CHAPTER 11

Footnotes and Suppression – Richard Müller’s Impact on Historiography

The influence of Richard Müller’s books and his interpretation of the German Revolution on later generations have varied over the decades, depending on how it was filtered through the historic contestations that succeeded each other in German politics. This chapter will examine how Müller’s books were read both in the Weimar Republic and later in East and West Germany and how these interpretations became influential internationally as well. While exploring or even summarising decades of Marxist-Leninist and Social Democratic historiography of the German Revolution produced during Weimar and then in the Cold War era is impossible here, I outline its main features. In doing so, I argue that Müller’s analysis and understanding are critically important for overturning the Cold War narratives that still pervade popular and historical discourse.1

The Millstones of Social Democracy and Marxism-Leninism

The impact of Richard Müller’s history of the German Revolution was paradoxical. While Müller’s politically distinctive historical works on the German Revolution ensured that he would not be forgotten by those with special interest in the German Revolution, the very politics of his interpretation have marginalised Müller and his writings in the consciousness of a broader audience. Already during the Weimar Republic German political discourse had been set in a mould with only a relatively small niche for Müller’s interpretations:

1 I say ‘outlining’ because any proper history of reception would have to be a comprehensive history of the German Revolution and the German labour movement and would have to be undertaken as a separate and enormous undertaking in its own right. Such completeness is therefore not attempted here. Individual works I refer to should be taken to illustrate a strand of the discourse as pars pro toto. For further bibliographical details and research, see among others Mario Kessler’s ‘Die Novemberrevolution und ihre Räte – Die DDR-Debatten des Jahres 1958 und die internationale Forschung’, Kessler 2008b; Tenfelde 1991; Weißbecker 1999; Winkler 2002; Niess 2012. On the overarching controversies in German labour history, see Dowe 1981; Tenfelde and Ritter 1981.
already then, they challenged liberal and Social Democratic historiography as well as orthodox Marxist historiography.

For liberals and social democrats among his contemporaries, Müller’s writings fell under the rubric of ‘Bolshevism’, a category into which all tendencies to the left of the SPD were summarily placed. Such wholesale lumping was programmatic for the liberal and Social Democratic memoir literature of the Weimar era, which shared an undifferentiated anticommunism and patriotism with the conservatives as well as the antidemocratic right. For all these currents, revolutionary anti-war resistance could only be considered traitorous to the fatherland. When, in giving a statement during a lawsuit in Magdeburg in 1924, President Friedrich Ebert explicitly distanced himself from the January strike’s pacifist demands, he simply was true to type. Such views, voiced regularly and from high places, furthered the stigmatisation of the strike, and more generally the anti-war and revolutionary events of the time, as a national betrayal. As the definitive representation and acknowledgment of the mass anti-war strikes, Müller’s writings therefore ran afoul of the pervasive restorationist zeitgeist and were branded extremist.

This did not, however, make Müller’s works welcome in the communist party. Though the party was not invested in the patriotic consensus, Müller’s historiography undermined the nascent mythology around Liebknecht, making it difficult to construct a heroic party history. Müller’s complaint that Malik-Verlag did little for his books due to his lack of party affiliation was not rooted in anything the publishing company did or neglected to do but in the broad communist counterculture and media which ignored Müller’s works because they did not fit into this emerging historical perspective.

The *Illustrierte Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution* (Illustrated History of the German Revolution), published in 1929, offers a representative instance of this party communist view of the German Revolution.² Compiled by a collective of KPD writers, the collection was a milestone in Marxist historical studies. It included extensive documentary and illustrative material that provided the first detailed depiction of the entire war and revolutionary periods up to and including the Kapp Putsch. With recourse to Marxist theory, it offered an equally sober and terrifying accounting of the World War which discussed things left out of the dominant revanchist interpretation of the war, such as its economic causes and wartime profiteering. Illustrations on every page and reproductions of contemporary source materials heightened the

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2 The *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* was published without author credits in *Internationaler Arbeiter Verlag* 1929.