

The Role of the Spartacist Group after 9 November 1918 and the Formation of the KPD

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The Background

CONTRARY TO THE resolutions passed by the Socialist International, the Social Democratic Party of Germany deputies in the Reichstag on 4 August 1914 voted unanimously in favour of war credits.¹ The most intense criticism of that decision came from a group of left-wing Social Democrats who came together under the rubric of the Spartacus Group (later the Spartacus League). Their numbers grew and the Spartacists became the voice of the socialist anti-war movement, although under the state of siege they could not work other than as a loose clandestine network. It was only with the freedom of the press and freedom to organise that followed the November 1918 revolution, as well as the release of leaders and sympathisers from prison, that the stage was set for a new party to be established: the Communist Party of Germany made its first appearance at a national conference at the turn of 1918/19.

This chapter will look at the founding of the party and the events leading up to it from August 1914 until the failed upheaval in January 1919, which ended with the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. It will emphasise the continuities between social democracy and early communism and address the fragility of that beginning phase, which was not only threatened by external repression but was also persistently contested from within. Certain leading figures within the Spartacus group, such as Clara Zetkin and Leo Jogiches, doubted the value of establishing a new party until the very last, preferring to remain in the partially revolutionary Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD).

The Shock of 4 August

While the left wing of the SPD was mired in a passive state of shock in August 1914, the circle of radicals around Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin attempted an internal protest against the change of course without any initial success. Nonetheless, that group, which included Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin, Ernst Meyer, Julian Marchlewski (a.k.a. Karski), Wilhelm Pieck, Hugo Eberlein, Leo Jogiches, Käte and Hermann Duncker, and, from late August 1914, Reichstag member Karl Liebknecht, campaigned – following the anti-war resolution of the Socialist International – for a consistent anti-war policy and for democracy through mass actions up to and including revolutionary uprising. They promoted their ideas verbally at party events and among small groups of radical comrades and they widely distributed illegal pamphlets. These were initially directed at SPD members, but their focus increasingly shifted toward the workforce as a whole as the war progressed. The Luxemburg circle adopted the name International Group (*Gruppe Internationale*) after the newspaper *Die Internationale*, published in April 1915. The group operated autonomously within the SPD and, after the party split, within the USPD. The name Spartacus Group, derived from the illegal newspaper *Spartacus*, gained currency starting in 1916. Given that the group was only an informal network, it had neither an executive committee nor any formal membership. Anyone committed to the views espoused in *Spartacus* and involved in the dissemination of its content could be considered a ‘member’.

The Spartacus Group during the Last Two Years of the War

The International Group was badly weakened by the arrests of two of its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Luxemburg was in prison from February 1915 until February 1916 and then in ‘protective custody’ from July 1916 until 8 November 1918. A great deal of her writing for pamphlets and *Spartacus* articles was smuggled out, but her oratory talents were missed at assemblies and demonstrations. Worst of all, she was unable to contribute to the revolutionary left-wing socialist uprising in Berlin on 9-10 November 1918 because she only reached Berlin on the evening of 10 November, following her release from prison in Breslau (Wrocław).

Starting with his rejection of war credits on 2 December 1914,

Liebkecht's consistent anti-militarist politics made him a symbol of the peace movement. After he was arrested at a demonstration on 1 May 1916 and sentenced to four years and one month in prison, the harsh conditions of his imprisonment left him isolated and deprived him of any political impact.

It is primarily thanks to the efforts of Rosa Luxemburg's long-time comrade Leo Jogiches – a journalist born in Vilna in 1867 who had been active before the war among the exiled Russian social democrats in Switzerland and Berlin – that the Spartacus Group was able to effectively influence mass actions among German workers between 1916 and early 1918. His great experience in conspiratorial political work helped him to build a clandestine network of backers within the Berlin SPD and, later, the USPD, with connections to supporters nationwide. In Berlin, he focused on the Teltow-Beeskow-Charlottenburg electoral organisation, which was the only party organisation outside Hanau in which the Spartacus Group had a majority. Under the guise of being a building cooperative, Spartacus supporters met in various neighbourhoods to discuss their illegal work. Jogiches had a large number of pamphlets printed, shipped, and distributed. The Spartacus Group's main strongholds were in Stuttgart, Hanau, Chemnitz, Braunschweig, and Duisburg. Oppositional members of the socialist youth organisation made up a separate network.² There were also radical left-wing organisations in Bremen and Hamburg. However, from mid-1916 onward they demanded the founding of a radical party that would unify party and trade union, which was rejected by the Spartacus leadership.

The pamphlets made their way to a wide array of locations. Other people, including Ernst Meyer, worked to assist Jogiches; most of these were long-term SPD or USPD members or functionaries.³ Spartacus supporters also received internal memoranda on certain occasions. They met with Jogiches and other main organisers for discussions at events like the national SPD conference in Berlin in September 1916 or the founding USPD conference in Gotha in April 1917. However, after this, there were no further national gatherings of the Spartacus Group until 13 October 1918 in Berlin, due to difficulties paying for travel expenses and the significant risk of arrest.⁴

Because of the Spartacus Group's loose organisational structure, they did not organise the mass political strikes of June 1916, April 1917 and January 1918. These were instead organised by a network of

oppositional union leaders who would be known after the German Revolution of 1918 as the Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*Revolutionäre Obleute*, RSS).⁵ Jogiches organised a network distributing pamphlets, which aimed to radicalise the shop stewards and the union rank and file. For example, during the revolutionary mass strike in late January 1918, in which approximately three quarters of a million people participated in Berlin and other cities, eight Spartacus pamphlets were produced, each with a print run of 25,000-100,000.⁶ Jogiches began preparing for another mass action in March 1918 after the January strike of that year, but he and his group of supporters were arrested in late March. The authorities uncovered and destroyed almost the entire Spartacus network in the process.⁷

Mathilde Jacob, a friend of and intermediary for the imprisoned Rosa Luxemburg, as well as one of Jogiches' associates, worked painstakingly to win over new recruits for the Spartacus Group. It was only in May 1918 that the thirty-four year-old blacksmith and Labour Secretary Karl Schulz, who had just deserted the military, was able to rebuild the Spartacus Group and restart pamphlet distribution. However, he was arrested on 15 August 1918, together with his closest aides Susanne Leonhard and Erich Anspach. The newly re-established network was again destroyed, after the authorities found a list of Spartacus Group members' names and addresses on Leonhard; the group did not revive until the November Revolution.⁸ Following their arrests, the RSS, with whom Jogiches had worked closely, cut off contact with Spartacus Group members due to fear of infiltration by informers.⁹

After his amnesty on 23 October 1918, Karl Liebknecht had only modest success in reviving the Spartacus networks, although he personally worked intensively to prepare for the November 1918 uprising in Berlin. By that point, the RSS, together with the Spartacus Group and various leftist USPD leaders, such as Ernst Däumig and Georg Ledebour, had formed a committee they were already calling a 'workers' council' to prepare for a mass action. What they had in mind, however, was not another strike, but an armed uprising. It should be emphasised, however, that neither the USPD nor the Spartacus Group had voting authority in that committee; instead, they served only in an advisory capacity. The shop stewards alone set the date of the uprising for 11 November. However, they revised that decision in favour of 9 November, in response to changing circumstances and, to some extent, pressure from Liebknecht, who participated in the

discussions as the Spartacus Group representative.¹⁰ The uprising was successful and the *Kaiserreich* came to an end.

The Role of the Spartacus Group after 9 November 1918

On the day of the uprising,¹¹ Liebknecht joined members of the revolutionary committee at the front of marches, addressed assemblies, and proclaimed the existence of a Socialist Republic from the window of the *Stadtschloss* in the heart of Berlin. A short while before that, however, SPD politician Philipp Scheidemann had already declared a German Republic from a balcony of the Reichstag building. At noon, with the imperial government ceding to the pressure by the victorious revolutionary masses, the title of Chancellor was transferred from Max von Baden to the SPD leader Friedrich Ebert, who announced the formation of a new government comprised of SPD and USPD representatives.

When Liebknecht arrived at the Reichstag in the early evening for negotiations with the other insurgents, he was urged by soldiers to affiliate with the SPD-USPD unity government that the SPD had proclaimed. After resisting for a long time, he finally accepted a government office, provided that it would only last for three days until an armistice could be established. But, after Jogiches had informed him of his strong disagreement, and the USPD had abandoned the left-wing positions that were the conditions of his participation, he rescinded the agreement.¹²

The political decision to form a SPD-USPD government on 9 November was made largely without the participation of the people who had organised the successful uprising. This is because almost all the members of the Spartacus Group, the left wing of the USPD and the RSS who were involved in the revolution were marching with the workers through the streets of Berlin, giving speeches, and helping to occupy government buildings.

The rank and file only came back into the picture thanks to the efforts of RSS leader Emil Barth, after the negotiations in the Reichstag building between the SPD and the USPD on the formation of a new government were almost finished. At an assembly in the Reichstag building on the evening of 9 November, at which soldiers were present, Barth got a resolution passed that would allow Berlin's factories and garrisons to elect workers' and soldiers' councils on the

morning of 10 November, which would then elect a revolutionary socialist government that afternoon.¹³ However, this plenary assembly of Berlin's workers' and soldiers' councils proved to be a disaster for the revolutionary left. The SPD won a majority among the soldiers and, using its party newspaper, *Vorwärts*, and the preliminary discussion, skilfully exploited the soldiers' and workers' need for unity.¹⁴ Before and during the assembly, the Spartacus Group had distributed a pamphlet with the slogan 'No votes for the government socialists', but this was pilloried by a soldier over the course of the meeting 'with vigorous applause'.¹⁵

A letter to August Thalheimer (written, in all likelihood, by Jogiches), dated 11 November 1918 and obviously influenced by this tremendous defeat for the left, offers a remarkably prosaic assessment of the balance of political power: 'The Revolution [...] is, above all, a soldiers' mutiny. It was executed *by* soldiers who were dissatisfied with their lot *as* soldiers. [...] Certainly the masses contributed to the Revolution, but for the moment its social core remains completely shrouded in darkness.' Jogiches realistically assumed that 'Many or most of the working people still support the majority Social Democrats'. That majority, however, was 'not only slowing down the Revolution but directly counter-revolutionary'. The task of the Spartacus Group was therefore 'to expose the counter-revolutionary nature of the majority socialists before the masses by initiating a wave of agitation against them. We must then expose the social core of the events that have taken place and thereby turn this from a soldiers' revolt into a true proletarian revolution'.¹⁶

Founding the Party Prematurely in December 1918

It might have been possible for the Spartacus Group to lawfully propagate its political goals at its own assemblies and through its own newspaper in order to build an organisation. But the links between the leadership and its supporters had largely been destroyed during the war due to the large numbers of arrests and conscriptions. When the leaders first met with Rosa Luxemburg on 11 November, following her arrival in Berlin the evening after her release from 'protective custody' in Breslau, the group adopted the name Spartacus League to clarify its claim to a larger federation even as it remained within the USPD. Where its illegal work during the wartime state of siege had

largely been limited to agitational pamphleteering, various tasks were now delegated to fourteen different people. Not only did they plan on publishing a daily newspaper but also a weekly theoretical journal called *Die Internationale* as well as newspapers directed at soldiers, women, and young people. Between 11 and 17 November, however, they had no publication at all. The editorial offices of the bourgeois publishing company Scherl Verlag had been occupied during the Revolution on 9 November and used to publish the *Rote Fahne* on 9 and 10 November 1918, in lieu of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*. But the occupiers were unable to hold the premises, and Luxemburg and the rest of the Spartacus leadership spent more than a week looking for a publisher with a printing press for their own newspaper, before the *Rote Fahne* finally resumed publication on 18 November 1918. Yet even then, a shortage of paper and staff restricted editions to four pages. Luxemburg was so burdened as editor-in-chief that she was hardly able to appear at the Spartacus League's public assemblies, costing the organisation its most dynamic orator.¹⁷ All of these circumstances combined to delay the Spartacus Group's composition as a cohesive organisation.

By contrast, although the opponents of a socialist revolution had no functional mass organisations at their disposal, they were nonetheless able to monopolise state power, as Liebknecht made clear in a sober analysis dated 21 November 1918: 'the "socialist" government has maintained or even reinstated the entire administrative apparatus and the old military machinery – institutions which are nearly impossible to control for the workers' and soldiers' councils; the enormous economic power of the ruling classes has not been touched, and some of their social powers will continue for a long time'. Liebknecht emphatically called for the Revolution to move forward, writing that: 'The working masses must defend what they have gained and proceed to conquer the remaining positions of power in order to bring the ruling classes to their knees and to make proletarian rule come true in flesh and blood'.¹⁸ The question at that point was whether Liebknecht and the other leaders of the Spartacus League would be able to use this realistic assessment to draw level-headed conclusions for future political action.

For Rosa Luxemburg, this was not the case. As in early 1916, she drastically overestimated the revolutionary mood among the workers. In a letter to Clara Zetkin dated 29 November 1918, she wrote that

USPD members, including 'Däumig, Eichhorn and others, argued for taking a stand entirely on the same grounds as ours, and the same was true for Ledebour, Zietz, Kurt Rosenfeld – and the masses!'¹⁹ In her revolutionary impatience and wishful thinking, Luxemburg had evidently entered into an inauspicious alliance.

Based on that erroneous assessment, she believed that the time had come to assume leadership of the left wing of the labour movement. On 14 December 1918, she published the manifesto 'What Does the Spartacus League Want?' in the *Rote Fahne* and on 15 December she proposed that the USPD withdraw from the government at the party's general assembly in Berlin. She called for party members to reject a national assembly, take power immediately through the workers' and soldiers' councils, and convoke a national party congress immediately. But her resolution received only 29 per cent of the delegates' votes versus 71 per cent for a proposal by Rudolf Hilferding. This proposal supported allowing the USPD representatives to remain in the joint revolutionary government with the majority Social Democrats, participating in the national assembly elections, and holding a USPD congress only after those elections. That outlook was not limited to USPD delegates; the working population of Berlin shared it as well. When the Berlin workers' council delegates to the national council congress were elected on 14 December, the SPD, with eleven delegates, won significantly more support than the USPD with seven delegates. The SPD's majority in the soldiers' councils was even larger. It is therefore incomprehensible that Rosa Luxemburg still believed that there would be a left-wing majority at the National Congress of Councils, which opened on 16 December in Berlin, and she was disappointed when the delegates voted for a national assembly, cursing them afterwards as 'Ebert's Mamluks'.

That mid-December, Luxemburg and the other Spartacus leaders could no longer ignore the actual views of the proletarian masses delegated from Berlin and across Germany. Over the weeks that followed, they doggedly campaigned for their views within the USPD (some of whose members already leaned toward supporting the Spartacus League) in an attempt to win a majority or be able to take a significant number of party members with them to form a new, left-wing socialist party in the event of a split. At the same time, quickly forming a new party carried the risk of isolation, which is why Luxemburg had opposed dividing the party during the war.

There was also no shortage of urgent pleas from left-wing USPD officials to hold off on founding a separate left-wing socialist party. In a conversation on 20 or 21 December 1918, Wilhelm Koenen, chairman of the USPD's large Halle-Merseburg branch, emphatically pointed out to Luxemburg that Spartacus sympathisers within his chapter needed more time to build a majority in favour of forming a new, radical party. But Luxemburg insisted on doing so quickly.²⁰ In a letter dated 17 November 1918, Clara Zetkin also argued with Luxemburg against establishing a party too soon, writing that, 'Given our well-known lack of leaders and resources, it would make it considerably more difficult for us to reach the masses [...] I think we should stay in the USP[D] for now as its relentless critics'.²¹ Zetkin, who was unable to travel to Berlin for health reasons, was evidently not immediately informed of the resolution to form a new party, which was subsequently passed at the national Spartacus conference on 30-31 December 1918. Jacob Walcher, a delegate from Stuttgart who participated in the founding KPD conference, would later recall her 'irritation at the choice of an inauspicious moment' for it.²² In an as yet undiscovered letter to Luxemburg in early January 1919, Zetkin evidently vigorously criticised the decision, as we can deduce from Luxemburg's reply dated 11 January 1919.²³

The Founding Congress of the KPD

The source materials do not provide an unambiguous explanation as to when exactly the preliminary decision to establish the KPD was made. The *Rote Fabne* mentions a 'national Spartacus League conference' on 23 December and again in a lead article dated 29 December. A decision to form the party is supposed to have been passed on the evening of 29 December when the Spartacus leadership met for a discussion with several delegates. That is when the name Communist Party was chosen over Luxemburg's preferred Socialist Party.²⁴ There was talk at the conference itself of a national conference and a founding party convention but it was only at its conclusion that Liebknecht declared it the official founding party conference.²⁵

While Luxemburg's 'What Does the Spartacus League Want?' advanced a vision of socialism with an unambiguously grassroots-democratic and socialist orientation, it was counteracted at the founding party conference by the prevailing anarcho-syndicalist and

putschist currents among the delegates. That ultra-left outlook led the party to reject participation in the forthcoming national assembly elections despite the fact that the entire Spartacus leadership, with Luxemburg and Liebknecht at the helm, had supported participation. The risk of a resolution hostile to the existing unions and their replacement by a single unity organisation that merged party and union was only averted by handing the matter over to a programme committee, where Luxemburg's proposed basic programme could also be discussed and augmented.²⁶ The radical current among the Spartacus League's delegates was widespread and it was supplemented by the twenty-nine delegates from the International Communists of Germany (*Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands*, IKD), which had constituted itself as a party in late November 1918 and had strongholds in Bremen, Hamburg, and Dresden.²⁷ It had merged with the Spartacus League at the conference, where they combined to form a radical majority. On the other hand, the union-based RSS ultimately did not participate in the conference despite hours of negotiations with Liebknecht.²⁸ As a result, the new party lacked a mass base among the workers of Berlin. Karl Radek, who participated in the congress as an emissary of the Bolshevik government and whose speech was greeted with thunderous applause, came to a drastically negative conclusion, writing that: 'The party conference was a glaring demonstration of the party's youth and inexperience. Its connections with the masses were extremely weak [...] I did not believe that I was looking at an actual party'.²⁹

By breaking away from the USPD in late December 1918, Luxemburg and the other Spartacus League leaders also broke with the conviction that doing so would isolate them from the proletarian masses, as they had believed in 1916-17. As the discussion, speeches, and resolutions at the founding congress show, the leaders had particularly surrendered themselves to the pressures of a radical spectrum whose illusory expectations were far removed from what most workers had in mind. If the Spartacus League had remained in the USPD, that party would likely have pledged its unambiguous commitment to the council system at its subsequent party conference in early March 1919, and thereafter advocated a revolutionary politics with an emphasis on mass action. A revolutionary socialist mass party in Germany might therefore have been possible by March 1919.

What Effect Did the Bolsheviks Have on the Formation of the KPD?

Given that the Bolsheviks' representative, Karl Radek, had been in Berlin since 19 December 1918, the question has arisen of whether or not he and Adolph A. Joffe, the Soviet ambassador in Berlin between late April and 4 November 1918, had pushed for the establishment of a separate party.³⁰ The archival sources cannot confirm that they did. Neither the correspondence between Spartacus leaders Hermann and Käthe Duncker between May and October 1918,³¹ nor the letters sent to Moscow by Joffe and other Bolshevik emissaries in Berlin during the same period, discuss the notion of forming a party. On the contrary, Joffe's reports on the USPD and the Spartacus Group repeatedly state that the USPD was too passive and the Spartacus Group too weak to be able to actively push for a revolution.³² After the Russian embassy was expelled from Germany on 4 November 1918, contact with a Bolshevik representative was only re-established with Radek's arrival on 19 December 1918. However, given Radek's long-standing animosity toward Luxemburg and Jogiches, it was impossible for him to influence the leaders of the Spartacus Group. He only succeeded with his old friends among the left-wing radicals in Bremen (particularly Johann Knief, who opposed merging with the Spartacus League), where the IKD were preparing to form a joint party.³³ The decision to establish the KPD some time near the end of the national council congress on 20 December 1918 was therefore taken quite autonomously by the Spartacus League's leaders.

It is well known that Luxemburg and Lenin had considerable political differences.³⁴ They clashed repeatedly, as in 1904 and 1911, over Luxemburg's conception of a grass-roots democratic mass proletarian movement.³⁵ In an incomplete draft of a manuscript Luxemburg wrote on the Russian Revolution, she rejected the terror that the Bolshevik government directed at its political enemies. Most other leaders of the Spartacus Group shared that opinion, as Angelica Balabanoff wrote after speaking with them, in a letter to Lenin dated 19 October 1918.³⁶

The leaders of the KPD also opposed Lenin's plans to establish a Communist International, on the grounds that such an undertaking could only be successful if there were a mass base for socialist parties in Europe.³⁷ But despite all their differences, Rosa Luxemburg and her political colleagues worked closely with the Bolsheviks. In mid-December 1918, cultural historian Eduard Fuchs, a long-standing

confidant of the Spartacus League's leaders, was sent on an arduous journey to Moscow with a letter from Rosa Luxemburg and verbal messages about the situation in Germany.³⁸ Leo Jogiches, who assumed leadership of the KPD after Luxemburg was murdered, maintained that contact, with his early February 1919 letter informing Lenin of the situation in the German labour movement and, in the wake of Fuchs' return from Russia with money for the KPD, asking for additional financial support.³⁹ Nonetheless, the KPD leadership did not satisfy Lenin's wish for their approval of the Communist International. On the contrary, they decided to send fellow party organiser Hugo Eberlein to Moscow with an explicit mandate to vote against its establishment.⁴⁰ Thus we can say that the leaders of the KPD preserved their autonomy from the outset.

The KPD in the Berlin January Upheaval of 1919

Luxemburg's article 'The First Party Congress', first published in the *Rote Fahne* on 3 January 1919,⁴¹ gives no indication that she expected revolution to come soon or to run its course quickly. She did not anticipate a revolutionary turning point in the near future but rather a longer maturation process.⁴²

Late at night on Saturday 4 January 1919, the RSS, KPD leaders Liebknecht and Pieck, and the Berlin branch of the USPD issued a call for a demonstration in protest against the dismissal of Berlin Police Superintendent Emil Eichhorn, a USPD member, by the SPD government. The USPD had left the government in late December and the office of police superintendent was its only remaining position of official power. Despite the short notice, several hundred thousand people participated in the demonstration in central Berlin on 5 January. The organisers, who were caught off guard by the enormous turnout, had not called for any concrete objective other than protest against the Ebert-Scheidemann government, but participants nonetheless spontaneously occupied several newspaper offices that evening, including the Social Democrats' *Vorwärts*.

Despite the enormous scale of the demonstration that Sunday, the coverage in the Monday edition of the *Rote Fahne* on 6 January was relatively reserved. There was nothing to suggest that Luxemburg or the rest of the KPD leadership planned a decisive power struggle against the Social Democrat government in the days that followed.

Nor is there any hint of this in Luxemburg's patently realistic reply to Karl Radek on 6 January 1919, in response to his question regarding the goal of the mass action. Radek, quoting her, wrote that, 'The strike was a protest strike. We wanted to see how far Ebert would go and how the workers in the countryside would respond to the events in Berlin. Then we would see.'⁴³

In contrast to Luxemburg's cautious outlook, Liebknecht and Pieck let themselves get carried away by the euphoric mood among the RSS on the evening of 5 January. With only six votes against, an overwhelming majority passed a resolution calling for a general strike on 6 January for the purpose of toppling the SPD government. However, the extremely short announcement did not include any direct call to remove the government. At Pieck's request, a Revolutionary Committee made up of thirty-three members was formed, including co-chairmen Ledebour, Liebknecht, and Shop Steward Paul Scholze. The demonstration already had the appearance of a popular uprising, due to its hundreds of thousands of participants and, without any preparation, the left-wing socialists of Berlin suddenly attempted to turn it into a new insurrection. Richard Müller, who had organised the mass strikes during the war, warned against exceeding the scope of the protest due to the lack of organisational structure and planning. He and five other shop stewards did not participate, depriving the Revolutionary Committee of skilled organisers.

With nearly half a million participants, the mass demonstration on Monday 6 January was even larger than on Sunday. The Revolutionary Committee sent armed troops to occupy government buildings, legitimising their authority with a document written by Pieck declaring that the SPD government was no longer in control and that the Revolutionary Committee had taken power; at the bottom of this document were the names of Karl Liebknecht, Georg Ledebour and Paul Scholze. The public and the other KPD leaders would only learn of the existence of the declaration when a facsimile was published in *Vorwärts* on 14 January. While the Revolutionary Committee were more than satisfied with the response to their call for a general strike on 6 January, they were deeply disappointed by the troops stationed in Berlin, which either remained neutral or were loyal to the SPD government.

Liebknecht and Pieck, the two members of the KPD leadership who were also part of the Revolutionary Committee, had spent their

time since Saturday 4 January in a nearly uninterrupted string of meetings and speeches at demonstrations, without any opportunity to coordinate with the other KPD leaders. It was only on the evening of Monday 6 January that Jogiches and Paul Levi were able to make contact with Liebknecht and Pieck.

Impressed by the success of the general strike on 6 January, Luxemburg now also saw a possibility to take power. In her lead article in the *Rote Fahne* on 7 January (therefore written on the evening of 6 January) titled 'What Are the Leaders Doing?' she proclaimed the goal of 'occupying all positions of power,' a clear reference to the fall of the government.⁴⁴ The first meeting of the KPD leadership with Liebknecht and Pieck was held that Tuesday noon. 'Comrades Luxemburg and Jogiches urged a more definitive leadership of the struggle and clear slogans.'⁴⁵ Historians have previously been unaware of the discussion on 7 January between the Spartacists – and their representatives on the Revolutionary Committee Liebknecht and Pieck – and the push by Jogiches and Luxemburg for the Committee to take more forceful action. This KPD leaders' meeting was evidently suppressed in subsequent writings on the German Revolution produced by both the KPD and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) as a way of constructing the myth that party leaders – particularly Rosa Luxemburg – rejected the idea of overthrowing the government. Luxemburg's lead article 'Neglected Duty', dated 8 January (but written the day before), shows that by 7 January she had indeed concluded that the time to fight for control had come. She repeatedly mentions that 'the Ebert-Scheidemann government must be removed' if the revolution is to be continued and socialism implemented. However, she does clearly oppose an outright coup, writing: 'Removing the Ebert-Scheidemann government does not mean storming the Reich Chancellery and chasing off or arresting a few people. Above all it means seizing all actual positions of power and *keeping* and *using* them.'⁴⁶ Here, Luxemburg focuses on institutions that would facilitate the distribution of revolutionary propaganda with intensive involvement by prominent USPD leaders Ledebour and Däumig.

The coup d'état proclamation that Pieck wrote and Liebknecht signed was attacked both by Rosa Luxemburg immediately after the failed insurrection attempt and by historians later on. That criticism is, in my view, unjustified. On 7 January, it appeared as though most

of the workers in Berlin were insisting that the Ebert-Scheidemann government be replaced. The planned takeover by the RSS and the attempt to occupy government buildings therefore did not amount to a putsch by a small revolutionary group; instead, they were the product of a mass movement made up of the majority of the workers of Berlin (albeit only on that particular Monday and Tuesday). Those steps and the coup declaration were what gave them revolutionary legitimacy in Berlin – just as the overthrow on 9-10 November 1918 had. The scale of the majority in favour of replacing the SPD government among the rank and file is apparent in two resolutions passed by the plenary assembly of the Greater Berlin local workers' councils on 10 January, which almost unanimously called for the resignation of the government – including support from most of the SPD delegates.⁴⁷

The argument that a Ledebour-Liebknecht government with the RSS would have been limited to the capital and a few industrial centres is true, but this is only apparent in hindsight. In November 1918, information about the workers' willingness to engage in a revolutionary uprising nationwide had appeared extremely unfavourable at the moment when the spark was lit, making it possible that a similar movement could have arisen in January 1919 as well. The action in January 1919 only became a putsch as of Wednesday 8 January, when the majority of Berlin's workers no longer supported the Revolutionary Committee taking power.

The KPD leaders held a meeting that Wednesday evening, after the factory workers' willingness to strike had begun to wane and the first small skirmishes between government troops and revolutionaries had started. Given the flagging appetite for conflict among the working people of Berlin and the majority SPD government's discernible preparations to put down the revolution by force, Jogiches forcefully called for Liebknecht and Pieck to resign from the Revolutionary Committee. A majority passed the proposal over dissenting votes from Pieck and Liebknecht, and Liebknecht announced that he would not comply with the resolution, thereby initiating a split among the KPD leaders. Jogiches went so far as to propose that the group publicly distance itself from Liebknecht in the *Rote Fahne*. That proposal was rendered meaningless, however, when the RSS held a meeting late that evening and adopted both a pamphlet written by Hugo Haase and Liebknecht's call for a general strike. Luxemburg and most of the Spartacus leaders regarded this renewed willingness on the part of the RSS and the

USPD leadership to engage in conflict as a sign that the mass movement might be reviving, but it was not enough to move the workers to continue fighting. On the contrary, a mass movement with an entirely different objective developed in the factories of Berlin on 9 January. Workers called for unity on socialist principles between the 'ordinary' members of the SPD, USPD and KPD to end the bloodletting without recourse to their leaders. The unity movement consisted of over 200,000 workers in Berlin and it spread to other industrial centres across Germany. Workplace assemblies elected worker delegations, usually on a parity basis (i.e. each of the three socialist parties had the same number of delegates), and these were sent to the SPD central council, the USPD, the RSS and Liebknecht to demand the resignation of the government and of all socialist party leaders in order to stop the fighting in Berlin. The parity-based workers' committees were to take over management at all levels. Furthermore, the workers called for unification of the three socialist parties, and new workers' council elections. The USPD fully supported this spontaneous mass movement, but the leaders of both the SPD and the KPD rejected its objective.⁴⁸ Luxemburg saw the USPD as its intellectual author and she sharply criticised them for it. The fact that the Social Democrats had also rejected all the unity movement's demands was not sufficient to convince Luxemburg to reconsider her position.⁴⁹ For her, it was reminiscent of the unity slogans of 9-10 November 1918, when the SPD, which had previously worked against the revolution, was able to win a majority against the revolutionary forces by employing the same rhetoric of unity. But had the KPD supported the new unity movement, it might have made it possible to preserve the masses' revolutionary energy and strengthen the party.

The unity movement thus failed to achieve its objective and, contrary to the hopes of the revolutionary left, the mass movement did not regain momentum on 9-10 January. With Liebknecht's consent, the KPD leadership decided on the 10 January 'to abandon joint actions with the shop stewards and only to participate in their meetings in order to exchange information'.⁵⁰

Rosa Luxemburg published an article in the *Rote Fahne* on 12 January under the headline 'And Still the Revolution Will Win!', in which she commented on the seizure of the *Vorwärts* building by government troops and the SPD government's military victory. Although she no longer regarded the fall of the government as imminent, she nonetheless

saw it as almost inevitable in the near future, writing that Ebert and Scheidemann could 'enjoy only a final, brief reprieve' for their 'glorious rule' which was built 'on dead bodies' and required 'the grace of the bourgeoisie'. A letter Luxemburg wrote to Clara Zetkin on 11 January shows that this was not merely optimistic agitation but in fact corresponded to Luxemburg's illusory expectations. Despite the unambiguous defeat, she remained hopeful, writing, 'if the course of events continues as it has so far, it will prove to be highly questionable whether things will even reach the point of elections and a National Assembly'.⁵¹ Just how badly her assessment deviated from the popular mood would become apparent eight days later during the National Assembly elections. At the start of the January uprising, it appeared as though a great majority of Berlin's working people would side with the revolutionary left. But on 19 January, the SPD won 36.4 per cent of the votes in Berlin – a significant gain against the USPD, which only took 27.6 per cent of the vote.⁵² In keeping with the decision made at its founding congress, the KPD had boycotted the elections.

When analysing and assessing the *Rote Fahne* and the policies of the KPD leadership during the fighting in January 1919, we must keep in mind the fact that the situation changed repeatedly from hour to hour. Rosa Luxemburg and the other editors and other leaders were under enormous stress, the printing press and the editorial offices of the *Rote Fahne* were being attacked by government troops, and articles had to be written in safe houses.⁵³

After changing houses several times, Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht went into hiding in the home of some comrades in Berlin's Wilmersdorf district, where they were arrested on 15 January 1919 and murdered by *Freikorps* troops. The murders weakened the prospects for democracy not only within the KPD but also in the Communist International as a whole. As the story of its establishment shows, the first generation of leaders was not only independent in terms of the strategies they pursued, but also in their concept of democracy. Rosa Luxemburg in particular typified that autonomy. If she had not been murdered, with her concept of a humane basic democratic socialism, she surely would have influenced the political left efficiently and might have prevented or at least significantly hampered Stalinism's triumph in the Comintern.

Translated by Joe Keady

Notes

1. After the foundation of the USPD, the SPD was often referred to as the *Mehrheits*-SPD, or Majority SPD. To avoid confusion we have left the party's name as SPD throughout.
2. Mathilde Jacob, *Rosa Luxemburg. An Intimate Portrait*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2000, pp69, 74-84; Ottokar Luban, 'Ermittlungen der Strafverfolgungsbehörden gegen Mathilde Jacob und Leo Jogiches (1915-1918). Ergänzungen zu ihren politischen Biographien', in *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung (IWK)*, 31, 3, 1995, pp307-331; idem, 'Die Auswirkungen der Jenaer Jugendkonferenz 1916 und die Beziehungen der Zentrale der revolutionären Arbeiterjugend zur Führung der Spartakusgruppe', in *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte (AfS)*, XI, 1971, pp185-223 http://library.fes.de/jportal/receive/jportal_jpvolume_00010019;jsessionid=44239AA6FFEF6B9B5A72D5884EB736CB?XSL.view.objectmetadata.SESSION=true&XSL.toc.pos.SESSION=1; Ernst Meyer (ed.), *Spartakus im Kriege. Die illegalen Flugblätter des Spartakusbundes im Krieg*, Berlin, 1927.http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0000994F00000000_-_blank
3. Ottokar Luban, 'Führung und Basis des Rosa-Luxemburg-Kreises (Spartakusgruppe), 1915-1918. Biographien und soziale Zusammensetzung', in idem, *Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratiekonzept. Ihre Kritik an Lenin und ihr politisches Wirken 1913-1919*, Leipzig: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2008, pp172-195.
4. Ottokar Luban, 'Neue Forschungsergebnisse über die Spartakuskonferenz im Oktober 1918', in Ulla Plener (ed.), *Die Novemberrevolution 1918/19 in Deutschland. Für bürgerliche und sozialistische Demokratie*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, pp68-78.
5. See Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working Class Politics in the German Revolution. Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement*, Brill: Leiden, 2014, pp35-60.
6. Ottokar Luban, 'Julius Gerson und Eduard Fuchs, die Spendensammler für die Flugschriftenagitation der Spartakusgruppe – Verbindungen zwischen Linksozialisten und bürgerlichen Pazifisten', in idem (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratiekonzept*, pp286-305; idem, 'Spartakusgruppe, revolutionäre Obleute und die politischen Massenstreiks in Deutschland während des Ersten Weltkrieges', in *ibid.*, pp127-171.
7. For the proceedings against Jogiches, see 'Die Ermittlungsakten zu Jogiches und Genossen', in Bundesarchiv Berlin (henceforth: BArch), R 3003, C 83/18.
8. See, BArch, R 3003, J 638/18, No. 1, Bl.1, 6 and a Berlin political police report from September 1918, in Landesarchiv Berlin, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, No. 15842, Bl.131.

9. Jean-Claude Montant, 'La propagande extérieure de la France pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale. Exemple de quelques neutres européennes', PhD Thesis, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1988, p1489.
10. For more on the relationship between the shop stewards and the Spartacus Group, see Luban, 'Spartakusgruppe, revolutionäre Obleute und die politischen Massenstreiks in Deutschland während des Ersten Weltkrieges', pp164-171.
11. For details on this and what follows, see, for example, Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2006, pp157-207; David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution. A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922*, London: Ithaca, 1975, pp118-211; Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918-1919*, Frankfurt/M: Ullstein, 1978, pp114-214.
12. Jacob Walcher to the author, 8 July 1969.
13. Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, p116.
14. Stenographic notes by journalist Richard Bernstein, in Gerhard Engel, Bärbel Holtz, Ingo Materna (eds), *Groß-Berliner Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte in der Revolution 1918/19. Dokumente der Vollversammlungen und des Vollzugsrates. Vom Ausbruch der Revolution bis zum 1. Reichsrätekongreß*, Berlin: Akademie, 1993, pp17ff.
15. *Ibid.*, pp15-24.
16. SgY 17, No. 1, Bl.85, 86, in BArch Berlin. There is nothing in the letter about the proposed state form.
17. Heinz Wohlgemuth, *Die Entstehung der KPD. Ein Überblick*, Berlin: Dietz, 1978, pp242ff.
18. For Liebknecht's article, see Gabriel Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918 -1919*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012, pp.93ff; for the online version, see: <http://libcom.org/files/Allpower%20to%20the%20councils.pdf>.
19. Georg Laschitza, Peter Adler, Annalies Hudis (eds), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, trans. George Shriver, London/New York: Verso, 2011, p482.
20. BArch Berlin, NY 4072, No. 138, Bl.81 f.
21. 'Letter from Clara Zetkin to Rosa Luxemburg', 17 November 1918, in Marga Voigt (ed.), *Clara Zetkin. Die Kriegsbriefe (1914-1918)*, Berlin: Karl Dietz, 2016, p440.
22. 'Letter from Jacob Walchers to Karl Bittel', 9 March 1966, in BArch Berlin, NY 4127, No. 68, Bl.269.
23. Laschitza *et al.* (eds), *Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, pp491ff.
24. Hermann Weber, 'Einleitung', in idem (ed.), *Die Gründung der KPD. Protokoll*, Berlin: Dietz, 1993, pp38ff.
25. *Ibid.*, p290.
26. *Ibid.*, pp154, 164f.
27. Paul Frölich, *Im radikalen Lager. Politische Autobiographie, 1890-1921*,

- ed. Reiner Tosstorff, Berlin: BasisDruck, 2013; Gerhard Engel, *Johann Knief. Ein unvollendetes Leben*, Berlin: Dietz, 2011, pp368ff, 397-406.
28. Weber, *Gründung der KPD*, pp270-280 (Liebknecht).
 29. Karl Radek, 'November – Eine kleine Seite aus meinen Erinnerungen', in Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf, *Karl Radek in Berlin. Ein Kapitel deutsch-russischer Beziehungen im Jahre 1919*, in *AfS* II, 1962, pp119-159, 136. Also available online: http://library.fes.de/jportal/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/jportal_derivate_00020003/afs-1962-087.pdf.
 30. See Ottokar Luban, 'Russische Bolschewiki und deutsche Linksozialisten am Vorabend der deutschen Novemberrevolution. Beziehungen und Einflussnahme', in *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung (2009)*, pp283-298; *ibid.*, 'Rosa Luxemburg's Critique of Lenin's Ultra Centralistic Party Concept and of the Bolshevik Revolution,' *Critique. Journal of Socialist Theory*, 40, 3, 2012, pp357-365.
 31. Heinz Deutschland (ed.), *Käte und Hermann Duncker. Ein Tagebuch in Briefen (1894-1953)*, Berlin: Karl Dietz, 2016, with complete correspondence, documents, and images on a USB-card, here: pp. 1914/2331-1918/3047.
 32. Luban, 'Russische Bolschewiki', pp283-298.
 33. Jean-François Fayet, *Karl Radek (1885-1939). Biographie politique*, Berne: Peter Lang, 2004, pp262-270; Ottokar Luban, 'Karl Radek im Januaraufstand 1919 in Berlin. Drei Dokumente', *IWK*, 36, 3, 2000, esp. p392; Engel, *Johann Knief*, 407ff; Frölich, *Im radikalen Lager*, 166ff.
 34. Nonetheless, some scholars have attempted to downplay or even deny these differences right up to the present day, see Ulla Plener, *Rosa Luxemburg und Lenin. Gemeinsamkeiten und Kontroversen*, Berlin: Nora, 2009.
 35. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, pp.248-65, 266-80.
 36. Rossijskij Gosudarstwennyj archiv sozial'no-polititscheskoi Istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, RGASPI), Moscow, f.5, op.3, d.80, 2.
 37. *Ibid.*, f. 495, op. 124, d. 539, 42 (Henryk Walecki's handwritten report in German).
 38. 'Letter from Rosa Luxemburg to Lenin', 20 December 1918, in Laschitza *et al.* (eds), *Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p486.
 39. 'Letter: Leo Jogiches to Lenin', 4 February 1919, in Hermann Weber, Jakov Drabkin and Bernhard H. Bayerlein (eds), *Deutschland, Russland, Komintern. II. Dokumente (1918-1943)*, Volume 1 [1918-1933], Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015, pp77-80.
 40. Hugo Eberlein, 'Spartakus und die Dritte Internationale,' *Internationale Pressekorrespondenz*, Vienna, 4, 1924, No. 28, 29, p306.
 41. Rosa Luxemburg-Stiftung (ed.), Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 4 [August 1914 to January 1919], Berlin: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2000 [henceforth: Luxemburg, *GW*4], p514.

42. See Ottokar Luban, 'Rosa at a Loss Rosa. The KPD Leadership and the Berlin Uprising of January 1919. Legend and Reality', *Revolutionary History*, 8, 4, 2004, pp19-45.
43. Radek, 'November', p137.
44. Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, 4, pp516-518.
45. Wilhelm Pieck, 'Zur Parteigeschichte der KPD', in BArch Berlin, NY 4036/384, Bl.122. The manuscript contains important information that is not included in the versions that were printed subsequently.
46. Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, 4, pp519-522.
47. Gerhard Engel, Bärbel Holtz, Gaby Huch, Ingo Materna (eds.), *Groß-Berliner Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte in der Revolution 1918/19. Dokumente der Vollversammlungen und des Vollzugsrates. Vom I. Reichsrätekongreß bis zum Generalstreikbeschuß am 3. März 1919*, Berlin: Akademie, 1997, pp183f, pp200f.
48. Pieck, 'Manuscript', Bl.125f; Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, pp235-237; Morgan, *Socialist Left*, p217.
49. 'Das Versagen der Führer', in Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, 4, pp523-526.
50. Pieck, 'Manuscript', Bl. 128f.
51. Laschitzka *et al.* (eds), *Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p491.
52. Susanne Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1918-1920*, Düsseldorf: Droste, 1978, p452.
53. Jacob, *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp94f, 97-100.