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Why Did the German Revolution of 1918-19 Fail in Its Goals?

It was the dawn of the 20th century, and a European country devastated by the First World War bore witness to a bloody Communist revolution, as a result of which the *ancien régime* was swept away and a radical new government took its place. This country was not Russia, however, and the new government were not the Bolsheviks, much as their opponents may have believed them to be. The German Revolution of 1918-19 has been largely overlooked by history, as failed revolutions are wont to be, but the question of just why it failed in its goals (which consisted of the usual Marxist intentions, e.g. the uprising of the proletariat and overthrow of the *bourgeoisie* systems of government, replacing them with rule via soviets, and so on) has a number of answers, from Germany's suitability for revolution according to Marxist theory to the less academic and substantially more tangible fact that it was a tiny force with limited to no popular support, divided leadership and sparse supplies against a large, war-hardened fighting force with no sympathy for Communist ideals. This inquiry shall elaborate on those factors and analyse their overall impact on the failure of the German Revolution via the use of intertextual analysis of a number of sources, primary and secondary, from both sympathetic and antagonistic points of view.

With Marxism invariably comes ideology, and it is in this ideology that we find a potential reason for the revolution's failure. One of the prerequisites for Marxist societal change, as laid out in the Communist Manifesto,¹ is that the country in question must be, to paraphrase source 10, "ripe for revolution". Was this the case in post-war Germany? Source 18's arguments can be reasonably expanded to include the nation as a whole, and in doing so would suggest strongly that it was, although there are issues with the source that will be elaborated on later in the inquiry. Regardless of this, post-war Russia appears just as unsuitable for revolution being even less industrialised than Germany at the time. The difference, however, was that the Bolsheviks under Lenin were willing to bend their belief in Marxism, and in Leninism they were justified in seizing power if it was in the interest of forwarding the revolution.² The Spartacists, on the other hand were of a more Menshevik persuasion and refused to compromise their beliefs for pragmatism's sake³ until their hands were forced⁴, a stubbornness that could have cost them the revolution. Source 19 evidences their outlook, and source 20 explicitly compares them to the Bolsheviks, and source 20 comes from an ardent ex-Communist,⁵ so its praise of Luxemburg for remaining true to her values holds some weight, although it then goes on to decry her fellow Spartacists for giving in, implying already that the leadership was fracturing. To the more conservative members of the ruling Social Democratic Party, the Spartacists were indistinguishable from the Bolsheviks, as source 9 demonstrates. Source 9 shows the views of the populist ruler, and therefore would appear to reflect public opinion, albeit through the lens of political soapboxing. Nonetheless, the Spartacists were evidentially eerily reminiscent of the Bolsheviks in the eyes of many Germans, which would have been a large factor in their inability to muster much support that proved their undoing.

¹ "The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority." (See source 1)

² See source 2

³ "To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure." (See source 3)

⁴ "Never before was a revolutionary party forced into action in an inflammable situation against its will and with such cynicism." (See source 4)

⁵ Bertram D. Wolfe was a leading anti-Communist during the Cold War period, serving as ideological advisor to the State Department's International Broadcasting Office.

Another issue that invariably comes with a movement led by ideologues rather than soldiers is the fracturing of the leadership, which often spells death for a revolution. Source 20 shows that Rosa Luxemburg, the golden girl of the revolution,⁶ was beginning to drift apart from her contemporaries. The decision to attempt a seizure of power non-democratically ran counter to the spirit of true Marxism, and would have reminded many of the Leninist offshoot that they so wanted to avoid becoming,³ but which their enemies already believed they had done (source 9). Source 21 supports the fracturing hypothesis, with Leviné, a major figure in the revolution,⁷ outright criticising fellow revolutionaries for being insincere in their motives. Whether Schneppenhorst and Durr were genuine or not is immaterial; what matters is that Leviné was willing to call them poseurs and criticise them when he should have been searching for all the allies he could find. Source 6, however, describes a very different Leviné,⁸ and one that appears less susceptible to such dogmatism. The historiography of the source is important in determining its reliability, as Hobsbawm is a well-known Marxist historian⁹ and this could perhaps leave him prone to changing a minor detail of a key Marxist figure in order to better suit his narrative, although this seems unlikely, as Hobsbawm is also a world-renowned historian of great acclaim. Instead, perhaps Leviné's divisiveness can be explained as not naively taking the word of any would-be revolutionaries, his refusal to accept them at face value at odds with the more trusting attitude of his colleagues. Of course, this was again the case for the Bolesheviki in Russia, but whereas they had the charismatic leader figure of Lenin to unify them towards a common goal, the closest the Germans had was Luxemburg, but source 20 would imply that her sway was limited at a time when it was needed most.

Along with the numerous ideological barriers, Germany's suitability for Marxist revolution (recalling the "ripe for revolution" source 9 paraphrase from earlier) was massively suspect. source 4's description of the revolutionaries being "forced into action" contrasts with source 19's promise never to seize power except via "the proletariat's conscious affirmation" of their cause's justness. Marxist theory decrees that successful Marxist revolution requires majority support,^{1 10 11 12} which the Spartacists just did not have. As source 18 explains, Bavaria, and largely by extension Germany, was an agrarian, conservative place. In 2010, 54.4% of Bavarians identified as Catholics.¹³ Extrapolating this backwards, reversing the general trend towards less religious belief,¹⁴ it becomes clear that the Bavaria of 1918 would have been an uphill struggle to radicalise, which helps explain source 13's description of the liberation of Bavaria.¹⁵ True, the Spartacists did manage to set up a Soviet-style government in Bavaria, but it lasted just under a month and in that time saw two presidents, with one of whom (Leviné) even taking advice from Vladimir Lenin,¹⁶ which was unlikely to have helped the public image of the Spartacists.¹⁷ However, source 18

⁶ "Franz Mehring, the biographer of Marx, did not exaggerate when he called Rosa Luxemburg the best brain after Marx." (See source 5)

⁷ Eugene Leviné was a revolutionary who led the short-lived Bavarian Socialist Republic, succeeding Ernst Toller. He was shot in Stadelheim Prison upon the fall of the revolution.

⁸ "Leviné, a lucid, sceptical, efficient professional of revolution among noble amateurs..." (See source 6)

⁹ See source 7

¹⁰ "The masses are the decisive element; they are the rock on which the final victory of the revolution will be built." (See source 8)

¹¹ "The liberation of mankind, as the Marxian saying has it, must be the work of mankind itself, must be majoritarian and democratic. No elite, whether violent or non-violent, can substitute." (See source 9)

¹² "Therefore of course it is a necessary prerequisite that the economic and social conditions for socializing society are ripe." (See source 10)

¹³ See source 11

¹⁴ See source 12

¹⁵ "The long columns of Freikorps soldiers arrogantly goose-stepped into the captured city, to be greeted by a joyful middle class and an ecstatic Catholic clergy" (See source 13)

¹⁶ "Lenin telegraphed his best wishes to Leviné on April 27 [...] Terror was never far from Lenin's mind, and he suggested taking hostages from among the *bourgeoisie*." (See source 14)

¹⁷ Also unlikely to help was Ernst Toller's, the first president, choice of Foreign Affairs Deputy Dr. Franz Lipp, a regular psychiatric patient who declared war on Switzerland over their refusal to loan trains to the Republic, among other

suffers from a potential conflict of interest, with Paul Frölich, founder of the German Communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*, clearly knowing where his loyalties lay and susceptible to perhaps passing responsibility for the failure of the revolution in Bavaria from the revolutionaries and onto Bavaria itself, it being easier to stomach the defeat and deaths of his allies if they were absolved of blame in the matter. He would also obviously be averse to criticising the Marxist ideology that he supported. That said, even if he were to push the blame more onto the Bavarian situation, the fact remains that Bavaria was unsuitable for revolution and, though that is by no means the only cause for the revolution's failure, it is an important one.¹⁸

Not only was Germany not willing to accept these new ideals, they were more than willing to fight back. Post-war Germany was still reeling from the impact of the Great War and the perceived effrontery of the radicals, as seen in source 22, which is written by a national hero and widely-respected general and easy to see putting forth a view similar to that of most Germans who had fought recently, inflamed anger. Even those that were not willing to physically fight back nonetheless fought back with their wills, and the "tiny forces" that source 20 mentions were a testament to the German frustration with what they perceived as high ideals and grand gestures. The aforementioned reactionary ex-soldiers were prime fodder for the Freikorps and their post-war nihilism left them able and willing to deal with the Spartacists with the utmost ruthlessness. This predilection for violence served as yet another nail in the coffin of the Spartacists. As source 23 bluntly displays, the Freikorps were a hardened bunch, and to those who had been through the flames of Flanders, the deaths of a few upstart revolutionaries was nothing to balk at, and if that was only achievable with a measure of collateral damage, then so be it. The SDP were just as eager to see the potentially Bolshevik-emulating Spartacists destroyed (source 9) and so were more inclined to toleration of the Freikorps' more violent episodes, such as the massacre of medical orderlies at Starnberg (source 13, and although this source is clearly aimed at demonising the Freikorps as the precursors to Hitler's rise to power, this and similar incidents are well-documented elsewhere).¹⁹ ²⁰ Faced with such a repressive and battle-hardened foe, the high ideals of the poorly-armed and barely-trained Spartacists proved flimsy armour and they were soon butchered. Even after the failure of the revolution, large swathes of the German public feared Communism, as evidenced by groups such as the German Worker's Party (a predecessor to the Nazi Party), which lasted from 1919 to 1920 and whose party line consisted of the old standby of anti-Semitism and the new zeitgeist of anti-Communism. Whilst the Communist Party of Germany did continue to operate until 1933, and did hold control of Germany for some of the intervening time, the reactionary response to their beliefs (culminating in the Reichstag fire, an arson attack by Dutch Communist Marinus van der Lubbe and the backlash that resulted in their being banned and suppressed by the Nazis) helped the Nazis rise to power. This lasting negative impact that the radical Communists left goes some way to showing just how poorly they must have been received by the German people in 1918, their lack of enthusiasm compounded by their fresh war-weariness.²¹

Perhaps all of this could have been avoided with some outside help from the Bolsheviks, vanguards of the revolution as they so styled themselves. Indeed, many subsequent Communist

anecdotes.

¹⁸ "It is possible, though perhaps not very likely, that Bavaria could have maintained itself as an autonomous and relatively left-wing regime, based on the unity of its labour movement [...] [b]ut a Soviet Republic was doomed." (See source 6)

¹⁹ "On 29 April, and setting the tone to the campaign, the Freikorps captured and shot 21 Red medical orderlies." (See source 15)

²⁰ "It took part in the crushing of the Bavarian Soviet Republic in Munich in May 1919, being responsible for various massacres." (See source 16)

²¹ The Communist Party of Germany, at its peak in the July 1932 German federal election, still only took in 5,282,636 votes, 14.32% of the overall total.

revolutions in other countries²² had been pushed towards success thanks to Russian intervention, but Finland and Hungary both saw crushed Communist revolutions between 1918-19, much as Germany did. Russian absence in all of these conflicts has a very obvious cause; the newly-formed Soviet government were embroiled in their own bloody civil war at the time, with no attention or manpower to spare to upstart rebellions elsewhere for the foreseeable future. A major aspect of Marxism is the concept of world revolution; united the many Communist revolutions could have stood, divided they fell. Furthermore, anti-Semitism was the order of the day in the pre-Nazi European world, and the prevalence of Jews amongst the Bolshevik elite (Trotsky, Zinoviev, etc.) certainly did not help to dispel the notion of Communism as a "Jewish conspiracy". The revolution appears to have contributed to the genesis of the stab-in-the-back legend that Hitler would later use to scapegoat the Jews for Germany's defeat in WWI,²³ but even contemporary reactions focused on the Jews numbered amongst the German revolutionaries (Luxemburg, Eisner and Toller, to name but a few, were Jewish, although others such as Liebknecht were not). This further added to the German public's lack of support and sympathy for the revolution, previously analysed as a major factor in its failure.

Rosa Luxemburg once said "history is the only true teacher, the revolution the best school for the proletariat." Despite this, the German Communists bought into the fears of their enemies and blinkered themselves by refusing to learn from the Bolsheviks in Russia, who had much to teach them about the result of Marxist theory encountering the real world for the first time, much to their detriment. As a result of this, they failed to appreciate just how unsuitable Germany was for revolution, just how weak their forces were, just how little the proletariat supported their cause and just how doomed the entire endeavour was from the start. To their credit they fought on regardless, although the merits of tenaciously sticking to one's guns pale somewhat when the result is a pile of thousands of corpses. Among these corpses lay many of German Communism's leading figures, such as Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner and Karl Liebknecht, and with them died the radical spirit of German Communism.

²² Such as the Mongolian Revolution of 1921 and the National Liberation War in Yugoslavia during WWII

²³ "The work fought for by our fathers with their precious blood – dismissed by betrayal in the ranks of our own people! Germany, yesterday still undefeated, left to the mercy of our enemies by men carrying the German name, by felony out of our own ranks broken down in guilt and shame." (See source 17)

Expanded Sources

1. (Source 4) "Never before was a revolutionary party forced into action in an inflammable situation against its will and with such cynicism. Never were the militant workers so severely punished for it. Never was a game so clearly envisaged by a superior, not only "equal" opponent. Never had a revolutionary party resisted with such determination taking part in an ostensibly revolutionary action. Never had a revolutionary party to master such a bizarre, daily changing situation."
2. (Source 6) "It is possible, though perhaps not very likely, that Bavaria could have maintained itself as an autonomous and relatively left-wing regime, based on the unity of its labour movement [...] [b]ut a Soviet Republic was doomed. [...] A Soviet Republic was proclaimed in Munich and enthusiastically joined by the numerous, often anarchist and semi-anarchist writers and intellectuals of what was Germany's most celebrated Latin Quarter. Leviné, a lucid, sceptical, efficient professional of revolution among noble amateurs living out the dream of liberation and confused militants, knew that it was lost, but also that it had to fight."
3. (Source 10) "Otto Braun, board member of the SPD and later prime minister of Prussia, clarified the position of his party in a leading article in the SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* under the title 'The Bolsheviks and Us': 'Socialism cannot be erected on bayonets and machine guns. If it is to last, it must be realized with democratic means. Therefore of course it is a necessary prerequisite that the economic and social conditions for socializing society are ripe. If this was the case in Russia, the Bolsheviks no doubt could rely on the majority of the people. As this is not the case, they established a reign of the sword that could not have been more brutal and reckless under the disgraceful regime of the Tzar. [...] Therefore we must draw a thick, visible dividing line between us and the Bolsheviks.'" (See source 10)
4. (Source 13) "[On] 29 April, Starnberg [...] was taken by the Freikorps [...] despite a determined defence by 350 Red soldiers. Twenty-one unarmed Red medical orderlies were captured and shot on the spot – an atrocity presaging many similar massacres in the coming days."
"The long columns of Freikorps soldiers arrogantly goose-stepped into the captured city, to be greeted by a joyful middle class and an ecstatic Catholic clergy"
5. (Source 18) "Bavaria is not economically self-sufficient. Its industries are extremely backward and the predominant agrarian population, while a factor in favour of the counter-revolution, cannot at all be viewed as pro-revolutionary. A Soviet Republic without areas of large scale industry and coalfields is impossible in Germany. Moreover the Bavarian proletariat is only in a few giant industrial plants genuinely disposed towards revolution and unhampered by petty *bourgeois* traditions, illusions and weaknesses."
6. (Source 19) "The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat's conscious affirmation of the views, aims, and methods of struggle of the Spartacus League."
7. (Source 20) "In vain did [Luxemburg] try to convince them that to oppose both the Councils and the Constituent Assembly with their tiny forces was madness and a breaking of their democratic faith. They voted to try to take power in the streets, that is by armed uprising."
8. (Source 21) "I have just learned of your plans. We Communists harbour profound suspicion of a soviet republic initiated by the Social Democrat minister Schneppenhorst and men like Durr, who up to now have combated the soviet system with all their power. At best we can interpret their attitude as the attempt of bankrupt leaders to ingratiate themselves with the masses by seemingly revolutionary action, or worse, as a deliberate provocation."
9. (Source 22) "They and the Soldiers' Councils worked with zeal, determination and purpose to destroy the whole military structure. Such was the gratitude of the new homeland to the

German soldiers who had bled and died for it in millions. The destruction of Germany's power to defend herself – the work of Germans – was the most tragic crime the world has witnessed.”

10. (Source 23) “In a 'pep' talk to his colleagues Major Schulz of the Lützow corps announced: “Anyone who doesn't understand that there is a lot of hard work here, or whose conscience bothers him had better get out. It's better to kill a few innocent people than to let one guilty person escape.””

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