be held as soon as possible. On the suggestion of USPD leader Hugo Haase the congress would vote on the date of the elections. A new proposal called for elections on the 19th of January¹⁶⁵. The small band of radical socialists tried to shift the discussion. They argued that the congress of soldiers and workers councils in itself was a national assembly. The councils should hold the power, and no elections would be necessary. This proposal was defeated by a huge margin, 98 votes in favour and 344 votes against the proposal to institute a council republic¹⁶⁶.

Quite unexpectedly the topic of military-civil relations was put on the agenda. To the shock of the representatives at the congress a group of soldiers claiming to represent the regiments stationed in and around Berlin marched into the Prussian parliament on December 17th 1918. They demanded the end of rank insignia and the end of the traditional command structure, meaning democratisation of command and the

¹⁵⁹ Herwig, *The First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils* 153.

¹⁶⁰ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 127.

¹⁶¹ Herwig, *The First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils* 153.

¹⁶² Jones, *Founding Weimar* 127; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 126.

¹⁶³ Kolb, *Arbeiterräte in der deutsche Innenpolitik* 198.

¹⁶⁴ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 138.

¹⁶⁵ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 103.

¹⁶⁶ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 102.

end of the rule of the officer class. Georg Ledebour, one of the radical delegates and USPD member who was closely aligned with Liebknecht and the Spartakusbund, demanded that the congress would immediately vote on this proposal brought forward by the soldiers of the Berlin garrison.¹⁶⁷ If the sudden entry of soldiers and sailors was not enough, Ledebour's proposal truly brought great pandemonium to the Congress. *Die Freiheit* of the 18th of December described the scene as delegates reacted to the entry of the soldiers and their demands. "Now excitement grew in the congress to unprecedented heights. Several soldiers representatives and right-wing socialists were ready to leave the hall. It seemed, for a moment, as if the entire congress would break up. At that moment Haase tried to rescue the congress and calm everyone down. He convinced the delegates who wanted to leave to stay and that the demands of the soldiers would be discussed the next day"¹⁶⁸. The MSPD delegates were furious and it seemed as if the Congress would break up before it had properly started. *Vorwärts* on the 18th of December 1918 reported this incident as a 'dramatic surprise' by a band of around '30 soldiers' who disturbed the proceedings¹⁶⁹. The evening edition was even stronger in its wording when it declared that 'The congress wants to work undisturbed'¹⁷⁰. Hugo Haase once again sought and got a compromise deal which calmed the delegates enough to resume discussions. The issue of civil-military relations and the command structure of the armed forces would be put on the agenda for the 18th of December 1918¹⁷¹.

The next day the discussion was opened by an MSPD delegate from Hamburg named Lamp'l. He proposed the so-called 'seven Hamburg points', which were supported by the soldiers and sailors who had interrupted the proceedings the previous day. These points were the result of discussions which had been held amongst the Hamburg soldiers councils in the first two weeks of December 1918¹⁷². The seven points mainly came down to reforms to abolish rank, election of officers and put the council of deputies, overseen by the soldiers councils, in form control of the army. On Ebert's suggestion Lamp'l added the additional line that these points were 'guidelines', a commission consisting of the Council of Deputies, under control of the Vollzugsrat

¹⁶⁷ Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* 200.

¹⁶⁸ *Die Freiheit*, 18th December 1918.

¹⁶⁹ *Vorwärts*, 18th December 1918.

¹⁷⁰ *Vorwärts*, evening edition 18th December 1918.

¹⁷¹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 104-105.

¹⁷² Kolb, *Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* 201.

and in cooperation with representatives of the army and navy would decide whether to pursue these reforms or not¹⁷³. Surprisingly a unanimous decision had been reached, the seven points would be adopted as reforms effective immediately. The addendum added on the behest of Ebert was rejected.

What is interesting in this episode is that Ebert, being one of the deputies in the commission, supported not only reforms which went against the agreement with Groener from November 10th 1918, he also rejected his very own proposal that these reforms were guidelines rather than measures to be implemented as soon as possible, if not immediately. Why would Ebert act in such a way? The unrest of the 6th of December 1918 and the physical intrusion of soldiers the previous day may have played a role. Perhaps Ebert feared another round of fighting if the demands were not met. It remains a curious decision considering the absolute support Ebert had at the Congress.

The overwhelming majority of delegates at the congress were MSPD members¹⁷⁴. The moderate and conservative social democrats from the MSPD also had a majority in the new Zentralrat¹⁷⁵. It was elected at the congress and would act as a permanent representation of all workers and soldiers councils. The Zentralrat replaced the Vollzugsrat as the central organ; much to the latter's chagrin.

From the very beginning the Zentralrat was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Officially the Rat was supposed to be equal to the government. Laws would have to be discussed by the Zentralrat before the government enact them¹⁷⁶. Before long Ebert managed to reduce the Zentralrat to an advisory body. In a joint session of the Council of Deputies and the Zentralrat Ebert proposed that the latter would only be able to advice on proposals which the Council did not deem urgent. In case of an urgent proposal the Council could ignore the Zentralrat¹⁷⁷. This went against the express mandate given by the congress which stated that the Zentralrat had the duty to oversee and if necessary recall the Council of Deputies and whatever government might be formed in the future¹⁷⁸. After the Spartacist Uprising and the elections of the 19th of January the Zentralrat continued to exist but slowly drifted into irrelevance.

¹⁷³ Ibidem, 201-202.

¹⁷⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 100.

¹⁷⁵ Kolb, *Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* 244.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, 245

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem, 246

¹⁷⁸ Ibidem, 246

On the other side the few radical workers councils saw (not without reason) the Zentralrat as being dominated by the MSPD. They subsequently treated the Zentralrat with caution¹⁷⁹. The planned representative function by the Zentralrat of the various workers and soldiers councils did not get off the ground before the end of January¹⁸⁰. Reason for the delay was the tumultuous series of events in late December 1918, early January 1919 which took up most of the attention of the councils and the Zentralrat itself.

Several important issues were resolved in Ebert's favour, including the topic of elections, the power of the council in the new republic and the date for the assembly elections. Since most of the accepted reforms would be weakened or discarded altogether in the first few weeks of January it might be the case that Ebert simply temporarily accepted these radical reforms, knowing that under pressure of the army and after the end of the congress he would have more room to manoeuvre¹⁸¹. There was enormous outside pressure from the various newspapers on the proceedings of the Congress. Jones mentions that the liberal and conservative press, strongly opposed to the revolutionary fervor which swept through Germany, and Berlin in particular¹⁸². Ebert was judged harshly after every decision and move he made. Any sign of compromise was seen as weakness. Ebert continued to believe in a democratic republic, which had to be supported by a broad layer of the German population. He could not afford to antagonize the moderate and conservative elements in German society. He remained committed to the belief that order and continuation of society was desirable, radical experiments could only endanger the stability of the republic. His uttermost fear was that radicalism on the left would be answered by counter revolution on the right and the country would descend into a bloody civil war.

¹⁷⁹ Ibidem, 244

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem, 256

¹⁸¹ Herwig, *The First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils* 160-161.

¹⁸² Commentaries and quotes expressing anger at the supposed unwillingness to crush any radical tendency from liberal and conservative newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Deutsche Zeitung* can be found in Jones, *Founding Weimar*.

Bloody Christmas

In the evening of the 23rd of December 1918 a group of sailors from the People's Naval Division, based in the Berliner Stadtschloss and the Neuer Marstall situated next to the palace, marched to the Chancellery and demanded to see the Council of Deputies. Their pay had been long overdue and after weeks of discussion the situation was still not resolved¹⁸³.

During the days of the November revolution just a few weeks earlier, the sailors had been described as the most loyal and trustworthy defenders of the new republic and the Council of Deputies. The division was stationed in the city centre, at the Berliner Stadtschloss and the Marstall at the end of the famous boulevard Unter den Linden¹⁸⁴. The approximately three thousand sailors took up guard duty in the center of Berlin¹⁸⁵.

The trust Ebert and the MSPD had placed in the People's Naval Division had been diminished by the end of December 1918. They suspected that their ranks were infiltrated by Spartacists, or that they at least were under influence of the Spartakusbund¹⁸⁶. The issue of pay, financial compensation and control of the division created a lot of anger amongst the sailors. They demanded financial compensation of around 80.000 Reichsmark in return for their departure from the city center. The commander of the Berlin garrison Otto Wels demanded the keys to the Stadtschloss and the Marstall before any payment would be made. On the evening of the 23rd of December angry sailors demanded to see the Ebert and the council of deputies not once, but twice¹⁸⁷. The second time the sailors threatened to imprison the entire Council of Deputies, or at least hold them hostage in the chancellery¹⁸⁸. In a separate simultaneous incident an armored car patrolling on Unter den Linden exchanged fire with a group of sailors, killing two of them¹⁸⁹. As a reaction the sailors stormed the headquarters of the city garrison, and took Otto Wels, the MSPD military commandant of Berlin and two of his deputies hostage¹⁹⁰. Ebert had had enough of this kind of insubordination and he requested the OHL to send troops to dislodge the Naval Division from the Stadtschloss

¹⁸³ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 137.

¹⁸⁴ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 136.

¹⁸⁵ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 140.

¹⁸⁶ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 140.

¹⁸⁷ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 137.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem* 137.

¹⁸⁹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 109.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 109.

and arrest them¹⁹¹. This was in part necessitated by Eichhorn's refusal to send his police forces and newly created security detachments (Sicherheitswehr) to dislodge the sailors. Even worse, members of the Sicherheitswehr joined the sailors in their fight.¹⁹² Eichhorn, the police commissar of Berlin, was an USPD member and was already unpopular amongst the MSPD. His refusal would have great consequences in the near future.

In the night of the 23rd and the morning of the 24th of December 1918 units belonging to the Guards division stationed in Potsdam moved through the city center towards the City palace and the Royal Stables¹⁹³. These were not second-line or garrison troops, these were troops who had been trained for and fought in the brutal trenches on the Western Front during the war. They brought with them their tools of war, including field artillery and heavy machineguns, and a desire to redeem their defeat in the war by attacking the symbol of the November revolution: the rebellious sailors of the Naval Division¹⁹⁴. Negotiations to release the hostages soon proved to be unnecessary as Otto Wels and his deputies had been released by the time the soldiers arrived in the center of Berlin, although Dittmann reports that Wels and one of his deputies stayed in the Marstall as they felt safer there than on the streets¹⁹⁵. At daylight Berlin awakened to the thunderous booming of the artillery, as the historic Stadtschloss and Royal Stables were shelled before the frontline soldiers moved in. Despite the advantages the Guards division had in terms of equipment, training and experience they could not overcome the stubborn defense by the Naval Division. As the morning went on and the list of casualties on both sides grew the people of Berlin curiously moved closer to the fighting to see what was going on¹⁹⁶. What happened next is an extraordinary example of the power of crowds.

The Berliners were shocked by the fighting between the sailors, whom they still saw as guardians of the revolution, and the soldiers who had just returned from the front. The spirit of socialist unity, by now absent in the political higher echelons, was still present amongst the masses of Berlin. Some of the civilians had brought arms and

¹⁹¹ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 138.

¹⁹² Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 110.

¹⁹³ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 110.

¹⁹⁴ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 138-139.

¹⁹⁵ Dittmann, *Erinnerungen* 614.

¹⁹⁶ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 146.

joined the sailors¹⁹⁷. Others pleaded with the soldiers to cease their assault. By 10.30 a short cease fire was agreed on to evacuate the women and children from the square in front of the palace and the surrounding streets¹⁹⁸. The fighting resumed for another short but intense hour before the soldiers withdrew, defeated by the Sailors who were still firmly entrenched in the visibly damaged Stadtschloss and Marstall¹⁹⁹.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R72464
Foto: o.Ang. | Dezember 1918 ca.

Figure 3: Curious crowds in front of a damaged Stadtschloss

It was an unexpected defeat of the frontline soldiers and it had a lasting effect on the attitudes of the main figures of the German revolutions. A group of around one thousand sailors, never trained for land combat and equipped with several machine guns and rifles, had managed to defeat well equipped, trained and experienced troops of the Guards division. Of course the division had been weakened by the desertions mentioned earlier, and Groener and the OHL were strengthened in their opinion that any further delay in cracking down on the radicals would undermine army morale and combat

¹⁹⁷ Ibidem, 147.

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem, 147.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem, 147.

efficiency even further²⁰⁰. There was an alternative to the regular soldiers who were still under arms.

In the weeks since the November revolution right-wing paramilitaries had been formed. Consisting of dedicated, well-motivated and embittered officers and soldiers who had returned from the front to find everything they had believed in and fought for was gone these so-called Freikorps would be essential, though not always successful, in the revolutionary years 1918, 1919 and 1920²⁰¹. The veterans had often fought in the elite Sturmtruppen who had spearheaded Germany's last offensives in 1918. The influence of the Freikorps on German politics during those years and the years leading up to 1933 is unmistakably important but is not the main focus of this research. It suffices to say that the Freikorps were ready and able to fill the gap of the frontline troops who had disappointed the army leadership and the MSPD²⁰².

Under the headline "Ebert's Bloody Christmas!" *Die Rote Fahne* saw a continuation from the incident on the 6th of December 1918 and the fighting during Christmas. "The second bloodbath in three weeks! What began on the 6th of December was to be finished on the 24th. Ebert-Scheidemann waited for an excuse to drown the revolution in blood. The provocations against the Peoples Naval Division, the guardians of the proletarian revolution, created the necessary excuse. A peaceful demonstration from the sailors for back pay gave Wels and Ebert the opportunity to open fire and to call in troops from around Berlin to participate in this fratricide."²⁰³

Die Freiheit gave a more neutral analysis of the events. "Now that the combat has ended, questions who is responsible and who bears the blame will be raised ruthlessly. Ruthless in every direction, as in revolutionary times one has to say as it is. The Spartakusbund, like the Unabhängigen and the right wing socialists [MSPD] were surprised. [...] Wels is unlucky. We do not want to criticise his intentions but he is a wholly unsuitable man."²⁰⁴

Vorwärts put the blame on those who wanted a second revolution and gave an ominous warning. "We, the working people of Berlin, do not want a civil war. We do not want Richard Müller's [leader of the Shop Stewards] second revolution. His

²⁰⁰ Ibidem, 148.

²⁰¹ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 327.

²⁰² Jones, *Founding Weimar* 232.

²⁰³ *Die Rote Fahne*, 25th of December 1918.

²⁰⁴ *Die Freiheit*, 25th of December 1918.

revolution will take us back, not forward. We want domestic peace and freedom and we must be firm and hard to preserve that!”²⁰⁵

The USPD leaves the government

The fighting, coming at Christmas and in the city center, also had a profound effect on the political leadership of the German Republic. The fighting and especially the unilateral decision made by Ebert to call in regular soldiers to drive off and arrest the sailors was heavily criticised by his USPD colleagues in the Council of Deputies²⁰⁶. Ebert defended his actions by saying that he feared for the lives of the three hostages held by the sailors in the Stadtschloss. Otto Wels had been released and appeared in front of Scheidemann around 03.00 hours in the early morning of the 24th of December 1918²⁰⁷.

The discussion was turned over to the Zentralrat who were asked to give a judgement on the actions taken by Ebert during the fighting²⁰⁸. As the MSPD dominated the Zentralrat it was not an unexpected surprise that when the Zentralrat agreed with Ebert. Subsequently the USPD left the Council on the 29th of December, embittered and disappointed by the experience of governing over the last 7 weeks²⁰⁹. Haase, Ledebour and Barth were replaced by Wissell and Gustav Noske, who had previously done a good job at quieting the revolutionary fervour in Kiel in early November²¹⁰. Gustav Noske would assume control over army and navy affairs, which was later proven to be a fateful decision²¹¹. The victory of the sailors, guardians of the revolution, had been the end of the government of socialist unity.

Gustav Noske himself described quite dryly how he was appointed as member of the Council of Deputies. “I returned to Berlin on the 27th of December. [...] The next day came the declaration of the position of the Unabhängigen. Haase, Dittmann and Barth would leave the government. With the full support of the Zentralrat of the workers and soldiers councils, instituted by the Council congress as the controlling body of the council of deputies until the national assembly elections would be held, Löbe, Rudolf Wissel and I were appointed as their successors.”²¹²

²⁰⁵ *Vorwärts*, 25th of December 1918.

²⁰⁶ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 111.

²⁰⁷ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 145.

²⁰⁸ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 111.

²⁰⁹ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 151.

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 151.

²¹¹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 111.

²¹² Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp* 63.

The Spartakusbund and Karl Liebknecht had been completely taken by surprise by the events at the Stadtschloss and Marstall. The wild rumours and fear of his involvement or even leadership in stirring up unrest were just fantasies as he knew nothing of the hostage taking or the short blockading of the entrances to the Chancellery. Liebknecht and his comrades knew perfectly well how to use the situation to their greatest advantage. *Die Rote Fahne* labelled the events as ‘Ebert’s bloody Christmas’, claiming that the revolution was under attack from conservative forces sent by Ebert himself²¹³. Gleeefully the paper described how the sailors defeated the enemy against overwhelming odds.

The final step towards radicalisation

On the 30th of December 1918 The Spartakusbund finally cut the last ties she officially still had with the USPD. On that day a congress of the Spartakusbund and their allies decided to split off and form their own party. The congress had been announced in *Die Rote Fahne* of the 23rd of December 1918²¹⁴. The majority of the revolutionary shop stewards refused to join the new party. They disagreed with Liebknecht’s policy of escalating mass demonstrations to the point where a revolution would break out²¹⁵. A sizable minority of the Spartakusbund did not want to sever ties with the USPD and found a new party, but they were overruled by the majority led by Liebknecht and Luxemburg²¹⁶. The next day, on the 30th of December 1918 the official congress of the Spartakusbund was opened in the Prussian parliament. Present were 127 delegates and 16 guests²¹⁷. Of the known occupations of the delegates the fact can be derived that the majority were not workers, only 34 qualified as working class, with most of those coming from the traditionally well-educated and paid occupations in printing²¹⁸. Once the foundational congress had started the delegates were surprised when a group of Shop Stewards asked permission to join the discussions and join the party²¹⁹. In the end only a fraction of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards joined the new party, most of them continued to disagree with the radical and ‘putschist’ tendencies within the KPD.

²¹³ *Die Rote Fahne*, 25th of December 1918.

²¹⁴ *Die Rote Fahne*, 23rd of December 1918.

²¹⁵ Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution* 152.

²¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 418.

²¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 418.

²¹⁸ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 117.

²¹⁹ Laschitza, *Die Liebknechts* 422-423.

Within the group of radical socialists who had joined forces to found the KPD there was plenty of discussion of which course to follow. Even the name of the newly founded party was a point of discussion. Luxemburg and Jogisches proposed to call the new party the Sozialistische Partei, Liebknecht was a firm proponent of the name Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands²²⁰. At the congress the majority supported the suggestion made by Liebknecht to name the party the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartakusbund)²²¹. The program that was agreed upon was a thoroughly radical socialist program. It called for the disarmament of non-working class soldiers, appropriation of the assets and possessions of the nobility and the introduction of a unitary council republic²²².

Further discussion erupted over the course the party should follow in the next few weeks. The party leadership, including Liebknecht, wanted to escalate tensions via mass demonstrations, strikes and other incidents in order to create a revolutionary setting. Participation in the elections would be less important, but useful nonetheless. Liebknecht made this very clear in the speech he gave in front of the congress. “Evidently our most important objective is to enlighten the masses with our ideological lessons, and to revolutionise the council system. At the same time it should not be underestimated what opportunities participation in the elections gives us in stating our goals and aims.”²²³

Part of Liebknecht’s defence was based on the realisation that the desired council republic would not immediately mean a socialist state. The workers and soldiers councils were in majority, as shown at the Congress, to be ‘reactionary’. He said in his speech “Just as this congress has decided, we will stick to the position that all power should go to the councils. It is expected of us to give this power [to the councils] just as we are expected to participate in the national assembly. We want to build our support on the masses and we have to reform the hitherto reactionary councils into a tool of the revolution. We have identified this as our main goal.”²²⁴

His defence of participating in the election for a national assembly is surprising when keeping in mind the endless stream of agitation against the elections and

²²⁰ Laschitza, *Die Liebknechts* 418.

²²¹ *Ibidem*, 419.

²²² Weber, *Der deutsche Kommunismus* 39-40.

²²³ Laschitza, *Die Liebknechts* 421.

²²⁴ Notes of the Foundational Congress of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
<<https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/geschichte/deutsch/kpd/1918/tag1pm.htm#to2>>

defamation of the ‘class-traitors’ who supported the election. On the 21st of December, a little over a week before the congress convened, *Die Rote Fahne* prophesied of “the Scheidemann-dictatorship” after the elections which would be reinforced by the “Ebertmajority” at the Reichskongress in December 1918²²⁵. Other Spartakus heavyweights like Luxemburg expressed their support for participating in the election. Luxemburg wanted the new party to form a bridge between the Bolsheviks in Russia and the socialist parties of Western Europe²²⁶. Aligning too much to one side or the other would prevent this desired cooperation between all left wing parties in Europe. Even more surprising than this sudden support from the leadership was the fact that the delegates continued on the radical line and rejected Liebknecht’s proposal by 62 against 23²²⁷.

Rosa Luxemburg was highly disappointed by the course of events at the congress. She stated that after the defeat at the Congress of Workers and Soldiers Councils it was obvious that the KPD did not have a clear mandate from the people. In the program of the new party, which she wrote, the sentence “The Spartakusbund will not seize executive power without support of a majority of the proletarian masses in all of Germany, only when they consciously support the views, goals and methods of the Spartakusbund”²²⁸. Without an obvious majority or even a sizable minority of the German workers behind them, any attempt at a revolution would be foolish, dangerous and in the end destructive. It is curious that the congress, which overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to participate in the election of the 19th of January 1919, did also pass the program containing this sentence which ruled out any premature seizure of power. Winkler quotes Arthur Rosenberg who said that during the entire congress an atmosphere of fanatical utopianism was present²²⁹.

December had seen the definitive end of socialist fraternity. The MSPD and USPD had tried to maintain a government of socialist unity but the differences which had grown larger in November 1918 became insurmountable in December 1918. The Spartakusbund continued their policy of escalation and radicalisation. They had suffered a huge defeat at the Reichsrätekongress, being a very small minority and their

²²⁵ *Die Rote Fahne*, 21st of December.

²²⁶ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 116.

²²⁷ *Ibidem*, 421-422.

²²⁸ Schmidt, *Spartakus* 152-153.

²²⁹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 118.

leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg not being elected as representatives to the congress. The congress had been dominated by the MSPD and the majority of their decisions were in support of the actions taken by Ebert and the Council of Deputies. The new Zentralrat which was formed at the congress was dominated by the MSPD and would play a decisive role in the split between the MSPD and the USPD. This split was caused by the attack ordered by Ebert on the hitherto loyal People's Naval Division who were stationed in the Stadtschloss and the Marstall in the center of Berlin.

The attack, performed by regular soldiers who had just returned from the western front only a few weeks before the 24th of December 1918, was an absolute failure. The sailors stood firm, the regular soldiers suffered a bruising defeat and within the Council of Deputies a fierce discussion raged between the USPD and MSPD. Haase and his two compatriots accused Ebert of abusing his powers. Furthermore, he had damaged the prospect of socialist fraternity and unity by attacking the People's Navy division, which had been seen as a true republican guard loyal to the November Revolution. Ebert feebly defended his conduct and in the end the issue was handed over to the Zentralrat who approved of Ebert's actions. Infuriated by this decision Haase, Emil Barth and Wilhelm Dittmann left the Council of Deputies and were replaced by the hardliners Gustav Noske and Rudolf Wissell.

The Spartakusbund, which was disappointed by the congress of councils but buoyed by the sharp escalation which followed the Christmas fighting, called for a party congress on the 30th of December. Together with a few allies they decided to found a new party: the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartakusbund). The split between the three factions of German socialism, which had already occurred during the Great War, was now irreparable. Tensions were running high and it seemed to the leaders of the three parties and their contemporaries as if a single spark could ignite the powder keg that was German society.

Chapter Four

January 1919: uprising!

“An den Beratungen nahm Georg Ledebour teil, ein zuverlässiger Streiter, ein ehrlicher Mann, ein Feuerkopf, nicht ohne Theatralik und Revolutionsromantik. Lenin hätte bei seinem Anblick gegrinst. Er sprach, und als auch Karl Liebknecht sprach, wurde es den Anwesenden völlig klar: Es gab kein Ausweichen mehr. Die Massen waren schon im Losbrechen. Die Massen begriffen besser als die Führer.”

Alexander Döblin²³⁰

The spark came with the dismissal of police commissar Emiel Eichhorn on January the 4th. It was seen as a political move, and greatly upset the USPD, of which Eichhorn was a member. A general strike and demonstration in support of Eichhorn was planned for the 5th of January. This demonstration escalated through occupation of hostile newspaper buildings by radical socialist workers and the seemingly revolutionary atmosphere in Berlin. The leadership of the KPD and their allies decided that the time to act was now. They gambled everything on a final confrontation which would usher in the second revolution, the overthrow of Ebert and his government and the foundation of a socialist council republic. This gamble proved to be a fateful mistake, which costs the lives of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, the two leaders of the KPD. Central to this final chapter is the question ‘How strong was the support for the Radical Left amongst the Berlin workers in January 1919?’ By looking at the course of events, the enthusiasm of the Berlin masses during the initial demonstrations and the strength of the forces which clashed in the days between January 5th and January 12th 1919 the support (or lack of it) for the radical left might be deduced.

Dismissal of Emil Eichhorn

The immediate cause of the Spartacist Uprising was the dismissal of Emil Eichhorn, the police commandant of Berlin and a member of the USPD by the Council of Deputies which was completely filled with Deputies from the MSPD. On the 4th of January Ebert had sent a note to Eichhorn saying that he was dismissed²³¹. Eichhorn had

²³⁰ Döblin, *November 1918, Karl und Rosa* 305.

²³¹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 120.

been a thorn in the side of Ebert and the moderate social democrats. He was accused of being too lenient towards the radicals. In particular the lack of response of Eichhorn during the Christmas fighting and the occupation of the Vorwärts building on the 29th of December 1918 was heavily criticised by the MSPD²³². Coming just a week after the USPD had left the Council of Deputies the dismissal of Eichhorn looked like it was politically motivated. It was certainly seen as a politically motivated move by the radical left, who saw it as a sign of counterrevolutionary danger heading their way²³³. The MSPD had a firm control over the soldiers and workers council, it had a majority in the Zentralrat, it had full control over the Council of Deputies. Only the post of police president was still not occupied by a member of the moderate social democrats²³⁴.

The Uprising

The Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands was less than a week old by the time Eichhorn was dismissed by Ebert. What response the KPD would give to the dismissal was a matter of debate. Together with Eichhorn himself, a few members of the USPD and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards the KPD convened on the evening of the 4th of January 1919²³⁵. The USPD and Shop Stewards had taken the lead in calling for a demonstration and the KPD gladly joined²³⁶. The time for action had come, but what course they would follow was still undecided. Ultimately it was thought to be wise not to escalate matters any further²³⁷. The dismissal of Eichhorn was not seen, not even by the leaders of the KPD, to be the moment to seize power from Ebert. For now they decided on a demonstration in front of the police headquarters on Alexanderplatz for the next day, January 5th 1919²³⁸.

On the morning of the 5th of January 1919 crowds gathered for at several locations throughout the city center of Berlin for a series of smaller demonstrations. Eichhorn himself attended the USPD demonstration in the Chausseestrasse, after which the crowd moved towards the Siegesallee where it combined with the other demonstrations. From the Siegesallee the combined crowd, which numbered in the

²³² Jones, *Founding Weimar* 175.

²³³ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 120.

²³⁴ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 175.

²³⁵ Ibidem, 175.

²³⁶ Müller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 226.

²³⁷ Ibidem, 226.

²³⁸ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 175.

thousands, marched towards Alexanderplatz and the Police Headquarters²³⁹. Laschitza gives a reported figure of the crowd of around 100.000 people during the day though such a large turnout could not be found elsewhere in other sources²⁴⁰. It would definitely be the largest crowd the Spartakusbund would have been able to mobilise during the entire period November 1918-January 1919. Whatever the precise turnout, the number and especially their combativeness pleasantly surprised the leaders of the demonstration²⁴¹. The demonstration took the form of a typical revolutionary crowd in procession. They sang songs, waved red flags, carried banners denouncing their opponents, in this case Ebert and Scheidemann in particular, and shouted slogans against their enemies²⁴².

After the demonstration arrived at Alexanderplatz the leaders of the demonstration entered the police headquarters. From a balcony Eichhorn gave a short speech in which he stated that he got his position from the revolution and he would only give it up to the revolution²⁴³. Liebknecht also spoke to the crowd on several occasions on the 5th of January. At the Siegesallee he called on the workers to arm themselves and disperse the National Assembly with force²⁴⁴. The police headquarters should be surrounded by a protective iron ring of workers. *Die Rote Fahne* reports Liebknecht saying that “Now is the time for the most determined struggle of the revolutionary proletariat, it must do more than protect the gains of the revolution which it still holds to ensure that they are not stolen by the government of Ebert, it must take the revolution into a socialist revolution, which must become world revolution!”²⁴⁵ This inflaming rhetoric made it obvious that in the eyes of Liebknecht the time for action had come. He was now ready to escalate matters to a full-blown violent coup to overthrow the Ebert government.

Gone were relatively mild discussions at the founding congress of the KPD, when Liebknecht had proposed to compete in the National Assembly election. He returned to the same rhetoric he had just at various occasions such as the funeral on the 20th of November 1918, to incite the crowds and workers of Berlin to take a step further. And this time a small group of around 600 men obeyed. After the end of the

²³⁹ Ibidem, 176.

²⁴⁰ Laschitza, *Die Liebknechts* 426.

²⁴¹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 121.

²⁴² Jones, *Founding Weimar* 176-178.

²⁴³ Ibidem, 177.

²⁴⁴ Ibidem, 177.

²⁴⁵ *Die Rote Fahne*, January 6th 1919.

demonstrations and the coming of nightfall the largest part of the crowd returned to their homes. A small group, led by a few Revolutionary Shop Stewards, moved towards the building of *Vorwärts*. This building had been the focal point of radical demonstrations and political acts of violence before. In the aftermath of the Christmas fighting in December it had been briefly occupied by angry sailors and workers²⁴⁶. The difference between the previous episodes and this act was the size of the crowd which stormed the building and the fact that it was guarded by around 80 armed members of the MSPD. They had been ordered to protect the building by Otto Wels, who was briefly held hostage two weeks earlier in the Stadtschloss by the agitated sailors²⁴⁷. Faced with a confrontational crowd which vastly outnumbered them, the guards stood aside. Emboldened by this easy victory, the crowd then separated in several groups to occupy other newspaper buildings²⁴⁸.

Meanwhile the leaders, including Revolutionary Shop Stewards, Liebknecht, Ledebour and several others, of the demonstration that day had gathered in the police headquarters on Alexanderplatz²⁴⁹. The careful considerations of the night before were gone. Buoyed by the turn out that day and even further embellished by the news of the occupation of *Vorwärts* and other newspapers, the possibility of a second revolution was seemingly close²⁵⁰. An officer named Dorrenbach from the People's Naval Division said that the entire division would support any attack on the Ebert-Scheidemann government²⁵¹. He even added that the entire Berlin garrison would rise against the Council of Deputies, but this was immediately disputed by soldiers from other units present²⁵². Jones reports that further wild rumours spread during the meeting. Supposedly a large crowd was gathering in Spandau, to the west of Berlin, with 2000 machineguns and 20 pieces of artillery to support the revolution. In Frankfurt an der Oder, to the east of Berlin, men stood ready to fight²⁵³. All these rumours, and the claims made by Dorrenbach, were false. There were no heavily armed groups of revolutionaries neither to the west nor to the east of the city. Dorrenbach's promise

²⁴⁶ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 148.

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 176.

²⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 178.

²⁴⁹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 121.

²⁵⁰ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 182.

²⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 181.

²⁵² *Ibidem*, 181; Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 121.

²⁵³ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 181.

proved to be empty, as the People's Naval division declared themselves neutral in the Uprising a few days later²⁵⁴.

The rumours and reports of revolutionary potential, real or imagined, did have a marked effect on the men meeting in the police headquarters. They thought that the time for the second revolution had come. The theory of autosuggestion is particularly valid in this example. The fog of war, the lack of information which has plagued battlefield commanders since the dawn of time, now also affected Liebknecht and his compatriots. They thought that their potential support was much larger than it actually was, and they had no way of finding out whether the reports were true. Thus they made the fateful decision to go for broke and wager all on a revolutionary uprising to finally sweep aside the old order and truly found a new, free and socialist, Germany.

The first point of action was to call for a general strike starting the next morning, the 6th of January 1919. An executive council of 33 or 53 members (the accounts differ on the exact number) was selected²⁵⁵. Ledebour, Liebknecht and Paul Scholze, one of the shop stewards, were appointed as its directorate²⁵⁶. The goal of the general strike was very simple, to overthrow the government of Ebert and the MSPD and to institute the dictatorship of the proletariat through a council republic. Once again several decisions should be evaluated critically. The revolutionary shop stewards, a majority who had just a week earlier rejected to join the newly founded KPD because of its 'putschist tendencies', now decided to throw their weight behind a general strike which should lead to the overthrowing of the Ebert government²⁵⁷. Rosa Luxemburg, who had written down the phrase in the founding program that no seizure of power should happen without clear support of a majority of the proletarian masses, was not present during the discussions at the police headquarters²⁵⁸. Whether she truly supported the strike is unknown, but now she too fell in line behind the calls for immediate revolution.

The general strike turned thousands of workers into the streets, where they assembled on the Siegesallee. There Liebknecht spoke of the need to stand firm and continue the strike until they had fulfilled their task. A socialist revolution in Germany

²⁵⁴ Ibidem, 181.

²⁵⁵ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 122; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht* 227 both state that the executive consisted of 53 members. Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* 136 states the number of 33.

²⁵⁶ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 182.

²⁵⁷ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 121.

²⁵⁸ Ibidem, 122.

would send a clear message throughout the world. Curiously at this point he did not call for open violence but urged the workers to keep a rifle at their feet, but that rifle must be loaded²⁵⁹.

Ebert and the MSPD meanwhile had not sat still. After hearing about the occupation of several newspaper buildings and the rumours, soon confirmed by the appearance of the first pamphlets, of a general strike to overthrow the Council of Deputies, the MSPD immediately proceeded to mobilise their own support²⁶⁰. They called on the loyal workers of Berlin to gather the next morning near the Chancellery and protect the government of the people against Bolshevik putschists²⁶¹. In speeches by Scheidemann, Ebert and Robert Leinert, a representative of the Zentralrat, firm warnings that enough was enough and further bloodshed would be necessary. Any blood spilled would be on the hands of the Spartacists so said Robert Leinert. “There will be further loss of blood. It will be difficult for us to declare ourselves in agreement, when we know there will be shooting at women and children, shooting at fathers and mothers. But the Spartacist gang will have it no other way!”²⁶² Any repeat of the scenes during the Christmas fighting, when the ordinary people of Berlin tried to persuade the fighting sides to lay down their weapons, was obviously out of the question. Civilian losses were clearly expected and such expected losses were publicly expressed.

Jones reports that during this day of hypertension rumours ran wild. Supposedly 10.000 loyal soldiers were on their way to crack down on the revolutionaries. Even worse, the Spartacists had full control over Berlin. The anxious commander of the Potsdam garrison believed a massive Spartacist force was on its way²⁶³. The uncertainty and fear, was increased by armed groups occupying buildings and speeches warning of bloodshed. As Jones eloquently summarises it ‘The increasing significance of threatening and unverifiable rumours during the revolutionary winter of 1918-19, in other words, helps to explain why an anxious audience grew more and more desperate for the state to use violence to reassure them that their worst fears would not be realised’²⁶⁴.

²⁵⁹ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 185.

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 184.

²⁶¹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 123.

²⁶² Jones, *Founding Weimar* 186.

²⁶³ *Ibidem*, 188-189.

²⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 189.

And violence came to the streets of Berlin. Fighting flared up across the city on the 6th of January as the day of demonstrations ended. On two separate locations revolutionaries and pro-government forces clashed²⁶⁵. The first location was the Wilhelmsplatz, where the two sides faced each other in a short stand off before one of the sides opened fire. The result was one dead and eight injured²⁶⁶. The second incident took place near a supply depot in the south of the city which was described as the most energetic street fighting the city had seen. The result: up to fifteen dead and thirty wounded²⁶⁷.

As violence spread across the street two curious developments occurred. The streets emptied, and except for a few curious onlookers and the two sides fighting it out they remained empty for the next few days²⁶⁸. The desired revolutionary masses stayed at home and it was simply not the case, as the leaders of the uprising had expected and hoped for, that the general strike would be the spark of a second revolution. This led to the second interesting development, the increasing doubts amongst the leadership of the revolution. Karl Radek, a Russian Bolshevik veteran revolutionary despite his young age had secretly crossed the border between Germany and Russia in late December, had his severe doubts about the course of action followed. On the evening of the 6th of January he called the general strike a severe mistake. On the 9th of January he even tried to persuade the leaders to call off the entire revolution as it was obviously failing²⁶⁹.

Even Karl Liebknecht himself apparently grew more nervous as the Uprising did not spark the desired revolution. He moved around the city out of fear from being caught²⁷⁰. During the first few days Liebknecht stayed at the police headquarters on Alexanderplatz before moving to the new Spartacists HQ at the Bötzwow Brauerei²⁷¹. Curt Geyer gives a gripping recollection of his trip to Berlin and his encounter with Liebknecht during these stormy days. He had travelled from Leipzig to Berlin as a representative of the Leipzig workers and soldiers council. He was a member of the USPD and not at all sympathetic to Liebknecht or the “Communist splitters” but he felt closely aligned with the Shop Stewards who were one of the driving forces of the

²⁶⁵ Ibidem, 190.

²⁶⁶ Ibidem, 190.

²⁶⁷ Ibidem, 190.

²⁶⁸ Ibidem, 191; *Die Freiheit* 7th January 1919.

²⁶⁹ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 123.

²⁷⁰ Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht* 182.

²⁷¹ Laschitza, *Die Liebknechts* 431.

Uprising²⁷². The precise course of events were unknown to him in Leipzig and therefore he decided to make an adventurous trip to the capital. He commandeered an aeroplane, which crash landed just outside Berlin²⁷³. After resting in a small inn he travelled to Berlin the following day by train²⁷⁴.

Arriving in the city he was struck by the normalcy and absence of the bloody scenes of civil war he expected. He visited first the USPD headquarters in Berlin, where the mood was dampened by the last few days of fighting. “Present in the party headquarters was just Frau Zietz [an USPD member] who was crying. I asked her for the political position made by the party leadership. She answered that the party tried to negotiate an end to the fighting. I then asked where Crispian and Dittmann were (two higher ranking USPD members) to which she replied that she did not know where they were or how to contact them. I got the impression that the party leadership had no idea what to do in this situation. I lastly asked her whether they needed any outside support to which Mrs. Zietz replied that they wanted no more fighting and an end to the street battles.”²⁷⁵

Geyer then went to the building of *Die Freiheit* where he had a similar discussion with his comrades present. He was told that Eichhorn was in the police headquarters on the Alexanderplatz. As another surprising sign of the normalcy in which most of Berlin continued their lives he was able to take a taxi directly to the police headquarters. Geyer wondered if this really was the city where a civil war was raging²⁷⁶. Arriving at the police headquarters he quickly spoke with his friend Eichhorn, who told him that the situation was chaotic. The USPD party leadership was gutless and Liebknecht had been out of contact for over a day. He was at the Bützow Brauerei with his men and a large cache of machine guns which Eichhorn desperately needed for the defence of the police headquarters²⁷⁷.

Geyer then took a tram to visit Liebknecht. Arriving at the brewery he found a demoralised group of armed men who told him that Liebknecht was in the main hall. Passing through the brewery he entered the hall and saw a man who was as demoralised as his troops. “In the great hall a macabre sight awaited us. A solitary light bulb hang

²⁷² Geyer *Die revolutionäre Illusion* 89.

²⁷³ Ibidem, 89.

²⁷⁴ Ibidem, 90.

²⁷⁵ Ibidem, 90

²⁷⁶ Ibidem, 90

²⁷⁷ Ibidem, 91

from a beam of the roof, giving just enough light to show rows and rows of machine guns, filling the entire hall leaving just a small path. To the left of the path lay around one thousand machine guns and to the right of the path lay around one thousand machine guns. Pacing nervously up and down that path was Liebknecht, clutching his hands behind his back. He did not see us. [...] He did not seem to recognise me. As I approached him he said “Who are you? What do you want? Who let you in?” I introduced myself and asked whether he needed any further support from Leipzig. [...] Instead of answering the question he asked how things were in Leipzig. When I answered that things were alright Liebknecht snapped, and shouted “Everything alright? What is alright? Nothing is alright! It cannot stay okay, it may not stay okay.” He then continued to pace up and down the pathway between the machine guns, and ignored me completely once again. I wasn't even able to communicate Eichhorn's request for support.”²⁷⁸

The description Curt Geyer of his trip to Berlin gives the impression that the leadership of the Uprising knew that the struggle was doomed to end in defeat. In fact, life continued pretty much as normal. Geyer himself took a taxi and trams inside Berlin and was able to use a train to enter and exit the city. Calls for a continuation of the general strike had had no effect, as had the calls for an uprising. There would be no revolution. On the 7th of January the USPD proposed to start negotiations with the government, to the horror of Liebknecht and the KPD members²⁷⁹. Berlin workers of several large factories, including AEG and Schwarzkopf desired a return to socialist unity. They formed a group uniting members of the MSPD, USPD and KPD and declared that the workers should unite, ‘if not with than over the heads of your leaders!’²⁸⁰ *Die Freiheit* called for an end to the war between brothers: “Socialists unite! A cry for rest comes from the hard pressed people!”²⁸¹ In *Die Rote Fahne* Rosa Luxemburg took aim at those who wanted to negotiate. “The slogans of unity and no loss of blood paralysed the energy of the masses.”²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Ibidem, 91-92.

²⁷⁹ Laschitzka, *Die Liebknechts* 430.

²⁸⁰ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 125..

²⁸¹ *Die Freiheit*, 10th of January 1919.

²⁸² *Die Rote Fahne*, 10th of January 1919.

The Uprising crushed

Negotiations to end the fighting did take place at the instigation of the USPD but unfortunately neither the MSPD nor the Spartacists were interested in a détente. The participants in the negotiations were the Council of Deputies, the Zentralrat, a group of members of the USPD and twelve representatives of the Shop stewards and Communists²⁸³. The crucial point of contention was the issue of freedom of the press. The MSPD demanded that the Spartacists abandon the occupied newspaper buildings. A compromise solution put forward by Karl Kautsky was rejected by the Council and Zentralrat²⁸⁴. They had decided to finally rid themselves of these radicals, who endangered Germany and brought it ever closer to civil war. The Spartacists were not keen on any negotiations either. In *Die Rote Fahne* Luxemburg criticised the USPD for thinking negotiations would succeed²⁸⁵.

In the aftermath of the demonstrations on the 6th of January 1918 Ebert decided to arm the loyal soldiers and workers and form them into volunteer units. Two regiments were formed from these loyalists, the regiments Liebe and Reichstag²⁸⁶. Volunteers from the Guards division came forward as well; ready to return to the fight after their disappointing performance during the Christmas fighting. The right-wing volunteer regiment Reinhardt, named after their commander Wilhelm Reinhardt, also supported the MSPD²⁸⁷. A mixture of volunteer veterans, officers from the guards corps and students at the NCO school in Potsdam formed the regiment Potsdam²⁸⁸. This last unit was to play an important role in the end of the Uprising as it possessed several pieces of light- and field artillery and several heavy machineguns²⁸⁹. Weapons which the Spartacists did not have. The OHL sent further volunteer units, commanded by General Luttwitz from farther afield to Berlin on the 8th of January 1918²⁹⁰. The decision who would command this assembled force was made on the 7th of January 1918. Gustav Noske assumed control over the combined forces facing the Spartacists.

²⁸³ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 124.

²⁸⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 125.

²⁸⁵ *Die Rote Fahne*, 11th of January 1919.

²⁸⁶ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 123.

²⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 123.

²⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 123-124.

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 124.

²⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 124.

He took command while uttering the famous words “Ah well, somebody must be the bloodhound. I will not shirk away from that responsibility!”²⁹¹

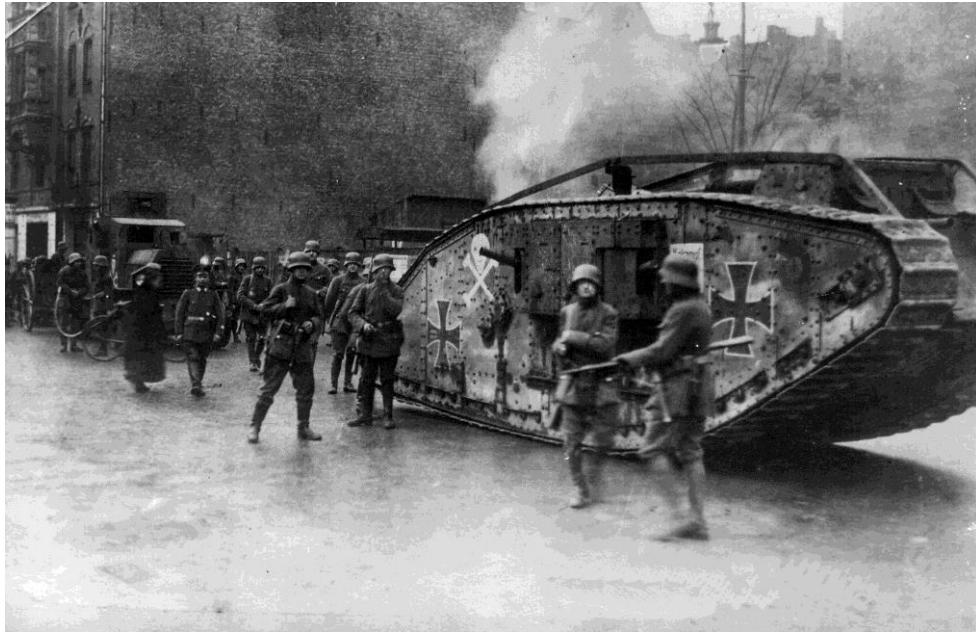


Figure 4: The massive firepower of the Freikorps, Berlin January 1919

The situation was favourable for Ebert and Noske. There had been no defections of units of the Berlin garrison to the Spartacists, not even the People’s Naval Division had joined the uprising preferring to stay neutral²⁹². Noske took his time, preferring to assemble the strongest possible force rather than risk defeat by attacking prematurely, as happened during Christmas. As he wrote in his book: "The situation in the city was unbearable. Armed gangs ruled over the city. We could not drive through the Wilhelmstrasse by car. At the Potsdamer Station, the Budapester Strasse, Brandenburger Gate and on the Wilhelmsplatz, everywhere rifle shots rang out. Even when one pressed oneself against a house would one not be secure from a bullet. The population was rightly outraged by this situation. The newspapers were still occupied by the Spartacists. My colleagues were not much better off than mice in a mousetrap. It was unthinkable to work with the nearby firing of guns. With understandable impatience I was implored every day to advance as soon as possible. I rejected these requests, as I thought that failure would be more catastrophic than a few days of insecurity in Berlin."²⁹³

²⁹¹ Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp* 68.

²⁹² Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 124.

²⁹³ Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp* 73.

On the 11th of January the Regiment Potsdam attacked the occupied *Vorwärts* building. There would be no repeat of the scenes at the Stadtschloss and the Marstall during the Christmas fighting. The building was recaptured within a matter of hours²⁹⁴. The others newspaper buildings were recaptured on the same day²⁹⁵. In a new sign of the further brutalisation of the conflict seven prisoners were beaten and shot by the victorious soldiers after the recapture of *Vorwärts*²⁹⁶. Convinced that one of the captured women was the much maligned Rosa Luxemburg the soldiers even threatened to summarily execute this hapless woman, who was saved by the intervention of Friedrich Stämpfer, editor of *Vorwärts*, who was present at the barracks where the prisoners had been held²⁹⁷. The last action of the Uprising occurred at the police headquarters on Alexanderplatz. On the 12th of January the last bastion of the Spartacists was stormed and quickly captured²⁹⁸. Once again captives were summarily executed by the victorious units, a total of four Spartacists were executed²⁹⁹.

Reports of the brutality which accompanied the crushing of the Uprising were published in *Die Freiheit* and *Die Rote Fahne* during the governmental counteroffensive after Noske took command. In *Die Rote Fahne* of the 14th of January, after the fighting had all but died down, a non-commissioned officer was quoted as saying “Yesterday around 03.45 I came across a sailor, with whom I spoke for a short time. He had no visible weapons on him and he confirmed that he was unarmed. A little further on the sailor was once again stopped, this time by a group of soldiers. He again repeated that he had no weapons on him. He was immediately shot as one of the soldiers shouted ‘Shoot the dog, he is one of the Spartacists!’”³⁰⁰ The sailor in this quote was not alone in being summarily shot during the Uprising. Other than the combatants many innocent bystanders and civilians died during the week between the 5th of January and the 12th of January. An estimated 165 people died during the Uprising³⁰¹.

Noske ordered more of the infamous Freikorps units assembled on the outskirts of the Berlin by the OHL into the city after the fighting died down. They occupied the

²⁹⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 126.

²⁹⁵ Ibidem, 126.

²⁹⁶ Ibidem, 126.

²⁹⁷ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 218.

²⁹⁸ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 126.

²⁹⁹ Ibidem, 126.

³⁰⁰ *Die Rote Fahne*, 14th of January 1919.

³⁰¹ Dassen, *Sprong in het Duister* 325.

capital on the 15th of January³⁰². Militarily this step was completely unnecessary, but the political message that it sent was clear. Noske and Ebert wanted to restore order in Berlin once and for all. The right-wing paramilitaries were immune to radical socialist propaganda and were therefore useful tools in the suppression of further dissent. In Eastern Europe Freikorps had gained quite a reputation for bloodthirsty fighting, and the Freikorps used against the internal enemy would be no different³⁰³.

The most infamous episode during the entire Uprising and its aftermath is the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The two leaders of the KPD had been in hiding since the 10th of January. Moving between the KPD headquarters in the Bützow Brauerei and safe houses around the city they tried to dodge the pro-Ebert forces and Freikorps in and around the city³⁰⁴. The news of the execution of prisoners would have not filled Liebknecht and Luxemburg with confidence that they, the leaders of the Uprising and the KPD, would receive any clemency.

The exact movement of Liebknecht and Luxemburg during these days is difficult to retrace, but in the evening of the 14th of January 1919 both leaders arrived at a house in Berlin Wilmersdorf³⁰⁵. The two spend the night there. The next day their presence in Wilmersdorf had been noticed and Luxemburg and Liebknecht were arrested by a citizen's militia³⁰⁶. After their arrest they were brought to the Eden Hotel, the headquarters of the Guards Division³⁰⁷. There they were interrogated and mistreated³⁰⁸. Liebknecht was the first to leave the hotel on his way to the prison in Moabit. He would never arrive there, instead being shot in the back in the Tiergarten³⁰⁹. Luxemburg left the hotel a half hour after Liebknecht and she too was shot, her body being dumped in the Landwehr Canal where it remained for 4 months before being discovered³¹⁰. A brutal and grisly end of two revolutionary lives.

In what proved to be his last article Liebknecht mocked the victorious MSPD. "The tolling bells called towards the slaughter, music and waving flags! Victorious jublations of the capitalists who thank their soldier-saviours from the 'bolshevist

³⁰² Ibidem, 126.

³⁰³ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 17.

³⁰⁴ Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht* 282.

³⁰⁵ Ibidem, 282.

³⁰⁶ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 234.

³⁰⁷ Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht* 282.

³⁰⁸ Jones, *Founding Weimar* 235.

³⁰⁹ Ibidem, 235.

³¹⁰ Ibidem, 236.

danger'. The rubble still smoulders, the fire of the murdered workers grows, the killed proletarians still lie there, the wounded proletarians still moan. There they hold a victory parade for the Murder Troops, blossoming with victor's pride: Ebert, Scheidemann and Noske. Dragon's teeth they have sown!"³¹¹

Gustav Noske reacted without any emotion, comparing the deaths of Liebknecht and Luxemburg to the deaths of all the others who fell during the January Uprising. He fully put the blame at the feet of Liebknecht and Luxemburg and refused to take any responsibility for the brutality with which the Uprising was crushed. "The murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht can only be explained by the insane atmosphere of Berlin in those days. Like a restless man Liebknecht roamed across the city. He and Mrs. Luxemburg bore the main responsibility for the bloodless revolution turning into a civil war with all its horrors. Hundreds of thousands had lived in fear and terror in Berlin during the first weeks of January. A great many lost their lives during the January fighting. The truth is that as the days progressed nobody asked if no one could take out the agitators. Of those who did ask this question, nobody actually committed this act. [...] I am abhorred by every murder. Those who protest the loudest on the deaths of Liebknecht and Luxemburg have a cheerful peace of mind for the not so insignificant number of other victims."

The lives of Luxemburg and Liebknecht had not been flawless, far from it. Especially Liebknecht's conduct after being released in prison in October 1918 deserves some critical scrutiny. He grossly overestimated his own influence over the masses and the support that he had. A very small minority answered his call for revolution. The demonstration in support of Eichhorn and against the government was not larger than the support Ebert and the MSPD managed to mobilise on January the 5th. If anything the size of the MSPD and non-socialist demonstrations was larger. The size of the initial group who had stormed and occupied Vorwärts on the night of the 5th of January was only 600 men, while reports on the number of loyalists protecting the Chancellery spoke of thousands of moderate workers and MSPD members³¹². Indeed, Ebert was able to quickly form several volunteer units of workers in addition to the regular forces and Freikorps being sent to Berlin. If these signs are any sign of where the loyalty of the

³¹¹ *Die Rote Fahne*, 15th of January 1919.

³¹² Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung* 123

Berlin masses lay it is not hard to conclude that the majority did not support the radical left.

The death of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht is a symbolic end of the Spartacist Uprising, and of this thesis. Their brutal murder and the brutality with which the Uprising was crushed were firsts in many ways. The November revolution had been relatively bloodless with a dozen casualties, the January Uprising was comparatively a lot bloodier with 165 dead. Later uprisings in 1919 in Berlin and 1920 in the Ruhr area were even bloodier.

The murder of the two leaders of the Spartakusbund would be the beginning of hundreds of assassinations which would mark the early years of the Weimar Republic. Matthias Erzberger, the Zentrum politician who signed the Armistice of Compiègne, would be shot in 1921³¹³. Philipp Scheidemann was lucky to survive an assassination attempt in 1922³¹⁴.

³¹³ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister* 332.

³¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 332.

Conclusion

The topic of this thesis was the Spartacist Uprising of January 1919 and the weeks preceding this crucial event in German history. The course of German history took a decisive turn during these 10 weeks. The November Revolution, arriving in Berlin on the 9th of that month, ushered in a new era. The Hohenzollern Empire was gone and a social, just republic would be built. From the very beginning this moderate course, propagated by the moderate socialist Ebert and his MSPD, was contested by the radical socialists of the Spartakusbund. The Spartakusbund wanted a radical socialist republic, which all powers being in hands of the workers and soldiers councils which had sprung up all over Germany during the November Revolution. Between the two extremes of German socialism stood the USPD. This party tried to bridge the gap between the two extremes, but the party itself was split between a moderate and radical wing which created some difficulty for the USPD.

In this thesis the events of the period between November 9th 1918, the arrival of revolution in Berlin, and January 15th, the date of death of Karl Liebknecht which heralded the symbolic end of the Spartacist Uprising were analysed. This is done by using the three newspapers of the parties (*Vorwärts* for the MSPD, *Die Freiheit* for the USPD and *Die Rote Fahne* for the Spartakusbund) as sources, backed up by other printed primary sources and extensive secondary literature. The role of revolutionary crowds and the theory of autosuggestion are crucial to this analysis.

Several things stand out during the events of November 1918-January 1919. First of all autosuggestion plays a continuous role. Whether it was the confrontation at the junction of the Chaussestrasse and Invalidenstrasse on the 6th of December 1918 or the fighting around the Stadtschloss and Marstall in the early morning of the 24th of December, without rumour and fear of the other these things would probably have not escalated to the proportions that they did. During the incident on the 6th of December the rumour that the Berliner Vollzugsrat had been arrested quickly spread amongst the ranks of the Spartakusbund, who just happened to have gathered in three meetings on the outskirts of the city. This enraged the Spartacists and drove them to march towards the city center where they clashed with troops sent by the MSPD commander of the Berlin garrison Otto Wels. The same Otto Wels was briefly held hostage by the Peoples

Naval Division on the night of the 23rd of December, and this provided Ebert with an excuse to send in army troops to dislodge the sailors.

During the Uprising itself autosuggestion also plays a key role. Without the idea that rumours were actually reality, it is hard to believe that the leaders of the demonstration of the 5th of January would have decided to pursue a course of further escalation. The sheer terror and fear of Bolshevik revolution put Ebert under a lot of pressure to act against any sign of radicalism and crack down on the radicals. Compromise was not an option for both sides, as the MSPD and Spartakusbund would only settle for complete victory.

Secondly the enormous gaps that existed between the MSPD and Spartakusbund in particular, which the USPD desperately tried to bridge. The split between the different socialist factions had its origin in the Great War and from the very beginning it seemed unlikely that the three sides would come closer to work towards a socialist Germany. The USPD valiantly, or perhaps naïvely, tried to form a bridge between the radicals of the Spartakusbund and the moderates of the MSPD. They alone continued to the very end, even during the fighting and bloodshed of January 1919, to call for socialist fraternity and unity in their publications in *Die Freiheit* and during public demonstrations. Though their commitment to socialist unity was commendable, it was absolutely futile. Throughout November and December 1918 the Spartakusbund had openly stated in *Die Rote Fahne* that they were not interested in cooperation with moderate socialists, let alone moderate bourgeois parties. Their goal was a socialist council republic, loosely modelled on the Russian Bolshevik example. Only through a council republic and the dictatorship of the proletariat would true social and economic justice be a possibility. The MSPD had chosen the path of reform and moderation. It wanted social justice, but it would only be viable if it was supported by the majority of Germans. Through *Vorwärts* it vehemently condemned any sign of Bolshevism and radicalism, which could only bring civil war and further horrors to the German people.

The third noticeable point of importance is that the escalating tensions caused a certain brutalisation of German politics. In the weeks leading up to the uprising the language used by the MSPD and Spartakusbund became increasingly sanguine and militant. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were personally demonized, while Liebknecht called for the burial of the 'Ebert-clique' and the 'Scheidemännern'. The scenes of the

Christmas fighting, when the crowd could intervene in the fighting, would not be repeated in January. Civilians would be targeted as well and no mercy was shown to surrendering Spartacists.

In the end, the question to what extent the Spartacist Uprising was a revolution to protect the gains of November 1918 or a counter revolution which would only damage the gains made is straightforward. Historians in general refrain from passing judgement directly; it is up to the reader to make up his or her mind. All parties involved share some blame but ultimately it was the Spartakusbund and Liebknecht who truly were misguided adventurers.

Ebert was driven too much by fear of radicalism to try to reconcile with the radical elements within German socialism. He was a bit too eager to accept the help of the arch-conservative OHL and the brutality with which dissent was crushed on his and his fellow MSPD member Gustav Noske's order is definitely distasteful. These fears and ultimately Noske's extreme reaction was fuelled by the open agitation of Liebknecht and the Spartacists for further radical revolution. Liebknecht and the Spartacists were too eager to copy the example of the Russian revolution, ignoring the many differences between Russia and Germany in the process. Germany was not ready for a radical revolution and Germany was not willing to accept a radical revolution. Rosa Luxemburg was right when arguing that the time for revolution was not ripe and the KPD should first focus on expanding its support base amongst the German workers. Unfortunately for her she was not able to convince her comrades and she paid the price in the end.

If the main achievements of the November Revolution are a democratic Germany and social reform the Spartacist Uprising can be seen as a partial counter revolution. The ideas of bourgeois democracy, an egalitarian parliamentary form of representation, were ridiculous in the eyes of the Spartacists. Only a dictatorship of the proletariat, exercised by a council republic, would bring true social and economic justice to Germany. Driven by their dreams of radical revolution the Spartacists went all in, without realising their weak position. The explanation for this overestimation of their own potential can be explained through autosuggestion. By believing that their support was stronger than it in reality was, Karl Liebknecht and his comrades gave everything for their dreams. One can, depending on the personal opinions and

preferences see this as romantic adventurism, or as putschism. The consequences of the Spartacist's rash decision to rise up in January 1919 would be felt in the Weimar Republic.

The brutality with which the Spartacist Uprising was crushed would be the first of many bloody uprisings, revolutions and counterrevolutions that would engulf Germany for the years after 1919. A few months later a new uprising in Berlin resulted in hundreds of dead. A year later the Ruhr Uprising resulted in over a thousand casualties. The intense hatred between the KPD and the SPD would continue throughout the 1920s. A solid support base amongst the working classes of Germany for the Weimar republic never materialised. This meant that a significant portion of the German population would rather see the Republic fail and hope for a better alternative.

The symbol of German militarism during the Great War, Paul von Hindenburg, succeeded Ebert after the latter's death in 1925. This was absolutely proof that the old power structures had not been removed, the conservative elite had not been broken. As the threat of National-Socialism grew the cooperation between the left wing parties of Germany remained limited, with the KPD even cooperating with the Nazis against the social democrats. The rise of Nazism could not be prevented through extreme hostility between moderate socialists and the communists of the KPD. The rest, as they say, is history.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

Een verraden revolutie?

In deze scriptie wordt getracht te achterhalen in hoeverre de Spartakisten Opstand van januari 1919 een poging tot revolutie was om de behaalde successen van november 1918 te beschermen, of een contrarevolutie die de verworvenheden van november 1918 alleen zou beschadigen. Door het gebruik van secundaire literatuur en primaire bronnen, met name de kranten van de drie voornaamste socialistische groeperingen (*Vorwärts* voor de gematigde MSPD, *Die Freiheit* voor de USPD and *Die Rote Fahne* voor de radicale Spartakusbund) is getracht om een antwoord te vinden op de bovenstaande vraag.

De splitsing tussen de verschillende socialistische groeperingen vond haar oorsprong in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. De gebeurtenissen tussen november 1918 en januari 1919 vergrootten de verschillen alleen maar verder. In dit onderzoek wordt duidelijk dat de kloof tussen MSPD enerzijds en de Spartakusbund anderzijds dusdanig groot was dat de USPD met geen mogelijkheid de brug tussen beide extremen kon vormen, iets wat wel haar doel was. De Spartakusbund was weliswaar klein en had relatief weinig steun onder de Duitse arbeiders, maar de naam van haar voorman Karl Liebknecht hing op ieders lippen en aan zijn radicale intenties werd niet getwijfeld. Hij kon zijn plannen alleen nooit waarmaken vanwege gebrek aan steun. De gematigde MSPD was nog altijd de grootste Duitse partij en beschikte over veel invloed in het Duitsland van na de novemberrevolutie. Door middel van een pact tussen Ebert en de Duitse legercommandant Groener wist de eerstgenoemde zich te verzekeren van steun voor zijn bewind. Een potentiële klassenstrijd werd de wind uit de zeilen genomen door een akkoord tussen vakbondsleider Legien en werkgeversvertegenwoordiger Stinnes.

Samen met de USPD formeerde de MSPD een regering, de Raad van Volkscommissarissen. Het onderlinge wantrouwen bleef echter groot, en na een serie incidenten en oplopende spanning in december 1918 trad de USPD uit de raad. De MSPD domineerde de Duitse politiek nu geheel, en wist op de cruciale momenten zijn dominantie om te zetten in overduidelijke steun. Liebknecht en zijn radicalen kregen geen poot aan de grond. In de arbeiders- en soldatenraden van Berlijn had MSPD de meerderheid. Op het Duitse congres van arbeiders- en soldatenraden, gehouden in Berlijn van 16 tot 21 december 1918, werd het beleid van Ebert gesteund. Verkiezingen

voor een nationale vergadering die een nieuwe grondwet moest schrijven werden uitgeschreven voor de 19e januari, 1919.

De Spartakusbund verenigde zich eind december 1918 met haar radicale bondgenoten en vormde de Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands. Haar doel was revolutie en pogingen van de twee leiders van de Spartakusbund Rosa Luxemburg en Karl Liebknecht om hun kameraden te overtuigen mee te doen aan de verkiezingen van 19 januari waren tevergeefs. Met een radicaal programma ging de nieuwe communistische partij het jaar 1919 in.

De scheidslijnen tussen de diverse partijen waren ondertussen dusdanig groot geworden dat het minste of geringste de doel kon doen ontploffen. De aanleiding voor de ontploffing, oftewel de Spartakistenopstand van januari 1919, was het ontslag van Emile Eichhorn op 4 januari 1919. Als hoofd van de politie van Berlijn en lid van de USPD was Eichhorn Ebert en de zijnen al langer een doorn in het oog. Hem werd verweten dat hij te zwak had opgetreden tegen de radicale socialisten in december 1918 en men vermoedde zelfs dat zijn sympathieën meer aan die kant lagen dan aan de kant van de regering.

Nadat het nieuws van zijn ontslag bekend werd kwamen de USPD, Revolutionaire Voormannen en de KPD tot de conclusie dat er een grote demonstratie moest worden georganiseerd. De demonstratie van 5 januari 1919 was een dusdanig groot succes dat de volgende dag een algemene staking zou worden aangekondigd. Ondertussen bezetten radicale socialistische arbeiders de gebouwen van *Vorwärts* en enkele andere kranten. Ebert reageerde furieus en onder aanvoering van Gustav Noske, een rechtse sociaal democraat, werden reguliere troepen en Freikorpsen van buiten Berlijn naar de stad gezonden. De regeringstroepen grepen hardhandig in. Bij het neerslaan van de opstand vloeide veel meer bloed dan bij de originele revolutie in november 1918. Op 15 januari 1919 werden Karl Liebknecht en Rosa Luxemburg aangetroffen in een appartement in Berlijn-Wilmersdorf, waarna zij brutaal verhoord en vervolgens vermoord werden.

De opstand was feitelijk mislukt voordat zij goed en wel onderweg was. De tweede revolutie waar Liebknecht en de zijnen op hoopten kwam niet van de grond. In dit onderzoek zijn drie opvallende conclusies te trekken. Ten eerste speelden angst en onzekerheid, leidend tot 'autosuggestie' een cruciale rol in de beslissingen die de leiders van alle drie de partijen maakten. Autosuggestie houdt in dat het kader waarin personen beslissingen maken beïnvloedt wordt door geruchten, angsten en vermoedens. Hierdoor

meent men dat gebeurtenissen zich echt voltrekken, ondanks dat daar geen enkel concreet bewijs voor is. Ook tijdens de maanden november, december en januari waren geruchten en angstige vermoedens sterker dan concrete feiten, waardoor een aantal curieuze beslissingen werd genomen door een Liebknecht, Haase of Ebert.

Ten tweede was de kloof tussen MSPD enerzijds en Spartakusbund anderzijds onoverbrugbaar. De USPD probeerde als enige nog het oude socialistische ideaal van broederschap levende te houden, zelfs tijdens het bloedvergieten in januari 1919, maar dit was tevergeefs. Het taalgebruik van de MSPD en de Spartakisten werd met de dag bloediger en militanter in aanloop naar de Opstand. De ideologische splitsing was definitief en zou niet meer gerepareerd worden.

Ten derde is de toenemende bereidheid om fors geweld te prediken en gebruiken opvallend. De novemberrevolutie was met een dodental van een dozijn vrijwel bloedeloos. Tijdens de Opstand in januari vielen 165 slachtoffers. Van beide kanten werd opgeroepen tot bruut geweld; van het doden van de Bolsjewisten Liebknecht en Luxemburg tot het begraven van de Ebert-kliek en de Scheidemannen.

Tot slot kan geconcludeerd worden dat de Spartakusopstand direct tegen de verworvenheden van de novemberrevolutie inging. Het betwiste punt van de democratisering van Duitsland en wat dat concreet betekende. Een parlementaire democratie werd afgedaan door de Spartakisten als onzin en contraproductief. Enkel het diktatuur van het proletariaat en een radenrepubliek kon ware sociale en economische gerechtigheid brengen voor het Duitse proletariaat. Dit was het doel van de Spartakisten in de periode november 1918 en januari 1919. Dit doel stond haaks op het doel van de MSPD en Ebert om een functionerende, sociale parlementaire democratie te stichten, gedragen door grote delen van de Duitse bevolking. De onvermijdbare tegenstellingen, ontstaan tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog, botsten uiteindelijk in de straten van Berlijn in januari 1919.

De bloederige wijze waarop Ebert maar vooral Noske opdracht gaf om de Opstand de kop in te drukken zorgde voor een definitieve breuk van de Duitse arbeidersbeweging. Ook schepte het ene precedent voor het meedogenloos de kop indrukken van elke vorm van links-radicalisme. De diverse opstanden in Beieren, Ruhrgebied en wederom Berlijn in de jaren 1919 en 1920 werden met grotere aantallen slachtoffers onderdrukt. De radicale socialisten, onder aanvoering van de KPD, wonnen snel aan steun in de Weimar republiek. De KPD ondersteunde de jonge republiek echter

niet en hiermee was de basis waarop de Weimarrepubliek steunde zeer nauw. Van rechts was al geen liefde te verwachten, maar ook radicaal links zag Weimar liever vandaag dan morgen verdwijnen. Het feit dat de verpersoonlijking van Pruisisch militarisme tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog, Veldmaarschalk Paul von Hindenburg, Ebert kon opvolgen na diens dood was een bewijs van de zwakte van de Weimarrepubliek. Bovendien toont het aan dat de conservatieve, rechtse machten weliswaar een nederlaag hadden geleden tijdens en kort na de Eerste Wereldoorlog, maar dat zij niet overwonnen was. Het opkomend Nazisme van eind jaren 20 zorgde pas te laat voor samenwerking op links om deze ontwikkeling tegen te gaan. De communisten enerzijds en de sociaal democraten anderzijds bestreden elkaar liever dan zij aan zij vechten tegen Hitler. Hoe dat afliep leert de rest van de geschiedenis van Duitsland in de 20^e eeuw ons.

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