CHAPTER 3

Communism and Insurrection

Introduction

The Communist Party of Germany (KPD)\(^1\) was formed at a congress held between 30 December 1918 and 1 January 1919 out of two divergent components: the Spartacus League and the Bremen and Hamburg Left Radicals. The Spartacists, the most prominent of whom were Rosa Luxemburg\(^2\) and Karl Liebknecht,\(^3\) emerged from the left wing of pre-war Social Democracy. When a section of the Party broke with official Social Democracy in 1917 over its continued support for the German war effort, and formed the rival Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) the Spartacists decided to join that group. The Left Radicals, led at this time by Karl Radek\(^4\) and Johann Knief,\(^5\) thought this was a mistake. They considered that a separate communist party should be set up, on the lines of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, and they were already using the word ‘communist’ in the name of their group, the International Communists of Germany (IKD) which was set up on 23 November 1918. Both sides, the Spartacists and the Left Radicals, were enthusiastic about the October Revolution in Russia, and both wanted something similar in Germany, but they had different views about the way to get there. The Spartacist leaders, Rosa Luxemburg above all, thought the coming

\(^1\) The Party in fact bore the title KPD (S) (Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League) for the first two years of its existence. See note 15 for further name-changes.

\(^2\) Rosa Luxemburg (1870–1919), eminent Marxist theorist and revolutionary prominent on the left of the SPD before 1914, founder-member of the Spartacus League 1916, led the KPD for some weeks until her murder in January 1919 by officers of the Free Corps.

\(^3\) Karl Liebknecht (1871–1918), revolutionary activist, prominent on the left of the SPD before 1914, founder-member of the Spartacus League 1916, led the KPD along with Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches for a few week until his murder in January 1919 by officers of the Free Corps.

\(^4\) Karl Radek (1885–1939), after a varied career on the left of pre-war Social Democracy, went to Russia and was elected a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee. He did not return to Germany until December 1918, but he retained a connection with the Bremen Left Radicals throughout the war. He was later involved closely in German affairs until 1924 on behalf of the ECCI.

\(^5\) Johann Knief (1880–1919), leader of the Bremen Left Radicals, then the International Communists of Germany (IKD), founder-member of the KPD, proclaimed the short-lived Bremen Council Republic in January 1919.
revolution should be the achievement of the whole working class and would take time to prepare; the Left Radicals on the other hand called for an immediate insurrection on Bolshevik lines organised by the Communist Party. At the founding congress of the KPD the Left Radicals appeared to be in the minority (there were 94 Spartacist delegates and only 29 from the IKD), but in fact their views prevailed on the issue of participation in the forthcoming elections to the Constituent National Assembly, an indication that many of the Spartacist delegates had also been influenced by leftist ideas. In the words of Chris Harman, ‘the majority of the delegates were far from accepting Rosa Luxemburg’s conviction that it was necessary to win the masses . . . before trying to take over the government’. The congress decided by a large majority (62 to 23) to boycott the parliamentary elections. It also refused to agree that communists should stay in, or enter, the existing trade unions; on this issue the leadership had to temporise by setting up a commission to discuss the question. Paul Levi, who became the leader of the Party after the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in January 1919, had to fight hard to overcome this tendency to ultra-leftism. The leftists opposed participation both in parliaments and trade unions, and favoured a loose federal organisation. In fact some of them rejected the idea of a communist political party in favour of a combined politico-economic ‘unity organisation’, on Syndicalist lines. At the second congress of the Party, held in October 1919, Levi was able to push through a Declaration of Communist Principles and Tactics, which affirmed the need for parliamentary and trade union participation, and a centralised political party (3.4). Delegates who did not accept Levi’s theses were immediately expelled, an extreme step which indicates how dangerous Levi and his associates considered the threat from the left to be. At the same congress theses approving participation in parliamentary and in trade union activity were also adopted (3.5 and 3.6).

Despite the title of this chapter, communism was not synonymous with armed insurrection. Communists did believe, however, that power could

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6 Harman 1997, p. 66.
7 Paul Levi (1883–1930), lawyer, joined the Spartacus League in 1916, founder-member of the KPD 1918, leader of the KPD 1919–21, expelled 1921, set up the Communist Working Group (KAG), entered the USPD with his group April 1922, brought his group into the SPD September 1922, led the left opposition in the SPD until his death in 1930.
8 These divergences are clearly brought out in Bock 1993.
9 For this reason, Klaus-Michael Mallmann, in his recent controversial study of the KPD, presents Levi as a Stalinist avant la lettre who was ‘even more rigorous than the Central Committee under Thälmann’ (Mallmann 1996, p. 64).
10 In fact, once the revolution had ceased to be an immediate prospect, local members of the KPD devoted themselves to promoting workers’ day-to-day interests through their