The German Revolution in Berlin: 1918

During the war the Shop Stewards had organised an escalating series of political mass strikes and one may be tempted to take the revolutionary events of November 1918 in Berlin as the fourth and final mass strike. But they were much more. The three previous strikes had radicalised the Stewards, workers of Berlin and other industrial centres and they now believed that only a revolution would end war and hunger. The Spartacists had, it is true, believed in revolution from the beginning, but without the masses the Stewards represented, the Spartacists could not act. This chapter will deal with the cooperation between the Stewards, the Spartacists and the USPD in the last year of the war and argue that the Stewards were crucial in making the German Revolution in November 1918.

The Stewards and the Spartacists: A Tale of Two Styles

Long-standing differences in the political styles of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Spartacists had bred new tensions by the summer of 1918 when the Spartacists were badly weakened by informers and arrests and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, fearful of suffering the same, had cut off all contact with them. After Karl Liebknecht reclaimed leadership of the Spartacists that October these tensions only rose higher.

Liebknecht had been released as part of attempts at democratisation as defeat loomed. Though the military tried to keep his release a secret to avoid disturbances, Liebknecht was triumphantly greeted by thousands of workers at Berlin's Anhalter Bahnhof on 23 October 1918.1 Rosa Luxemburg, meanwhile, remained in 'protective custody'. Though, unlike Liebknecht, she had never been legally convicted, it appeared that the military leadership feared her influence more given that she, not Liebknecht, was the Spartacists' intellectual leader.

By autumn 1918 Liebknecht regularly participated in the Shop Stewards’ secret meetings and brought other Spartacists along. An even wider circle of Spartacists, Shop Stewards, and the left-wing members of the USPD also regularly attended illegal meetings under the rubric of the Executive Committee

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1 See Laschitza 2007, p. 376; Friedel Gräf oral history interview, SAPMO-BArch, sg Y 30/0297.
of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils (Vollzugsausschuss des Arbeiter- und Soldatenrates), usually called, simply, the workers’ council.

While their collaboration represented the radical left’s recovery from the mutual tensions of the summer, the new rapprochement between the two organisations did not increase Liebknecht’s enthusiasm for the Shop Stewards’ tactics. And he did not keep his criticisms to himself. Naturally, old conflicts resurfaced. Müller later recalled that, ‘[Liebknecht] did not see the group as an association of committed revolutionaries. At most, he thought of it as a club of feral bourgeois philistines who met in secret and never informed the world of their existence’. Such choice left invective may have been attributed to Liebknecht by Müller but the former certainly had long failed to comprehend the Shop Stewards’ secret and unassuming style, born of legitimate caution and the down-to-earth assessment of possibilities.

It was certainly true that until then the Shop Stewards kept a low public profile. Unlike the parties or the Spartacus League, they conducted their propaganda in workshops and expanded their network of representatives secretly. They did not organise demonstrations or other street propaganda. They were action-oriented and placed very little value on the kind of ideological propaganda or theoretical work that the Spartacists usually engaged in, let alone the sort of grand gestures so integral to Liebknecht’s style. Their forum was the factory and their form of political action was the general strike. Although they could lead hundreds of thousands of workers in a strike, the Stewards’ organisation and their mode of operation were known only to their members. It was only in December 1918, weeks after the Revolution, that the Shop Stewards met in public for the first time and issued a press statement under their own name. How little known they were until then became clear when even a commentator for the USPD newspaper, *Freiheit*, had no idea who the Shop Stewards really were.

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2 Luban 2008a, p. 23.
3 ‘*einen Klub wild gewordener Spiessbürger*’: Müller 1924a, p. 165.
4 Fritz Opel notes that the Shop Stewards did not at first have a political plan of their own and, despite the autonomy of their actions, were dependent upon the Spartacists and the USPD to provide political analysis of the war that went beyond their shop-floor experience. Opel 1957, p. 55.
5 Morgan 1975, p. 209. Even the name ‘Revolutionary Shop Stewards’, which we have used to designate the group for the entire duration of its existence for the sake of simplicity, only appeared during the German Revolution in 1918.