Abstract.

Marxists generally assumed that a socialist revolution in one country would be rapidly followed by revolutions in (at least) a large number of other countries. Following the October revolution in Russia in October 2017, the most promising country in the West, and the most crucial one for Russia, was Germany. In many respects, conditions in Germany looked ideal. There was widespread agreement that the semi-autocratic regime of the Kaiser had to go. Much suffering was caused by the continuing Allied blockade. The largest parties were the various socialist parties. And a potential German revolution had excellent leadership from Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg was recognised as a leading Marxist theorist. Her ideas about the mass strike offered a democratic way forward from economic discontent to political change. She had a genuine commitment to liberal freedoms other than economic freedom.

So why was the German revolution an ignominious failure? The paper considers a number of reasons. These include:

- a German love of order, for sound historical reasons.
- The vast majority of Germans wanted to attain their political goals by means of liberal democracy.
- Luxemburg’s economic theories gave her excessive confidence in the inevitability of revolution.
- Luxemburg, Liebknecht and others felt that they were leading the masses, whereas they were leading a disorganised mob motivated by an immediate desire for gain from, for example, looting.
- Luxemburg was one of the leaders of a small, new party which did not have a mass membership or following. It was therefore not in a position to make plans for a coup similar to the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in October 1917.

In a final section of the paper there is a brief and speculative discussion of two questions. First, just assume for a minute that there had been a successful socialist revolution in Germany. Germany was a country with hostile powers just over the border. Large numbers of Germans would have been unsympathetic to socialist revolution. The war had seriously distorted German industry. What real potential was there for mutual support and trade between Germany and Russia? Second, the disunity of the German left in the years when it needed to resist the rise of
Hitler was a major problem. Could a different strategy from Rosa Luxemburg have helped?

**Introduction.**

An obvious starting point is two hackneyed observations. First, according to a straightforward interpretation of Marx’s theories, as found, for example, in the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, revolution is to be expected in an advanced capitalist society where capitalist relations of production had turned into fetters on the growth of the productive forces. This was decidedly not the situation in Russia in October 1917, and the Bolshevik coup could therefore be seen as a piece of opportunism on the part of Lenin – meaning seeing an opportunity and grasping it rather than having a wavering theoretical orientation.

Second, there was an assumption in Marx himself and amongst Marxist theorists of all persuasions, that a revolution in one country would be followed relatively rapidly by revolutions in the main capitalist countries. Trotsky turned this into a formal theory of permanent revolution, meaning that the Russian revolution would have to spread internationally or it would perish. However, even without this theory, it was pretty obvious that the chances of survival of the Bolshevik revolution would be enormously heightened by revolution in one or more of the advanced capitalist countries. Thus Lenin in “Everything to help the German Workers” talks about the “world workers’ revolution”, putting aside grain to help German workers and building up the Red Army so that the Russians could come to their aid (Lenin in Riddell, 1986, pp. 27-29). The most likely prospect was Germany, hence the subject of this paper.

Rosa Luxemburg was the leading theorist of the revolutionary left in Germany, and this paper will therefore be written to a considerable extent as if a possible German revolution was a matter of the conjunction between Luxemburg’s theories and the
situation in Germany. Obviously, she wasn’t alone, and it is one thing to have a set of theories and another to develop specific strategies in specific situations.

The first substantial section of the paper will concern Luxemburg’s economic theory that capitalism would have to keep expanding or perish. As it couldn’t carry on expanding indefinitely, it was obviously doomed sooner or later. Second, as a background to much of the subsequent discussion, there is a brief account of Germany’s political culture around November 1918. The third section concerns her theory of the mass strike, in particular the role of the mass strike in advancing society towards revolution. The fourth section concerns Luxemburg’s acceptance of many of the tenets of liberalism except, of course, economic liberalism, as seen, for example, in her proposals for the KPD. A fifth, brief, part will discuss what actually happened in Germany leading up to the failure of the attempt at revolution by Luxemburg and Liebknecht – if, indeed, what happened can be so described. This party is headed “Kautsky versus Luxemburg”, because much of the explanation for the overall failure of revolutionary attempts in Germany has to do with the merits of Kautsky’s arguments. In my concluding section I discuss what might have followed on from a successful German revolution, and also whether, by dividing the German working class, Luxemburg played a role in facilitating the rise of Hitler.

Luxemburg’s economic theory.

It would not be appropriate in a paper such as this to provide a general introduction to Rosa Luxemburg. Suffice it to say that, apart from what is discussed below, she was a leading figure in the SPD in the years leading up to the First World War. Because she was Polish, she had greater familiarity with Polish and Russian affairs than other SPD leaders. The SPD’s leading theorist was Kautsky. He followed
a theory that German industry was developing rapidly. As a result, the German proletariat was also expanding rapidly, as was the vote for the SPD. In due course this vote would be so large that the SPD would be in such a strong position in the Reichstag that it would be able to bring about a relatively peaceful transition to socialism. Luxemburg had doubts about the idea of a peaceful transition, as will be seen below. However, her economic theory has a certain similarity to Kautsky’s in the sense that, if accepted, it would demonstrate that capitalism could not simply go on expanding indefinitely.

Whether wrong or right, Luxemburg was undoubtedly an outstanding Marxist theorist – in his brief obituary Lenin described her as an eagle compared to other people who were merely sparrows. Part of this assessment is that she was an outstanding economic theorist. Briefly, Rosa Luxemburg’s economic view about collapse is premised on the idea that it would be impossible to realise surplus value in a world which had become entirely capitalist. This view is brilliantly argued in her book *The Accumulation of Capital* (Luxemburg, 1951). The book displays an impressive grasp both of Marx’s economic theory and of that found in a wide range of critics of Marx. As an economist Luxemburg was clearly on a par with contemporaries such as Hilferding or Lenin. That said, her theory is based on an analysis of expanded capitalist reproduction. She argues that this depends on the expansion of the market into areas not dominated by capitalism. Hence the conclusion that once the entire world has become capitalist, capitalist expansion would grind to a halt. In the edition above, Luxemburg’s book is introduced by the Cambridge Marxist economist Joan Robinson. She points out a series of logical flaws in Luxemburg’s economic analysis.

Contemporary readers of Luxemburg are likely to be sceptical about her analysis on the basis that it just doesn’t
seem to fit with the real world. The capitalist economy carried on expanding from the end of the Second World War through to 1989 in spite of the general ending of colonialism, and of communist economies being basically removed from the capitalist sphere for much of the period. Sub Saharan African countries, particularly, were largely marginalised by the main flows of trade. Since 1989 many of the biggest and most successful capitalist enterprises are very heavily based on knowledge rather than physical resources – consider Apple, Microsoft, Google and related companies, Facebook, and, by and large, companies traded on the NASDAQ. According to Marx, discontent with capitalism arises when capitalist relations of production turn into fetters on the forces of production. However, massive advances are occurring. The power and scope of computers and related devices has expanded enormously. Robots are increasingly used in industry. People can increasingly control their domestic environment using smart phones. Driverless cars are a real prospect. A range of medical advances is occurring, many of them based on use of computers.

Thus, there does not seem to be anything based on reproduction conditions to stop a purely capitalist world economy from carrying on expanding. Also, if it did become impossible to realise surplus value, the standard result is a capitalist crisis in which the value of goods goes down, or, indeed, they are physically destroyed until profitability is restored. Episodes of this sort are liable to lead to political instability, but there is nothing to stop them being resolved without some kind of catastrophe. Economic crises up to Rosa Luxemburg’s day had been resolved in the way described above without resulting in collapse, socialist revolution or barbarism.
Norman Geras in his discussion of Rosa Luxemburg (Geras, 1983a, p. 41) makes a point which is often made in arguments about continued capitalist expansion, which is that scientific advances can be put to evil uses. It is interesting in the light of his subsequent discussion of the Holocaust. The Holocaust was made much easier by a variety of innovations driven forward by capitalist advance, such as the development of railways, poison gas and so forth. However, Geras himself came to think in terms of a category of evil which is not purely explained by capitalism. Indeed, it is very difficult to explain the Holocaust in terms of some sort of purely capitalist rationality.

German political culture in 1918.

The view of Germany in both Luxemburg and amongst Marxists generally is unduly crude. Manhood suffrage was indeed a gift from above, meaning from the Prussian state under Bismarck. However, to simply regard this as a gift from the bourgeoisie ignores important features of German history. To start with, there was a thoroughly justified dread of instability, and an accompanying love of order. This was based on the religious disruptions which accompanied the Reformation. Lutherans challenged a corrupt religious order based on Catholicism. Luther himself came down on the side of authority, but Anabaptists had a role in Germany’s peasant war, and followers of Zwingli advocated a version of Protestantism founded much more on the community of believers than on Princes. The community of the faithful would thus be in charge rather than a secular ruler. (For one of many accounts of the impact of Luther, see Roper, 2016). A period of turmoil was resolved by the Peace of Augsburg (1555). This was founded on the principle that the secular ruler could determine the religion of the area he governed, but
that subjects who felt oppressed could leave for an area where their religious beliefs were more acceptable. From 1615 to 1645 this settlement broke down completely in the Thirty Years War. This was by no means a purely religious conflict, but religion played a substantial part in it. The effects on parts of Germany were devastating, and exacerbated in the 1640s by extreme weather conditions. The War was eventually basically resolved by the important Peace of Westphalia (1648). This reaffirmed the main principles of the Peace of Augsburg, but with the important additional principle that sovereign states should not interfere with the internal affairs of other states, an important principle of international relations subsequently (for details see, for example, Greengrass, 2014, pp. 440, 643, Wikipedia articles). The memory of this time and also of the French invasion during the Napoleonic wars left Germans with an understandable desire for peace and order.

A second part of German political culture was the issue of national unity. Germany was divided between many small city states and princely states, of which Prussia and Bavaria were the largest. A greater degree of unity was obviously desirable. The basic necessity was for a unity of customs, tariffs. This customs union (Zollverein) was agreed in 1834. Greater union was generally felt desirable. Marx and Engels and socialists and liberals generally hoped that this would be based on the southern German states, but it was actually achieved under Prussian leadership. This also raised the issue of where should be included. Germans lived in parts of Poland, indeed Königsburg was so far east that it has now become Kaliningrad, part of Russia. There was also the question of Austria and of the Sudetenland. Divided loyalties were therefore to be expected. In contrast, English, French and Spanish identities were generally more straightforward. Thinking about a British as opposed to an English identity, the
only land frontier of the UK as it stands today is in Northern Ireland, where there is, of course, considerable contention about national identity. Ambiguities and rivalries of this sort applied to many areas where Germans lived mingled with other peoples.

Third, more needs to be said about the Junkers, the legacy of Bismarck and the Kaiser. The Prussian government and upper civil service, together with the army, were essentially run by the Junkers. The Junkers were landowners from East Prussia. A characteristic pattern was for the oldest son of the estate owner to run the estate, while his younger brothers joined the Army or the civil service. Prussia had universal conscription, so that members of the government, civil servants and soldiers all enjoyed a common background of military service at some point. So far, this sounds like a description of a reactionary military caste. Officers were encouraged to develop a strong sense of honour, and to defend this through duelling, which was frequent. However, there was a very strong tradition, fostered by Prussian kings, and subsequently, with German unification, the Kaiser, who was also the king of Prussia, of public service, and of a strong sense of duty. The Kaiser was a constitutional monarch. His laws operated through the courts. The civil service had a very good reputation for efficient and neutral administration. Germany had excellent universities, and the ruling caste had a respect for higher education, including scientific education which was put to use with good effect in their country estates.

Bismarck, described by Engels as a “backwoods Prussian junker” (Marx and Engels, 1975, vol. 26, p. 475), dominated Prussian and subsequently German politics for some 30 years up to 1890. He had no political principles other than Prussian and personal aggrandisement. In many ways his policies were extremely successful. From 1864 through to 1870 Prussia
fought three wars, first against Denmark over Schleswig Holstein, then against Austria, and finally against France in 1870. In all of these the Prussian army was highly successful. Bismarck managed to manipulate the other states into attacking Prussia at a time of Prussian choosing, in a superb and complex diplomatic game of chess. Prussian victory in the war against Austria ensured that German unification would be carried out under Prussian leadership, and Wilhelm I became not merely King of Prussia but Kaiser of the German Empire. The war against France ended with Louis Napoleon Bonaparte III being taken prisoner, the end of the Second Empire in France, and with France paying very substantial reparations to Prussia which caused a boom followed by a bubble in Germany. Bismarck’s use of “blood and iron” to dominate Prussia’s neighbours obviously increased the prestige of the Prussian army.

Bismarck also introduced manhood suffrage for the lower houses of both the Reichstag and the Prussian parliament. This may have been a gift from above, but remember that in comparison Britain only achieved manhood suffrage in 1918, and the power of the Lords was only broken in 1911. This in turn led to the growth of both the SPD and the Catholic Centre party, both of which consequences Bismarck deplored. Bismarck responded to the growth of the SPD by banning it, which was not very effective at all. However, he also introduced the basics of a welfare state, including the best public education system in Europe, pensions and sickness insurance (The above account of Germany under Bismarck is basically a matter of straightforward historical record, but for an excellent account see Steinberg, 2012).

This is obviously very different indeed from the situation in czarist Russia. The czars regarded the acceptance of a
constitution as betraying their divine right and duty to rule. Russian military adventures depended on an ill-equipped steam roller of peasants, and the Russian state was not remotely a welfare state. The mass strike, therefore, was carried out in Russia by people with much less to lose than in Germany, and with no real reason to be loyal to the government.

**Luxemburg and the mass strike.**

The account which follows takes as its starting point Norman Geras’s defence of Luxemburg on the mass strike (Geras, 1983a). Geras says that in order to make sense of this conception one should disregard notions that Luxemburg had a metaphysical belief in the virtues of spontaneity. The best way to make sense of it is to think in terms of the distinction made by the German Social Democratic Party between minimum and maximum demands, and emphasise that it was necessary in some way to link the daily struggles of the masses and the achievement of socialism. She was particularly concerned that the party was concentrating exclusively upon the minimum programme (Geras, 1983a, pp. 113-115). From 1905 onwards, impressed by events in Russia, she came to regard the mass strike as the way of proceeding from one programme to the other (Geras, 1983a, p. 117). However, she agreed with Lenin that mass strikes and revolutionary situations were not something that could be called forth by parties or political leaderships (Geras, 1983a, p. 118. Geras’s account is strongly supported by a reading of Luxemburg herself and of two major biographies – see Luxemburg, 2014, locations 148, 202, 345, 722, 757, Nettl, 1966, pp. 502-504, Fröhlich, 1972, p. 109). In the past, groups influenced by
Trotsky and Luxemburg such as the British International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party were prone to call for mass strikes in very unpromising situations – they could be criticised for taking from Luxemburg the value of the mass strike, but not her reservations about calling up mass strikes for little reason.

Luxemburg certainly thought that the mass strike had an educational effect – a year of revolt had a greater effect than 30 years of Parliamentary and trade union struggle. This led her to say, in discussions at the founding conference of the KPD that the Russian masses had undergone political education through from 1905 to 1917, and therefore had a much greater level of maturity than that in Germany (Riddell, 1986, p. 176). Note that the Germans’ greater level of general education and literacy were apparently irrelevant. On the other hand she said that a mass strike would simply lead to demoralisation and confusion if the strike was not taken forward by a determined revolutionary leadership (Geras, 1983a, p. 129). Geras concludes on the issue of the mass strike that Rosa Luxemburg is part of the tradition of revolutionary Marxism along with Lenin and Trotsky (Geras, 1983a, p. 131). David McLellan is quite right to say that Geras rescues ‘Luxemburg from some rather patronising characterisations of her as entertaining an irrational fear faith in mass spontaneity’ (McLellan, ‘The Marxism of Norman Geras’ (McLellan, 2012, p. 32). Much of Luxemburg’s discussion of mass strikes dates from the years after the Russian revolution of 1905 where strikes played such a large role. Mass strikes also broke out in Germany, and Luxemburg was keen to see them taken forward as far as possible. However, obviously, none of them came really close to triggering off a revolution.

Luxemburg was also very much concerned with mass strikes during the failed attempt at revolution which lasted from
November 1918 through to the failure which also resulted in her murder in January 1919.

At this point we come back to the discussion of Bismarck and his legacy above. Even in the situation of defeat at the end of 1918, the Kaiser and the German regime had much more political credit than did the Czars. Germany had been defeated in the First World War, but, famously, German soldiers were still on foreign territory. There was less reason to see the war as a completely irresponsible military adventure. The legacy of legality, constitutionalism, and general care for the welfare of German citizens contrasted dramatically with the situation in Russia in October 1917. Willingness to engage in a mass strike in Germany was less of an indication of willingness to support revolutionary objectives than it had been in Russia. Notably, the very most successful mass strike in the years following the First World War came in response to the Kapp Putsch of March 1920. Workers who supported the SDP, the USPD and the Communists struck across Germany, supported by many from the middle classes such as civil servants. However, this was essentially in support of the Weimar constitution, and it put paid to the putsch within a few days.

This becomes particularly important in the failed revolutionary attempt. Luxemburg was personally tremendously popular, and if it was known that she was scheduled to speak at meetings it would guarantee a large audience. However, she and the other leaders of the Spartacists failed to pay sufficient attention to the question of which masses they were leading. According to Bouton (1921), an American journalist who was present in Germany throughout the First World War and for some of the subsequent years, followers seemed to be particularly attracted by the higher wages they awarded themselves out of public funds, and there was a strong suggestion that the Berlin police chief that they were committed to
defending was guilty of serious corruption. Other German workers regarded many of the Spartacists as layabouts interested in what they could get out of revolutionary activity. However Bouton was extremely unsympathetic to the Spartacists, and may have been simply repeating propaganda put out by their enemies.

At any rate, the issue of which masses they were leading, and what would be appropriate conduct if the striking masses seemed to be engaging in rash adventurism was crucial in deciding the fate of Luxemburg, Liebknecht and their followers. When the SDP union leader Ebert, who became president of the provisional government following the abdication of the Kaiser, ended up calling on Noske to organise military intervention against the Spartacists, they were fairly easily defeated by the Freikorps. A subsequent demonstration of support for what the government had done was very widely supported by members of all social classes including the working class.

Chris Harman’s depiction of the events of the Spartacist rising is helpful. Luxemburg, he says, regarded the demand for the overthrow of the SDP government as “... a propaganda slogan to rally the revolutionary proletariat rather than a tangible object of revolutionary action” – an immediate rising would chiefly be confined to Berlin. It would be a small-scale version of the Paris Commune (Harman, 1997, p. 74). However, such slogans could easily be misinterpreted. It also opened up the possibility of a figure such as Liebknecht getting swept away and demanding the actual seizure of power. As Luxemburg put it “Karl, how could you!” (E.g. Harman, 1997 p. 77). Effectively she was foisted by her own rhetoric. But she also thought that if the Spartacists showed that they were the most resolute fighters for the revolution it would stand them in good stead for subsequent revolutionary attempts (Harman, 1997, p. 87). Defeat in
revolution tends to be anything from extremely unpleasant to fatal for those involved, which suggests Luxemburg strategy might be flawed.

**Luxemburg and liberalism.**

Luxemburg was insistent that socialist democracy characterises the revolutionary process itself, and is not simply something to be postponed until a future socialist society (Geras, 1983a, pp. 160, 178). Luxemburg emerges from Geras’s pages as more of a democratic figure than, for example, Lenin – she expresses reservations about the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly (Geras, 1983a, p. 186). She insisted that the proletarian dictatorship must include a full set of democratic freedoms – elections, press freedom, freedom of assembly, freedom of dissent (Geras, 1983a, p. 188). More extensive reading about Luxemburg thoroughly vindicates Geras’s views. Luxemburg’s image of post-revolutionary society was plainly one in which there would be a plurality of (at least) socialist parties, and a high degree of free speech, and, presumably, most of the other standard accompaniments of liberal democracy (she basically made this point in opposition to Trotsky – see Fröhlich, 1972, pp. 248 et seq., Nettl, 1966, p. 701-703). Luxemburg was also consistently opposed to terror, both in Germany and in Russia (see, for example, Nettl, 1966, p. 732). when Luxemburg presented a proposed general programme of the KPD to its inaugural Congress, one of its clauses was:

The Spartakusbund will never take over governmental power except in accordance with the clear and explicit will of the great majority of the proletarian masses throughout Germany, except in accordance with their conscious approval of its views, aims, and fighting methods (quoted in Fröhlich, 1972,
Another indication of Luxemburg’s views was the revolutionary programme which she drafted for the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania during the Russian Revolution of 1905. Soviets featured only as a means to revolution, not as a goal. A full range of liberal freedoms was included, together with the election of officials at level, the replacement of the standing army by a popular militia (see Nettl, 1966, p. 340).

**Kautsky versus Luxemburg and Liebknecht.**

As indicated above, Luxemburg was the main author of the initial programme of the KPD. Together with her other writings at the same time, the programme argued strongly that the appropriate democratic form for a revolutionary government was a system of Soviets on the lines of those which had been developing in various parts of Germany. Commitment to the constituent assembly, on the other hand was effectively commitment to maintaining the capitalist system. Here are two typical quotations from Rosa Luxemburg, found in Harman, 1997, p. 66):

> we are now in the midst of a revolution, and the National Assembly is a counter-revolutionary fortress erected against the revolutionary proletariat. Our task is to take this fortress by storm and raze it to the ground.

> ... we must utilise the elections and the platform of the National Assembly itself... Our aim participating in the National Assembly must be to expose and roundly denounced all the tricks and machinations of this fine assembly, to reveal its counter-revolutionary activities step-by-step to the masses, and to appeal to them to intervene and force a decision.
This line of argument can be found in the first edition of *Die Rote Fahne*, the Berlin and subsequently national newspaper of the Spartacus League, and consistently subsequently in writing from the Spartacists, Luxemburg and the KPD (Riddell, 1986, pp. 57, 79, 92, 123, 195). For Luxemburg this was linked to the idea that the socialisation of the means of production could only be achieved through mass struggle in every factory (Riddell, 1986, p. 120). A factor in the preference for the councils rather than the constituent assembly may well have been that at the end of the war Germany had about 12 million workers and 13 million peasants. The peasants tended to be more conservative, and neither the SPD nor the Spartacists at gained much support in the countryside. Neither had really developed much of an effective peasant policy. This contrasts very strongly with Lenin’s very extensive work on the peasantry.

This line of argument was criticised by Karl Kautsky. Part of his argument was that the electoral basis of the Soviets varied from one place to another and one section of workers to another. Also, as professional people were able through their work to be part of the Soviet system, the supposed advantage of the Soviet system that it excluded capitalists did not present a clear dividing line (Riddell, p. 95). (Indeed, Liebknecht himself pointed out that the “peasants’ councils” were dominated by middle and large landowners – Riddell, p. 87). If the Soviet system was intended to be permanent, then it should certainly include housewives, peasants and servants (Riddell, p. 99). Kautsky pointed out that at this rate it would be getting quite close to the universal franchise proposed for the constituent assembly and subsequently for the Reichstag.

According to Luxemburg and the KPD programme, the immediate function of the Soviets on the economic front was that they should take over and administer all economic enterprises. Kautsky argued that such an attempt would be
chaotic, and would almost certainly result in a renewed blockade, and possibly also in Allied intervention. The assumption on the other side was that the Soviets would send wheat from Russia, and, presumably would be able to come to the aid of the German workers in the event of invasion. Kautsky was concerned about the potential for chaos, and had a picture where economic enterprises will be taken over gradually over a period of years.

This dispute obviously raises some extremely substantial issues. Although Kautsky had obviously disgraced himself at the beginning of the First World War, his arguments here have a great deal of merit. Members and supporters of the KPD were a tiny minority of those elected via the Soviet system. It therefore looks as though, if elections to the Soviets remained genuinely democratic, the majority of those elected would belong either to the SPD or the USPD. It is by no means clear that a system of Soviets would guarantee that the KPD line would prevail. In an earlier article, another SPD writer held out the prospect of Spartacist dictatorship if Germany were governed by councils (Riddell, 1986, p. 77). Although Germany did not lose the First World War in the dramatic fashion of Russia, she definitely lost. There is every reason to think that the capitalists of France, Britain and the United States would be thoroughly alarmed to see universal and almost certainly chaotic nationalisation in Germany, and would therefore orchestrate some form of intervention. And, of course, they would still want the various forms of compensation specified in the Treaty of Versailles.

Conclusion.

This section briefly discusses first, what might have happened in the event of a successful revolution in Germany, and second, whether by splitting the German working class thanks to the setting up of the KPD Luxemburg contributed to the failure to resist the rise of Hitler.
The first of the two most promising revolutionary opportunities in Germany immediately after the First World War was the failed Revolution of 1918/19, in which trade unionists in Berlin triggered off an attempt at revolution, but one in which the working class generally was not committed. Liebknecht lent his name to this doomed enterprise, and Luxemburg felt constrained to follow the masses, even though these masses were only some of the masses generally. The revolution was overthrown fairly easily by the Freikorps. Given their reputation, the Freikorps would probably have been very keen to murder Luxemburg and Liebknecht whatever they had said, but in supporting the revolutionary attempt they were effectively signing their death warrants. Jones (2004) produces a very useful brief history of the Freikorps. The left in Germany had every reason to be thoroughly alarmed that Noske, the SDP Ministry of Defence, felt constrained to use them to deal with threats. They originated in the storm troopers who had developed during the First World War. They were an elite group in the Army, with better rations and conditions, and a strong feeling of brotherhood, so that, for example, ordinary soldiers addressed their offices by their first names or as “du”, which was quite unprecedented in the Prussian army. They were proud of themselves and enjoyed combat. They remained together at the end of the war, and even when particular units were disbanded they tended to re-form. They were strong believers in the idea of the November traitors, the SPD, Jews, capitalists, communists etc who had stabbed Germany in the back (Jones, 2004, location 285). In putting down the Spartacist revolt between 1200 and 1500 people died, the vast majority of them murdered by the Freikorps (Jones, 2004, location 1589). This pattern of brutal repression, involving massacres of anybody perceived to have anything to do with a revolt, was repeated right across Germany.
It could be argued that this revolutionary failure occurred at least in part because the KPD was so new, it had not put down the extensive roots in the working class necessary to gain the requisite support, and input from Moscow was limited. In contrast, by 1923 the KPD was more developed. It had put down more extensive roots. Its leaders were getting more advice from Moscow. However, a planned attempt at revolution relied on getting at least some support in the Soviets from the SPD, and when this was not forthcoming the revolutionary attempt was cancelled. (For a good description of the 1923 preparations and fiasco see Chris Harman, 1997, chapter? “The German October”. His account of the lack of support from the SDP is on pp. 286 et seq.). The potentially revolutionary situation had been triggered off by hyperinflation, and the leading members of the bourgeoisie concluded that this ridiculous rate of inflation was no longer in their interests, and therefore lend support to measures which stabilised the currency. The revolutionary opportunity thus passed.

If either of these revolutionary attempts had been successful it would have faced at least the following problems:

- organising the food supply. It is certainly possible that the Allies might have restored the blockade, and it is open to question whether grain from Russia would have restored the deficit.
- Germany still owed massive reparations, and the French had occupied the Ruhr. British workers had famously opposed armed intervention in Russia. Whether they would have felt the same about Germany, and whether French workers and soldiers would have agreed with them is uncertain.
- Immediate, chaotic and universal nationalisation would almost certainly have led to a drop in production levels.
The SPD historically had demanded electoral democracy in Germany, and the constituent assembly (1918) had the task of setting it up. By 1923 Germany enjoyed electoral democracy under the Weimar constitution. If the KPD intended to install a Soviet system to replace electoral democracy they might well face widespread opposition from members of the working class as well as other classes.

Chris Harman in his book *The Lost Revolution* links the failure of revolution in West with the development of Stalinism in Russia. However, looking at the situation in 1918, his argument is that if there had been a KPD with a mass base and the proper line, then there was the potential for a revolution, which also applies to 1920 and 1923 (Harman, 1997 pp. 299-300). For 1923 he follows Trotsky’s argument that you cannot be certain whether or not there is a revolutionary situation unless you make an attempt at revolution (Harman, 1997, p. 295). Others might well see this as adventurism, particularly given the murderous activities of the Freikorps between 1919 and 1923.

It is debatable, in the immediate aftermath of a German revolution how much help the Bolsheviks could have given. Conversely, assuming that a successful German revolution was in due course able to overcome the list of possible problems outlined above, it would be some time before Germany would be in a position to lend substantial assistance to the Soviet Union.

The other question to be raised in conclusion is founding the KPD and splitting the German working class Rosa Luxemburg eventually facilitated the rise of Hitler. Once the German working class was split between the KPD, which in due course developed a mass base, and the SPD, it proved very difficult to achieve a sufficient degree of cooperation between the two
parties to resist threats from the right. In the years immediately after the failure of the Spartacist revolution of 1918/19, there are strong indications that a majority of workers did not understand the intricacies of the divisions between the SPD, the new SPD and the KPD, and very much favoured socialist unity.

I now want to briefly engaged in a Chris Harman style flight of fancy. Supposing that Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacists and the USPD had insisted on joining the SPD in governing Germany – she does indeed say at one point that she and Liebknecht would be willing to enter the government provided it would carry out principled socialist policies – these would almost certainly have involved immediate and widespread socialisation of the means of production, and was almost certainly not intended very seriously – see Riddell, p. 129). Suppose further that the KPD had gone along with accepting the constituent assembly and electoral democracy, there was the potential for a formidable alliance. The Spartacists and USPD could put some backbone into the SPD, encouraging them to make a serious start on nationalisation. They could also insist on either purging or restraining the monarchists who occupied the upper reaches of the military, the civil service and much of local government. As Kautsky points out, the Soviets could play a very helpful role in this. Finally, the SPD government in 1918 was faced with the problem that it had no way of enforcing its will against armed groups in rebellion. As explained above, for this reason the Ministry of Defence, Noske, turned to the Freikorps. Many members of the Freikorps went on to become the core of Hitler’s SA. These were emphatically not people any democratic government, let alone one from the left, would want defending its security. If the Spartacists had encouraged workers to join a force which was loyal to the government but also to the socialist revolution, then law and order could have been
maintained without the traumatic consequences which actually occurred.

This may be a counterfactual hypothesis similar to wondering what would have happened if the victorious powers at Versailles had had the good sense to institute something on the lines of the Marshall plan which stabilised Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War – in other words so far from historical reality as not to be worth considering. Perhaps Harman, my hypothesis and the Marshall plan hypothesis are all beyond the bounds of plausibility?

References.


