REVIEWS

The German Revolution of 1918-19

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The abortive German revolution of 1918-19 has never attracted the attention its significance would appear to merit. In Weimar Germany the official attitude was a virtual conspiracy of silence, in which the events of the first winter after the World War were viewed as a momentary aberration from German traditions occasioned by the defeat. Under Hitler, the Revolution and the "November Criminals" achieved more prominence as objects of vilification. After 1945, in western Germany interest in the subject was limited until the later 1960s when members of the revolutionary student body were drawn to the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg. These appeared to offer a more appropriate model than those of Lenin, as did the experiences of more romantic although equally tragic figures such as Toller and Levine of the Munich Soviet. Only in the German Democratic Republic, where the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) that emerged from the revolution provides the event with the area of historical antecedence akin to the role of the equally abortive Revolution of 1848-49 in the Federal Republic, has the subject received considerable attention.

The works that have hitherto appeared present one or other of four interpretations of the Revolution. Firstly, there is what might be called the orthodox bourgeois or western interpretation which favours the role of the Majority SPD in averting "Bolshevism" and blames the "putschist" approach of the Spartacists for the rapid recovery of the counter-revolutionary forces and for the absence of more thoroughgoing democratisation of the bureaucracy, judiciary, and military of the subsequent Weimar Republic. Secondly, there is the National Socialist interpretation which places the blame for the military collapse of 1918 on the "November Criminals". From the events of 1918-19, the Nazis drew the conclusion of the primacy of domestic policy. In other words, in contrast to Wilhelmian Germany where an aggressive foreign policy functioned as a means of subsuming domestic conflict, the aim in the Third Reich was to ensure a solid internal basis of unity for an expansionist foreign policy.

A third interpretation, first presented by Arthur Rosenbaerg in the early 1930s, is that the Revolution offered a chance of a third course between the limited social and political achievements of the Weimar Republic and a transformation along the lines of Soviet Russia. Unfortunately, however, this opportunity was missed by the Majority SPD leadership who, in allying themselves with the military leadership and the Free Corps (Freikorps), ensured the survival of the Reaction. Finally, to historians of the GDR the Revolution also amounted to a lost opportunity, which nevertheless demonstrates the possibilities of revolution in advanced industrial
countries and the necessity for a strong, well-organised and competently led communist party to successfully exploit those possibilities.

In the work under review, Dr Tampke sets out to analyse the background and the course of the revolution in the Ruhr industrial region in the light of the various interpretations that have been made. In doing so he remedies a serious deficiency in the available English-language accounts in which the Ruhr, the most highly-developed region of modern industry in Europe and a stronghold of revolutionary forces, is relatively neglected. The author is concerned to explain how, within a few weeks of ‘the collapse of the old order’, the left in the Ruhr was able to mount a serious challenge for power; and why unrest and revolutionary actions were more evident in some parts of the region than in others.

The basis of the analysis is a division of the Ruhr into three districts which differed in terms of the form of socio-economic development before 1918 which in turn determined contrasts of experience during the Revolution itself. In the old-established coalmining district of the eastern Ruhr, the Bochum-Gelenkirchen-Dortmund area, the miners experienced a considerable deterioration in their formerly privileged status with the relaxation of state control over the industry between 1851 and 1865. In response the district emerged as an early stronghold of the SPD and of the socialist trade unions. Thereafter, the rate of industrial and urban growth, while substantial in the context of Germany as a whole, was lower than in other districts of the Ruhr. Consequently, a high proportion of the labour force came from relatively short-distance migration, rather than from the reserve army of displaced agricultural labour in Germany’s eastern territories. In addition, the pronounced development of administrative organs and service industries in the towns of the eastern Ruhr provided substantial white-collar employment.

The eastern Ruhr by 1914 was relatively homogenous ethnically, had a more graduated social hierarchy with a substantial lower middle class, and a well-established SPD tradition controlled by the party and union bureaucracies. During the war itself the power of the Majority SPD functionaries was further enhanced with the gaining of control of the remaining party newspapers and key positions from the USP (Independent Socialist Party) that split from the SPD during the War. Consequently, during the Revolution power in the eastern Ruhr was firmly in the hands of the “moderates” of the Majority SPD. The latter managed to effectively limit the scope and objectives of the labour movement and, by, the end of December 1918, ‘the emphasis in the eastern Ruhr had shifted from revolution to political electioneering’, which was the forte of the Majority SPD.

The limited objectives in the eastern Ruhr are illustrated by the “Poster proclaiming the revolutions” in the town of Dorsten, which is published without translation. The poster announced the establishment of a Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council in the town on 10 November, 1918, to “maintain the public peace, security and order to the fullest extent”. Citizens are urged to “carry on with their business as usual”, severe punishment is threatened for instances of unrest and looting, children and youths under 17 years of age are informed to be off the streets by 7 pm, and no assembly shall obstruct or disturb traffic.”

In the southern Ruhr district, in the Solingen-Remscheid-Dusseldorf area of the metal trades, modern industrialisation also commenced relatively early in the 19th century. Metalworkers acquired a higher social status and incomes than the miners of the eastern Ruhr, although this did not prevent the emergence of a radical labour movement. During the war this area developed as a stronghold of the USP. However, the ‘vigorous course’ of the Revolution ended in December 1918 with the occupation of a large part of the district by the British Army, which supported the Majority SPD, and with the speedy recovery of the confidence of the substantial middle class.

It was in the third district, the district of the western Ruhr, centred on Hamborn that the Revolution reached its apogee as a mass movement of the working class. This district was characterised by particularly rapid growth from the later 19th century. In 1870 Hamborn was a village. By 1890 it had become a town of some 28,000 inhabitants. By 1914, however, it had emerged as a city of over 120,000. A large proportion of the population consisted of migrants from the agrarian east,
including a number of Poles. Consequently, the growth of the influence of the SPD, which had never made significant inroads in rural Germany, was delayed and limited up to 1914. In fact, Hamborn was one of the first cities in which syndicalism gained a following. Here, the Revolution was most spontaneous and protracted and the KPD made the most ground.

Within the division of the Ruhr into districts Tampke singles out Essen for special attention as the location of an attempt to establish workers’ control of the coal industry, ‘the only time between November 1918 and the spring of 1919 that major steps were taken to push revolution beyond the stage of mere constitutional change’. In turn this has become the basis of the ‘third way’ interpretation, that the Revolution offered the prospect of a middle course between “Bolshevism” and the coalition of the SPD with the Reaction. The Essen model failed through the ‘vagueness and confusion’ of its protagonists, through the fact that to the Majority SPD it was merely window dressing, and through the failure of the USP and the KPD to conquer power in Berlin.

Overall, Tampke presents an absorbing narrative of the events of 1918-19 in the Ruhr, which is marred only by the absence of a map to enable readers to orient themselves in the narrative’s mobile account and by the failure to translate a number of German expressions and names of institutions. The progress of the Revolution is convincingly presented in the context of the social and economic development of the region, although at times the relating of events in 1918-19 to such developments is rather simplistic. The work also presents a much-needed antidote to the numerous accounts that play down the revolutionary nature of the situation and of events in Germany at that time and attribute revolutionary actions solely to leftwing “agitators”. The essential weakness, however, rests in the analysis of the reasons for the failure of the Revolution.

The crucial absence of ‘a united and competent’ revolutionary leadership is noted by Tampke, although he considers that this would only have ‘seriously troubled the social-democrat conservative alliance’. Moreover, even if ‘a properly led and widely supported Communist Party’ had existed it is considered that the Allies would have intervened massively to prevent the appearance of a socialist Germany. In addition, Tampke offers as a reason for the failure ‘the fact that recent works on revolutions question the feasibility of a revolution occurring in advanced industrialised countries’. The sources of support for this ideological position translated into an universal truth are Hannah Arendt and Krishnar Kumar. The possibilities of a ‘third way’ are dismissed on the basis of the conception of workers’ control and the institutions of workers’ council having little real understanding and following amongst the working class.

What does emerge from this study is the equivocal role played the Majority SPD, which utilised its position at the head of the Revolution essentially to destroy it. The alliance of the Majority SPD leadership with the remnants of the old army leadership and the reactionary Free Corps (Freikorps) instead of allowing the formation of a Red Army, ensured the destruction of the Revolution and the survival of a Reaction that gathered confidence and strength during the Weimar Republic. This decision reflected the remarkable ability of the SPD leadership before 1914 to combine revolutionary rhetoric with reformist practice. The excesses committed by this alliance against the left — the suppression of strikes and uprisings and the murders committed by the Free Corps — more than justify the hostile attitude of the KPD towards the SPD in the Weimar era. Nevertheless, this has not prevented a number of historians from attributing the Nazi assumption of power in 1933 to the hostility of the KPD towards the SPD.