CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Forgotten Revolutionary

Why do we need a new history of the German Revolution – a revolution that failed nearly a century ago? Why bother with a little-known trade unionist like Richard Müller when we have legends like Rosa Luxemburg?

The answer is because we need to challenge received knowledge of those events. By following the course of Müller’s life, this biography presents a new narrative of the German Revolution and the international socialist movement of the early twentieth century.

The novelty of this narrative lies in recalling that the German Revolution that began in 1918 was the first and only socialist revolution to take place in a fully industrialised country. Its failure and the success of socialist revolutions in backward countries in the twentieth century make it hard for us to appreciate just how natural the revolution must have seemed to its participants. After all, only industrialised nations were supposed to be able to advance to socialism. And Germany combined the most centralised industrial capitalism with the most organised working class in the world: that it would fulfil the historic mission anticipated by Marx and Engels must have seemed all but inevitable. Even Lenin and his Bolsheviks felt that their revolution in agrarian Russia would remain precarious unless the Germans made their own and broke the Bolsheviks’ isolation. Their hope endured for five long years until a last failed uprising in October 1923 extinguished the possibility of a successful German revolution. In the decades that followed, Marxists around the world would continue to praise the urban proletariat and mostly ignore the fact that every other twentieth-century revolution took place at the margins of capitalism. Though the working class played a role, often a leading one, in these revolutions – from the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959 and up to the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 – they were all driven by peasant masses, rural workers, and soldiers who mutinied.

By contrast, the working class was the principal protagonist of the German Revolution of 1918. The revolution started with a mutiny of sailors and soldiers, but it came to be driven by workers and their organisations. Germany’s industrial labour force had been educated in Marxist theory for two generations and had organised itself by building both the strongest unions and the biggest and most orthodox Marxist party of the Second International: the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), the Social Democratic Party of Germany.
As such, the German Revolution was practically the model Marxist revolution but, like revolutionary movements in other industrial countries at the time, it too failed. Revolutionary defeat in Germany was followed in 1920 by a similar disaster in Italy: a wave of factory occupations all over the country was defeated within months, the Italian labour movement was destroyed and the world’s first fascist regime emerged in 1922. That regime became a model for German Nazism, which ended in levels of brutality beyond any political terror that the world had yet seen.

The Politics of Historical Interpretation

The Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci famously asked why the revolution had failed in the West and succeeded in the East, precisely the opposite of the predictions of Marxism as it was commonly understood by European Social Democracy until the Bolshevik Revolution. The German Revolution should have been at the centre of the various answers to that question, but was not. West German historiography came to be dominated by a narrative that simply declared the revolution an undesirable source of disorder and civil war and looked forward to a gradual transition to Western-style democracy. That was the consensus between the SPD and the old elites of imperial Germany.¹

Marxist historiography did not substantially correct this dismissal: it hailed the German Revolution but did not dare delve into it too deeply. In both East German and international Marxist-Leninist historiography, the failure of the German Revolution was largely explained as a ‘betrayal’ by leading Social Democratic politicians, of a piece with the betrayal that saw the parties of the Second International abandoning their internationalism in favour of nationalism on the eve of the First World War. This narrative, which would be shared by dissident currents within Marxism and in popular political debates, originated in Lenin’s 1918 pamphlet, The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky.² Its polemical target was revisionism, a tendency to revise Marxism in a reformist direction. Though Lenin’s 1918 pamphlet found it politically convenient to pin it on Kautsky, revisionism referred to the famous controversy between Eduard Bernstein and the defenders of ‘orthodox Marxism’ like Rosa Luxemburg in the German Social Democratic Party of the 1890s, when Kautsky

¹ The most detailed narrative of Germany, a Central European country, ‘going west’ towards the path of Western European democracy and parliamentarism was presented by Heinrich August Winkler: Germany: The Long Road West, Winkler 2006b.