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The "Forgotten" German Revolution: A Conceptual Map

Gaard Kets and James Muldoon

The German Revolution of 1918–1919 marks an important turning point in European politics, yet it remains neglected in historical scholarship. This oversight is surprising given its significant impact on the history of Europe and indeed the world. The revolution led to the end of the First World War, transformed the German *Kaiserreich* into a fledgling democratic republic, and created a spiral of conflict and violence that ultimately contributed to the rise of Nazism (Jones 2016, p. 4). The lack of popular memory of this historic event led a recent editor to name this political transformation of Germany the "Forgotten Revolution" (Gallus 2010). Older German textbooks often mention the defeat of Germany in the war and the establishment of the Weimar Republic without reference to the period of upheavals and political

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contestation that occurred in between (Pelz 2018, p. xix). What remains neglected is the key role a mass movement of soldiers and workers played in challenging the German Admiralty and bringing an end to the war. It was primarily through the political agency of ordinary people that Germany was transformed from an autocratic and deeply hierarchical society into a democratic republic with universal suffrage and social rights. However, the revolution was immediately overshadowed by the seismic events of the rise of Nazism and the Second World War. The centenary anniversary of the revolution offers an opportunity to reflect on this important event and to take stock of the significance of the revolution on the development of political thought.

This book aims to examine the political theorists and actors of the German Revolution in order to assess their contribution to the history of political thought and to contemporary debates in political theory. The intention is to fill the current lacuna in historical knowledge of the political thought of this period. We claim that the German Revolution was a decisive event that challenged many of the assumptions of socialist thought and led to a wide range of new political strategies, theoretical insights and institutional proposals. Returning to the political events of the German Revolution enables a more nuanced understanding of the development of political thought during this era. It sheds light on important developments as they unfolded in Europe following the collapse of the Second International and the growing division of international socialist thought. It also broadens the terms of debate from a canonical set of socialist theorists (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky) to other important contributors to left-wing political thought. In geographic terms, it expands the focus of political analysis from the Russian Revolution to consider the widespread revolutionary struggles occurring across Europe from 1917 to 1923. Important political debates were occurring in Berlin, Bremen, Munich, Hamburg, Amsterdam and Vienna, which were all closely connected to political events as they unfolded in Germany and neighbouring states. It also challenges the view of "Orthodox Marxism" as a fixed and stable ideology characterised by economic determinism and teleological development. Re-examining debates between Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg, among others, calls into question the view that the Second International had a single official doctrine that was widely accepted within the European socialist parties.

In the early twentieth century, socialists across Europe expected Germany to spearhead the international revolution. With the largest and

most organised industrial working class in the world, Germany had been anticipated by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* to be the most likely starting point for a proletarian revolution. Germany was, in both strategic and symbolic terms, the centrepiece of socialist plans for ushering in an age of world revolution. Lenin (1965, p. 72) famously noted that "without revolution in Germany we shall perish." Trotsky (1929) also considered that "[o]nly the victory of the proletariat in the West would protect Russia from bourgeois restoration and ensure the establishment of socialism."

The establishment of a democratic republic in Germany created a political order that was more democratic than any previous system in Germany. Yet the failure to achieve a socialist society had dramatic effects on the course of the Russian Revolution and the possibilities of the international spread of socialism. Arguably it was the defeat of the German Revolution rather than the success of the Russian that proved more influential over the development of Western Marxism, initiating a "dialectic of defeat" that generated a variety of alternative Marxisms (Jacoby 2002). From Antonio Gramsci to Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School, the need to explain why socialist revolution had failed in Europe occupied a central position in their political analyses. The German Revolution was an unstable and contradictory period in which hopes for political transformation were intermingled with fears of violence and a longing for peace and stability. This book returns to this important event in order to examine its impact on the development of political thought.

Historical Introduction

The extended suffering created by the First World War placed enormous pressure on the legitimacy of state governments, which eventually led to the fall of the Russian Tsar in February 1917. The rise of Bolshevism sent out shockwaves across Europe and threatened the military elite which had been governing Germany throughout the war. The year of 1918 witnessed a rapid intensification of political and social tensions in Germany that divided German society and led to increased pressure to end the war. While emperor Wilhelm II had appointed liberal aristocrat, Prince Max von Baden, as the new Chancellor to lead peace negotiations with the Allied Powers, the German Admiralty was vehemently opposed to an unconditional surrender. On 24 October 1918, Reinhardt Scheer,

Chief of Naval Staff, issued an order for the navy fleet in Kiel to engage in a final *Todesfahrt* [suicide mission] against the superior British Royal Navy. The sailors in Kiel refused and mutinied against their officers, and were soon accompanied by revolutionary soldiers and workers. By the evening of 4 November 1918, the city of Kiel had been taken by the revolutionaries.

What started as a localised mutiny quickly spread across the country through workers' and soldiers' councils and led to the abdication of the Kaiser and the declaration of a republic on 9 November 1918. Indicative of the divided nature of the revolutionary forces, two separate declarations were announced on the same day. The first was by Philipp Scheidemann of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) who pronounced Germany a republic from a window of the Reichstag in Berlin, against the wishes of politically conservative SPD party leader, Friedrich Ebert, who held hopes that the monarchy might still be preserved (Jones 2016, p. 13). The second declaration was by revolutionary socialist and member of the Spartacus League, Karl Liebknecht, who declared Germany a free *socialist* republic from the Royal Palace in the same city (Kuhn 2012, p. 27).

The revolution took both the authorities and revolutionaries by surprise, leaving established political parties and trade unions struggling to come to terms with the rapid pace of unfolding events. It was initially met with praise by liberals and progressives, although there were also fears about the potential for violence and bloodshed. Theodor Wolff, liberal editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, wrote:

> The greatest of all revolutions, like a suddenly rising storm, has crushed the Imperial regime with everything that belonged to it, above and below. It can be called the greatest of all revolutions, because never has such a sturdily built, solidly walled Bastille been taken in such a siege. Only a week ago there was a military and civil administrative apparatus that was so branched, so interlinked, so deeply ingrained that it seemed to have secured its rule beyond the changing of times. The grey cars of the officers were speeding through the streets of Berlin, in the squares stood policemen like the pillars of power, a giant military organization seemed to embrace everything, a seemingly invincible bureaucracy sat enthroned in the offices and ministries. Yesterday morning, at least in Berlin, everything was still there. Yesterday afternoon, none of it existed anymore. (Wolff 1918)

Soldiers and workers had spontaneously formed councils, which held de facto power across the country during the initial weeks of the revolution. The day after the declaration of the republic, elections were held in the Circus Busch assembly hall, which led to the creation of two new institutions. The first was a Council of People's Deputies, consisting of six deputies, which acted as a provisional government. The second was the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which was chaired by Revolutionary Shop Steward Richard Müller, and represented the power that had developed within the council movements. The Executive Council had the authority to appoint and dismiss the six People's Deputies and the right to supervise the operation of the ministries, but in practice, the Council of People's Deputies assumed governmental functions and often disregarded resolutions made in the Executive Council. The growing discord between the moderate People's Deputies, largely controlled by the SPD, and the more radical leaning Executive Council was the source of ongoing political tension.

The primary political division of the progressive forces was between the SPD leadership, led by Friedrich Ebert, who sought to prevent the development of a more radical revolution along the lines of the Bolshevist model, and radical council delegates, who pushed for the democratisation and socialisation of the country. The SPD were influenced by the threat of a Bolshevisation of the German Revolution and a descent into what they called "Russian conditions" of violence and scarcity. On 9 November 1918, Ebert made a secret pact with General Groener to prevent more radical reforms in exchange for Ebert's protection of the privileged position of the armed services. This deal was to prove decisive in the struggle over the future form of the German state and the relationship between the council movements and existing state authorities. Friedrich Ebert issued a statement on 10 November 1918 for all government officials to remain at their posts. In practice, various compromises were reached in different local settings between workers' councils and local authorities, with the vast majority of officials remaining in place and many councils exercising only "control" functions over their activities. This meant that while the councils retained the right of a final say in the activities of government officials, in practice, these officials continued to carry out their work as before.

The SPD and the radicals were divided over plans for the future German state. The Ebert leadership argued for the creation of a parliamentary republic without significant changes to the economic system

or military. The radical delegates, on the other hand, advocated for power to be placed in a council system controlled by worker delegates with imperative mandates subject to immediate recall. They considered that more thoroughgoing measures of democratisation to the civil service, army and workplaces would be necessary to ensure the creation of a socialist republic. This question of "National Assembly or Council System" was to be decided at the First German Congress of Workers and Soldiers' Councils, which commenced on 16 December 1918. The weeks between the start of the revolution in November 1918 and the National Congress in December 1918 are often characterised as the first phase of the German Revolution.

When representatives from the councils met at the Congress, a large majority supported the Social Democrats' policy of organising elections for a national parliament which were to take place on 19 January 1919. The provisional government had been divided between delegates of the majority faction SPD and a minor party, the Independent Socialist Party of Germany (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, USPD), which had split from the SPD during the war. Growing disputes between the SPD and USPD led to the USPD leaving the joint provisional government, which increased instability and led to more anti-government demonstrations in early January. The outcome of the Congress outraged radicals who thought that the revolution had been betrayed by the SPD leadership. In January 1919, many left radicals united in the newly founded German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD) and decided to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections. This second phase of the revolution was characterised by bloody confrontations between the central government and revolutionaries. As part of the "Spartacus Uprisings" in January 1919, the Social Democrats' newspaper office was occupied by armed workers leading Ebert's government to issue orders to crush the rebellion with force. Several days later Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were arrested and killed by far-right paramilitary *Freikorps* that cooperated with government troops. It remains disputed the extent to which the SPD ordered or approved of these specific executions.

In the National Assembly on 19 January 1919, a majority of voters supported non-socialist parties, although the SPD achieved the highest vote of any party with 163 seats and 37.9% of the vote. The assembly sat in Weimar to avoid the revolutionary tumult of Berlin and drafted a Constitution which came into effect in August 1919. The communists

regarded the revolution as derailed and betrayed and were dismayed by the role of the Social Democratic Party. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, also distanced themselves from the revolutionary origins of their government, in order to present themselves as a serious, mature governing party. Illustrative of this contested legacy of the German Revolution, Germany’s founding was never celebrated on the 9 November, but with a national *Verfassungstag* [Constitution Day] on 11 August, commemorating the day President Friedrich Ebert signed the new constitution in 1919 (Gallus 2010, p. 17).

Political Parties During the Revolution

The political ideologies of participants in the German Revolution have not been unpacked with the same rigour and insight as other key historical eras. While differences between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks or the Federalists and anti-Federalists are well known in political theory, the same could not be said about the strategic and ideological differences between political parties and groups—the SPD, USPD, Spartacus League and Revolutionary Shop Stewards—who played significant roles in the German Revolution.

The largest socialist party in Germany, the SPD, had split in 1916 over ongoing conflicts about the war in April 1914 into a majority group (the SPD) and a minority group (the USPD, founded in 1917). The USPD contained members who represented a broad constellation of radical political ideologies. At one end, the International Group (renamed Spartacus League on 11 November 1918) and left-wing radicals (*Linksradikalen*) from Bremen and Hamburg were formally members of the USPD, although they frequently organised independently of the party and split from the party on 31 December 1918 to form the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschland*, KPD). The Revolutionary Shop Stewards were a group of organised labourers in Berlin, probably numbering 80–100, who were formally members of the USPD, but also acted independently.

We identify six main ideological formations during the first weeks of the Revolution:

1. The pro-Russian Spartacus Group with the Bremen and Hamburg radicals
2. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards (left-wing USPD)

3. The Marxist "centre" of Karl Kautsky and Hugo Haase (right-wing USPD)
4. The Ebert-Scheidemann-led SPD
5. Liberal and progressive political parties
6. Conservative and restorative forces in support of the old Empire.

The Spartacus League, whose most notable members included Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Clara Zetkin, Paul Levi and Leo Jogiches, were a radical faction within the USPD who had opposed the war and organised anti-war protests and strikes. Their goal during the revolution was to create a council republic along the lines of the Bolshevik model. They called for the "replacement of all political organs and authorities of the former regime by delegates of the workers' and soldiers' councils" (Luxemburg 1918). Their programme at the outset of the revolution was to empower workers' councils and act with haste to destroy the power base of the old elite. They believed that the realisation of socialism required widespread social and political transformation carried out by the masses. For this reason, they opposed the establishment of a national assembly as an attempt by the bourgeoisie to limit the ongoing spread of the revolution and hinder efforts to transform Germany into a socialist republic. On 20 November, The newspaper of the Spartacus League, *Die Rote Fahne*, published the following:

> The national assembly is a means to rob the proletariat of its power, to paralyze its class dynamics, and to let its socialist objective evaporate in blue haze. The alternative is to put all power into the hands of the proletariat, to turn the revolution into a decisive class struggle, and to pave the way for a socialist society. For this purpose, the political rule of the great masses of the workers, the dictatorship of the workers' and soldiers' councils, has to be established. One is either for or against socialism, for or against the national assembly—there is no in between. (Quoted in Kuhn 2012, p. 71)

In contrast to the Spartacists, the left-wing radicals in Hamburg and Bremen had remained outside the USPD and in fact opposed the Spartacists who did join. The radicals organised around the journal *Arbeiterpolitik* (Workers' Politics, founded in the summer of 1916). Its editor was Johann Knief who published articles of theorists such as Anton Pannekoek and Karl Radek. As a result, the radicals were weary of disciplined and centralised party leadership and instead advocated

independent, bottom-up working-class action and thought. Instead of party and union, the International Communists of Germany (*Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands*, IKD), as the group called itself from 10 November 1918 onwards) called for the creation of “unity organisations” that combined party and union in one. During the first month of the revolution, this led to a distance between the Spartacists and radicals, until they finally decided to merge in the final days of 1918 (Engel 2017).

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards held a similar position to the Spartacus League insofar as they also advocated for the establishment of a council republic, but there were differences in their approach to tactics and strategy. Karl Liebknecht criticised the Stewards for meeting secretly, acting as an underground group and failing to publicise their revolutionary activities. In turn, the Stewards argued that they had an organised base of workers who they could turn out to protests, whereas the Spartacus League lacked a strong following among the workers and consistently failed to mobilise large numbers of workers (Müller 2012a, p. 78; Jones 2016, p. 82). The Revolutionary Shop Stewards were strongly rooted in the factory floors and among an organised and skilled section of the workers, particularly metal workers, who had proved significant in revolutionary actions in Berlin. With notable members including Richard Müller, Ernst Däumig and Emil Barth, the Stewards held one seat on the Council of People’s Delegates (Barth) and the chair of the Executive Council (Müller).

They issued their political programme on 17 November 1918, which set out the following guidelines for the revolution:

> Workers and soldiers have removed the old governmental system. In the revolutionary organization of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils the new state power is taking shape. This power must be secured and expanded so that the achievements of the revolution will benefit the entire working class. This cannot happen by transforming the German state into a bourgeois democratic republic. The German state has to become a proletarian republic on the grounds of a socialist economy. The wish of the bourgeoisie to elect and install a national assembly as soon as possible is destined to rob the workers of the fruits of the revolution. (Müller 2012b, p. 33)

While the Spartacus League never developed institutional designs of a council system, Müller and Däumig produced a number of models

during 1919 for a "pure" council system, which they published in their journal, *Der Arbeiter-Rat* (The Workers' Council) among other publications (Hoffrogge 2014, p. 109). The council system was intended to replace liberal parliamentary institutions with a dual system of economic and political councils that would be organised in a pyramidal scheme. They argued that the current revolutionary workers' councils could become state institutions which would only be open to workers and would represent the dominance of the working class.

The USPD contained another faction represented by Hugo Haase, Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding. This right-wing faction with the USPD split with the SPD, but did not support the establishment of a full council system. They supported a national assembly, but also saw a role for the workers' councils in a parliamentary republic. Hilferding argued that a continuation of a council system would exclude other classes from participation in government and was not a superior alternative to universal suffrage and parliamentary democracy. The council system suffered from problems of democratic exclusion with peasants, the unemployed, women engaged in unpaid labour and some professions excluded from decision-making. He also argued that in strategic terms it would likely lead to terror and civil war. In "National Assembly and Council Assembly," Karl Kautsky also argued for the benefits of elections with universal suffrage to a national assembly, but saw an ongoing role for workers' councils in a parliamentary republic:

> it is no less important that the popular masses energetically participate in this activity, strengthening the power of the representatives in parliament and spurring on their zeal with constant pressure from without. … Moreover, the workers councils are uniquely competent to safeguard proletariat class interests … the actual workers' councils would retain important political functions. … Therefore it is not a question of either national assembly or workers councils, but *both*. (Kautsky 1986, pp. 100–101)

Kautsky believed that workers' councils would establish an important basis for institutionalised pressure from below on parliamentary institutions in addition to advocating for the interests of workers. The right-wing USPD supported socialisation, but argued for a more cautious approach than the Spartacus League and emphasised the need for careful planning and an increase in overall levels of production. Yet during the revolution, this group exercised little influence as they were

isolated between moderates and radicals with only a limited connection to organised workers.

The party that exercised the most decisive influence over the course of the revolution was the SPD. Led by Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann, the SPD controlled three of the seats of the Council of People's Deputies and a majority of delegates who attended the National Congress in December 1918. The following pamphlet details their support for elections to a national assembly:

> Every day that delays the constituent national assembly also delays peace, prolongs the occupation of German territory, and deepens the food crisis. If we want bread, we need peace. If we want peace, we need the constituent national assembly and freely elected representatives of the German people. Peace, freedom, and bread were the goals of the proletarian uprising of November 9. Peace, freedom, and bread were the demands that brought victory. Those who prevent the constituent national assembly from forming rob the workers of peace, freedom, and bread; they take away the immediate fruits of the revolution; they are counterrevolutionaries. (Quoted in Kuhn 2012, p. 66)

Their goal was for the return to peace and order through a parliamentary democracy supported by independent trade unions, but with little change to the army, civil service of workplaces. They sought to avoid comprehensive structural reforms and opted instead for limited social reforms such as an 8-hour workday, unemployment benefits and increased protections for labourers. The SPD strove to direct the election away from revolutionary transformation and "as rapidly as possible into the calmer channel of an election campaign" (Kolb 1988, p. 11).

The SPD were supported by the liberal and progressive parties of the middle class who saw the SPD as the best vehicle to deliver parliamentary elections and to avoid more thoroughgoing economic reforms. There were a number of liberal and progressive parties who changed their name immediately after the revolution. Parts of the National Liberal Party and the Progressive People's Party combined to form the German People's Party, while other members of these groups formed the German Democratic Party. The liberal parties all supported calls for a national election and opposed the continuation of the workers' councils. Richard Müller noted that "they demanded quiet, order, security, individual freedom, freedom of conscience, protection of private property, protection of the middle class, etc." (Müller 2012b, p. 72).

There was a strong influence of neo-Kantian philosophy among liberals as well as social democrats, which had developed in academic circles. According to this ideology, workers were new citizens that were given control over their lives through new rights of self-government. The Weimar Republic was based on the enlightenment ideals associated with this body of thought, which conceived of citizens as endowed with certain rights and responsibilities. Carl Lindow wrote in *Vorwärts* on 22 December 1918 of the "Revolution Verpflichtet!" [duty-bound Revolution]: "Restrictions, to which one voluntarily decides, bear only half the weight of forced ones. *Therefore be moderate with wage demands!*" (Lindow 1918). There was an expectation among liberals that workers would become new citizens able to participate in a system of self-governance and self-control (Föllmer 2018). One strategy of the liberal bourgeoisie was to develop councils, committees and interest groups that mimicked the revolutionary forms of organisation of the working class. Although the main aim of most of these organisations was to steer the revolution towards a national assembly and to resist the power of the radical workers' councils, there were groups of liberals and democrats that were genuinely concerned with democratising German politics and saw a future for councils in the new German state (Bieber 1992).

Other centrist and right-leaning parties also stood for election to the National Assembly. The SPD joined into a coalition with the German Democratic Party and the German Centre Party to form the first government of the Weimar era. Richard Müller argued that there was a degree of opportunism in the actions of many of the liberal and centrist parties at the time:

> Only four weeks before the revolution, these people still opposed general, equal, and secret suffrage. Suddenly, their love for equal rights and democracy—the 'fundamental rights of the people'—knew no boundaries. This, of course, included dramatic demands to respect their own rights as "equals"; after all, each citizen had a right to express his opinion in speech and writing. (Müller 2012b, p. 72)

Finally, there were still groups within Germany that held restorative ambitions and supported the monarchy and the old institutions and values of the German Empire. The German National People's Party drew supporters from rural populations but also conservative forces in Germany's eastern provinces. It was supported by the large industrialists

and Junkers and also catered to anti-Semitic sentiment in the middle classes. Although it outwardly supported a parliamentary republic in 1918, during 1919 it quickly cemented into an anti-Weimar party.

Historiography of the German Revolution

There are a number of early German studies on the revolution dating from the 1920s (Bernstein 1921; Gutmann 1922; Müller 1924–1925). However, after the 1920s, studies of the German Revolution suffered a significant decline. In the years up to and immediately following the Second World War, the revolution in Germany remained a largely neglected topic of research for historians. Walter Tormin's (1954) excellent study remains an exception. He argued that the takeover of power by Bolsheviks had never been a serious danger in Germany and that the councils were actually an attempt to radically democratise German society. In the 1960s, historians such as Kolb (1962), Oertzen (1963) and Rürup (1968) began to demonstrate that the German revolutionaries were animated not by a desire to follow the example of the Russian Revolution, but to democratise authority structures and increase citizen control over social institutions. The wave of publications in the 1960s coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the councils and was inspired by the growth of the student and democratic movements at the time. These publications sought new interpretations of the revolutionary movements as a way of exploring different possibilities for democratic socialist politics. However, after this short burst of publications, there was again a decline in historical scholarship.

With the exception of a few important studies by Ulrich Kluge (1975), Wolfgang Mommsen (1978) and Heinrich August Winkler (1984), there has only been a recent revival of historical interest in the German Revolution (Niess 2013; Führer et al. 2013). Ralf Hoffrogge (2014) published a groundbreaking study of Richard Müller and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. Mark Jones (2016) examined the role of fear and violence in the German Revolution, with a meticulous study of newspapers and egodocuments written during the events. William A. Pelz (2018) highlighted the important role played by ordinary citizens in the uprising and has stressed that the council movements were animated by the passions and desires of everyday workers. With the centenary of the revolution in 2018, the revolutionary events of 1918–1919 will inevitably be viewed from a new historical lens. Some interesting new

pathways for historical research are the issue of gender and the revolutionary subject, questions of media and communications, and questions of culture, symbolism and rhetoric in the revolution (Stalmann 2016). However, little of this historical research on the German Revolution has focussed specifically on the political theories of the Revolution or examined its contribution to contemporary debates.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into three parts reflecting different thematic concerns. The first part contains chapters that offer a new historical perspective on the revolution, seeking to open new issues up to theoretical analysis. The chapters in this part analyse topics and areas traditionally overlooked within the historiography. For example, the German Revolution is often told (by men) as a tale of a male revolutionary subject, which overlooks women's important contribution to revolutionary events. In the first chapter, Helen Boak seeks to divert attention away from the focus on male revolutionary leaders and politicians by examining the crucial role of women in revolutionary events. The chapter investigates the role of activist women in Berlin, Munich, Brunswick; as well as women in the Spartacus Group, later the German Communist Party, and the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany. It also considers women's action as part of large street protests and in middle-class women's associations. The overall objective is to provide women with a more prominent place in the historical narrative of the German Revolution.

Robert Heynen contends that the German Revolution gave rise to new forms of organising on the radical right through the role of right-wing paramilitary units (*Freikorps*) in suppressing the revolutionary socialists. The political violence which followed from this event was shaped by the homosocial and profoundly misogynist culture of the right, which had roots in a longer colonial history. German colonialist narratives were bound up with anti-socialist discourse and found powerful expression in the revolutionary period of 1918–1921. With many of the *Freikorps* having served in colonial wars, the radical right movements adopted quasi-exterminationist political, economic and biopolitical strategies towards the left, while at the same time attempting to form a new "socialism" for the right.

The significance of the German Revolution is also often downplayed as a betrayed revolution which failed to have a significant influence on

world events. Donny Gluckstein argues that the German Revolution had a decisive impact on twentieth-century European politics and should also be given a greater prominence in the development of socialist political thought. At the centre of the German Revolution, he argues, was organised metalworkers in Berlin. He returns to events as they unfolded in factories in Berlin and examines the role of Revolutionary Shop Stewards in organising workers and striving towards a council republic. Gluckstein claims that it was the defeat of the so-called "Spartacist putsch" involving communists against the Social Democratic-backed military forces that sealed the fate of Germany's revolution.

Political narratives of the revolution also focus on events in Berlin without adequate examination of other political struggles that occurred outside the capital, which were shaped by their own local histories and political divisions. Gaard Kets analyses the minutes of meetings of councils in Bremen in addition to eyewitness accounts and newspaper coverage to examine the early experiences of council delegates and the self-conceptualisation of their political activities. Kets demonstrates that the development of council communist ideology emerged along three sets of political questions: firstly, how should the councils function, particularly in relation to other political institutions? Secondly, how should the demos be constituted? Thirdly, what should be the structure of a post-revolutionary society? The chapter shows that initially workers and soldiers came to their own conclusions with only limited influence from party theorists and intellectuals.

The political conflict that occurred between the SPD leadership and the Spartacus Group is well known, but more research is needed on the politics of the USPD, whose factions and political conflicts have received far less attention within the scholarship. Nicholas Vrousalis undertakes a reassessment of the principles and strategies of the USPD during the revolution. Following Arthur Rosenberg, he argues that a third option outside of the "national assembly versus council republic" debate was possible in November 1918, which he labels "council Erfurtianism." This consisted of a parliament sitting alongside workers councils with universal suffrage, an eight-hour day and protections of civil rights. The right wing of the USPD (Haase, Hilferding, Kautsky) supported such a programme and did not hold as many substantive differences of principle with the left wing of the USPD as has usually been assumed. Vrousalis contends that such differences were mainly over political strategy rather than a vision of a post-capitalist society. In addition, he argues

that USPD Left and Right shared a conception of revolutionary principles which differentiated them both from the Bolsheviks. The historical contextualisation of the political experiences of the early council movements that occurs in the first part of the book serves as a valuable building block for the later theoretical chapters.

Part II of the book analyses the theoretical contribution of key socialist theorists in Germany with a particular focus on their writings during and around the German Revolution. In the cases of Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, the issue is that their contributions to the politics of the German Revolution have been overlooked even while both are recognised as important political figures within the socialist movement. Bernstein has traditionally been seen to have said little of originality or significance after the "reform or revolution" debates of the 1890s, while Kautsky has been dismissed by revolutionary socialists as a "renegade" and liberal by the time of the German Revolution. Both of these assumptions are challenged. In this part, we also republish an important contribution analysing the overlooked political group, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and their theorisation of a council system during the German Revolution. Rosa Luxemburg's writings are mined for her insights into revolutionary strategy based on an analysis of her writings on the Russian and German revolutions. Gustav Landauer and other Jewish intellectuals also receive treatment in this part for their role as leading political theorists of the revolution.

Marius Ostrowski demonstrates that Eduard Bernstein played a central role in the German Revolution, which re-ignited old questions of "reform or revolution" that had split the social democratic movement since the 1890s. Bernstein was a treasury minister in the interim Council of People's Deputies during the early days of the revolution and published several theoretical and historical works after the revolution reflecting on its consequences. Ostrowski argues that Bernstein made several advances on his early reformism but maintained a consistent position of opposition to violent revolution and preference for a gradualist approach to social and political reform. The chapter outlines Bernstein's (highly prophetic) admonitory comments regarding the threats facing the Republic, and suggests that similar concerns continue to confront progressive politics today.

Michael J. Thompson returns to Karl Kautsky's theory of a socialist republic developed in a number of texts during the German Revolution. He defends Kautsky's vision of a socialist republic and compares it to

contemporary theories of radical democracy, finding Kautsky's theory a more robust and compelling alternative. He also defends Kautsky's idea of the "democratic-proletarian method" as a means for social transformation and the democratisation of society and state. The chapter ends with a critique of postmodern theories of radical democracy and defends a return to class as a means to reanimate socialist political theory.

Mayra Cotta argues that Luxemburg's central theoretical contribution during the German Revolution was to outline a method of revolutionary transformation in which the socialist revolution was understood not merely as a struggle for institutional power, but as the construction of a new way of life and new cultural understandings which would guarantee the liberation of a people's "spirit." Rather than envisaging the revolution as a single act, Luxemburg imagined a long process of economic and social change in which an active and mobilised population would overthrow the bourgeois social order and create new institutional and cultural forms for a post-capitalist society. For this process not to collapse into civil war or counter-revolution, it was essential for Luxemburg that it be carried out by a majority of workers with a commitment to basic political freedoms and democratic socialist institutions.

Ralf Hoffrogge offers an overview of the activities of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards within the council movements and reconstructs the theoretical model of council socialism outlined by Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig in their newspaper, *Der Arbeiter-Rat* [The Workers' Council], established in February 1919. Hoffrogge explores their writings on a "pure council system" which were developed out of the practices of the workers' councils. These writings constitute the first attempt to sketch a lasting institutionalisation of the council system as an alternative to parliamentary democracy.

Christian Bartolf and Dominique Miething examine a long tradition of non-violent non-cooperation which stretches back to Étienne de La Boétie's conceptualisation of the problem of "voluntary servitude" and which finds expression in Kurt Eisner's organising efforts for the Bavarian Revolution of 1918 and in Gustav Landauer's leading role in the Munich Council Republic of April 1919. In addition to analysing its influence over revolutionary events in southern Germany, Bartolf and Miething trace the evolution of the concept and the strong impact it had on the "No-More-War" movement in the early 1920s, particularly through Carl von Ossietzky and Kurt Tucholsky's activities and the writings of Ernst Toller and Erich Mühsam.

Stephen Eric Bronner analyses the role of Jewish writers and activists in the revolutionary events of 1918–1919, including Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, Paul Levi, Gustav Landauer, Erich Mühsam, Ernst Toller and Eugen Leviné. The visibility of these Jewish intellectuals during the revolution prompted right-wing ideas of a "Jewish-Bolshevik" conspiracy and the association of the Weimar regime with a "Jew Republic." Bronner contends that the German Revolution and its direct aftermath was a catalyst for the intensification of anti-Semitism in Germany. This chapter traces the contributions of Jewish intellectuals in this contested and increasingly violent environment.

The third and final part attempts to connect the theories and practices of political groups in the German Revolution to contemporary debates in political theory with a particular focus on the political experience of workers' councils. Chapters examine the influence of insurgent democratic practices of the council movements on subsequent political thinkers. Part III also contains an analysis of the development of forms of council communism based on thinkers inspired by the workers' and soldiers' councils.

Yohan Dubigeon identifies three constitutive levels of a theoretical model of council democracy drawn from the experiences of councilist forms of politics. The chapter first addresses the political dimension of the organisation of the councils as they arose in Germany and Russia. It then reflects on the strategic reasons for the collapse of councils, arguing for three different grounds in a fetishism of the form (Paris Commune), instrumentalisation (Russian soviets) and institutionalisation (German councils). Finally, the legacy of the councils of the German Revolution raises the problem of organisation and the shifting articulation between substitutionism and spontaneity in the relation between a revolutionary movement and its political organisations.

Paul Mazzocchi interprets the German Revolution through Miguel Abensour's theory of insurgent democracy, and in the context of two major criticisms of radical democratic theory. Insurgent democracy posits a radical version of democracy that exists against the state and is founded in the emergence of a subject (the demos) asserting its political capacity. But two persistent and interlinked criticisms are levelled against this type of vision of democracy: it is inattentive to institutions and it lacks a mechanism for maintaining its radical or insurgent nature. Mazzocchi claims that Abensour responds to these criticisms through a reconceptualisation of institution and an exploration of the possibility of an

institutional right to insurrection. Drawing on these insights, this chapter reflects on the German Revolution from the perspective of an "insurgent institution" which, by producing a *sens* (meaning and direction) to revolt, acts as the condition of possibility of revolutionary action.

Shmuel Lederman examines the distinctive influence of the German Revolution on Arendt through various personal and intellectual connections. He suggests that despite its relative absence in Arendt's writings, it constituted an important part of a broader "silent dialogue" Arendt had with the European socialist left. Through interaction with a number of historical sources, Arendt implicitly incorporated various aspects of socialist and councilist thought into her reflections on modern revolutions while reframing them to fit her own political theory.

Paulina Tambakaki places Rosa Luxemburg in dialogue with contemporary theorists of radical democracy. She distinguishes between two approaches to spontaneous politics, as moment and as beginning, and identifies their limits. She argues that whereas the first approach (exemplified in the work of Wolin and Rancière) empties spontaneous politics of its creative potential, the second approach (exemplified in the work of Hardt and Negri) asserts the creativity of spontaneous politics, yet reduces it to one form: self activity. Seeking to escape the narrowness of these two projections of radical democracy, the paper turns to Rosa Luxemburg's work. It argues that in the synthesis she draws between spontaneity and organisation, reform and revolution, there is a compelling third option for radical politics.

In the final chapter, James Muldoon demonstrates the pivotal importance of the German Revolution on the development of council communist thought, which retains a small but persistent influence over radical political theory. The chapter claims that differences between the Bolsehviks and "left" or "council" communists emerged initially through questions of revolutionary strategy for Europe and only later through a critique of the centralisation and bureaucratisation of the Russian Revolution. This chapter also traces a shift in theorists' understanding of workers' councils during and after the German Revolution. It argues that while participants in the revolution such as the Revolutionary Shop Stewards were more inclined to view the councils as the initial structures of a post-capitalist society, this shifted in the later council communist ideology towards a more open principle of workers' self-emancipation.

Contributors to this volume all seek to rejuvenate interest in the German Revolution and its influence on the development of political

thought. While there are disagreements between authors on the importance of particular political strategies and the causes of political divisions, there is a general consensus on the value of returning to the partially forgotten political debates of this period. The volume shows that the German Revolution functioned as a catalyst for the development of innovative political thought and practice and remains an important touchstone for certain political projects today. The notable research presented in the following chapters serves not only as proof of the value of the German Revolution for political theory over the past hundred years, but will hopefully open up pathways for further research.

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