

The Road to the KPD

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On 1 January 1919 the German Communist Party (KPD) was founded by revolutionary socialists who had emerged out of different traditions. Rather than coming from nowhere, the KPD was founded as a result of two processes. The first process lay in the political and, partly organisational, differences that emerged within the pre-war Social Democratic party (SPD). The second process lay in the speeding up of a new radical left, after outbreak of the First World War, when the SPD voted for war-credits; this ushered in new parties, small groups and tendencies, which finally coalesced into the KPD. This article sketches the process by which these new formations arose, and traces the key debates among the participants.

Preliminaries: Political differentiation and the struggle between the left and right wings in the SPD before 1914

Prior to 1914, the SPD was the greatest and most successful workers' party in the world, and was the crown jewel in the Second International. It could count a million members, 110 parliamentary representatives in the Reichstag, as well as 231 Regional Assembly representatives, 11,000 local government level representatives and 320 magistrates. By 1899 the party had over 73 newspapers with a circulation of 400,000. Of these 49 appeared daily.

From this basis the SPD supported a range of mass workers' organisations: in the co-operative movement there were 1.3 million people organised, while 2.6 million workers were in the Social Democratic Trade Unions. Then there were the women's organisations, the gymnastic clubs and the choirs. Theoretically the party was based on the radical Marxist principles set out in the Erfurt Programme of 1891, which speaks of "an irreconcilable, and increasingly bitter, class conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat... The gulf between those who do and do not possess property will widen through crises that are essential to the capitalist mode of production, becoming wider and more violent, raising general insecurity in the face of the normal state of society, and this can be evidenced by the development of the productive forces, which today takes place above the heads of the people, so that the private ownership of the means of production becomes fragmented by its complete application and free development."

Nevertheless, beneath the red façade a subliminal struggle was being waged between wings of the party. Its kernel consisted of the following: each wing was convinced that the task of the party was to advance the condition of the working class as it existed within capitalism. The dispute was over the swiftest way in which social reforms could be carried out. The right wing, led by Eduard Bernstein, aimed to carry these out through a parliamentary majority and coalition politics. The official position of the party's majority was that the SPD could only succeed through "unremitting refusal" and the method of class struggle. Beyond that, the Trade Union struggle for higher wages and a shorter working day should be pursued. Moreover, the dispute was about whether the transition from capitalism to socialism could be achieved through gradual legal reforms, or whether this could only be brought about through the revolutionary class struggle. For Bernstein and those 'Revisionists' who characterised the right wing, it was only once a series of steady reforms were underway that the transition was conceivable – until a certain time when, with the mandate of a majority, the SPD could finish off a virtually tamed capitalism that would transform into socialism.

Bernstein's position was strikingly in line with the economic developments in the two decades prior to the First World War.

Germany was booming. The average annual rate of growth from 1895 to 1913 was around 3.3 per cent – three times as high as during the previous period of the long depression. This set off the impulse for imperialist colonial policies, in which all industrialists concurrently and against one another participated. The average hourly wage in the period 1867-1873 increased by 45 per cent, from 1873-1879 they fell by 15 per cent, and in the thirteen years between 1882 and 1895 they rose back gradually by 27 per cent, and then from 1895 to 1913 they rose swiftly and continuously by 54 per cent. The working day sank gradually but steadily to 9 to 10 hours by 1913. The right wing of the SPD used these developments together with the growth of the SPD's electoral votes and membership as evidence for the parliamentary and trade union struggle, and for the fundamental transformation of capitalism.

At its starkest the 'pragmatism' was widespread among the trade union bureaucracy that had recently emerged. Their practical activity was based, above all else, on negotiating minor improvements for the working population with employers. Gradually this became the sole perspective of the SPD. They began to establish a 'Social Democratic niche' within the Kaiser's regime. They aimed to deal on 'level' terms with Kaiser's regime and the employers – thus to achieve equal recognition.

The Trade Union bureaucracy merged ever more fully into the chief layers of the SPD's apparatus. The total share of Trade Union bureaucrats in the Reichstag faction, that was only 11.6 per cent in 1893, was already at 32.7 per cent by 1912.

The gradual integration of the SPD into the structure of the Kaiser's regime was not without internal party opposition. Intellectual attacks on the policy of Bernstein and the theory and practice of the trade union bureaucracy was most prominently made by Rosa Luxemburg. Her two pamphlets *Reform and Revolution* (1898) and *The Mass Strike: Party and Unions* (1905) are to this day most effective as deconstructions of the reformist position. Luxemburg achieved such an intellectual victory that the pre-war programme of the SPD was a radical critique of the system that could be proclaimed from the soapbox. Yet this did not check the changes taking place within the SPD. Here social processes were at work that no amount of intellectual clarity could overcome. Deitmar Dath in his biography of Luxemburg makes the point both tragically and beautifully: "The polemical struggle was won, but the political struggle lost: this model of misalignment stuck to all the key campaigns in which Rosa Luxemburg was involved."

What Luxemburg and her comrades did not do was to develop a structured oppositional tendency within the party. This had many causes: firstly, the left of the party around Luxemburg could not conceive the possibility of the sell-out which actually took place with the vote for the war-credits in 1914 (Luxemburg fell into a deep depression when she heard of the decision of the Reichstag faction). In this she did not stand alone, other international socialists felt that it came like a bolt from the blue; Lenin simply disbelieved the news, which marked the derangement and the splitting up of the socialist movement.

Secondly, as a result of the persecution of Social Democracy under Bismarck, internal party discipline and secrecy were raised to the value of a cult within the organisation. The idea that any form of

faction fight would assist the bourgeois state in its struggle against Social Democracy was deeply held and furthered the self-disciplining of the left in the party.

The splitting of the Dutch SDAP was perceived by the left as a warning. Here at the close of the 19th century there were similar debates as those that took place between Luxemburg and Bernstein, albeit with different organisational consequences: the left of the party broke ranks in 1907, with its own publication *The Tribune*, in which the reformist position was sharply attacked. The party leadership demanded that *The Tribune* ceased, which resulted in 1909 in the expulsion of the opposition. The expelled opposition formed a new party, the SDP, with 400 members and was effected by its deep enmity towards the SPAD. The SDP used many of its powers to attack the SDAP, but just before the war it achieved no more than the status of a small group. By 1914 the SDP had 525 members and *The Tribune* had only 1,266 subscribers and was, in the words of the party's leadership "completely unknown to the Dutch working class". The path of inner-party opposition as an organisational solution to the majority of Social Democrats appeared, before the war, to be a blind alley.

Even the experience of the Russian Social Democrats does not alter this view. In this case Lenin had established an inner-party faction, the Bolsheviks, following a protracted dispute against the right wing Mensheviks in 1903. Henceforth Russian Social Democracy became an umbrella under which two significant and diverse factions existed with their own publications and structures. Prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, there had been an apparent but difficult set of motions to reunify the party in 1906, which was a long factional dispute resulting eventually in the splitting of the party in 1912. Stalinism has retrospectively made use of these disputes as part of a general line, that runs from 1903, when the genius Lenin founded the Bolsheviks as a 'new type of party' against Reformism and opportunism, to the glorious victory of 1917, and resulting in the construction of the Soviet Union under Stalin. According to this history, Rosa Luxemburg and her colleagues did not do this, but remained in the SPD and simply did not have the capacity to achieve the struggle for socialism.

In fact there is a grain of truth in this account: Lenin's leadership drove forward an ideological clarification and organisational struggle that made the Bolshevik organisation into a possibility, which went on to play a central role during the war years and the revolutionary wave that followed – but this was an option that the German radical left could only dream of.

At the same time it is unhistorical to ascribe to actors motives and clarity that they did not have in the historical process itself. Therefore it did not occur to Lenin to develop a model that countered pre-war German Social Democracy. In contrast Lenin, like everyone in the Socialist International, was deeply influenced by the harsh centralisation and organisational discipline of the SPD and aimed to adapt these features to the local conditions within the autocratic Tsarist regime. The Bolsheviks referred to the SPD, rather than distinguishing themselves, when they were formed. Lenin only became aware of the problematic ideological foundations of Social Democracy by 1914 – long after Rosa Luxemburg.

On the contrary, for Lenin and others following him, the Bolsheviks did not set out with a concept of the party, but rather as an ideologically united faction within an ideologically divided organisation, which was the Russian Social Democratic Party. The Bolsheviks were not pushed to create a party outside Russian Social Democracy, but rather sought to defend the revolutionary principles of the

party against an attack from the right. This struggle was successful – so successful that in the party conference in Prague in 1912, the Mensheviks did not put up a contest, due to the predictable dominance of the Bolsheviks. The Prague conference resulted in the formation of the Russian Social Democrats (Bolshevik), and shortly after in Vienna the non-Bolshevik Social Democrats founded in contrast to the Russian Social Democratic Party (Mensheviks). In contrast to previous disputes, the fact that this split constituted the final separation, which the actual participants recognised, is historically undisputed. The Social Democratic faction within the Russian parliament at first remained united – in 1913 the Bolshevik representatives formed an open split and formed their own faction. In addition given the narrow circles of Social Democracy, the split at the top was not noticeable – here supporters of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks worked together. The Bolshevik dominated Pravda published many proclamations aimed at the Mensheviks and published articles by leading Mensheviks. The source materials leave open the question of whether these proclamations of unity were seriously intended or a tactic, so that the Russian workers blame the Mensheviks for the continuing split. If it was a tactic it reflected an important point: in the pre-war international revolutionary Social Democratic movement a split was scandalous, so that no one, Lenin included, would have announced a split lightly. This can be seen with the resolution of the Bureau of the Second International that was adopted at Rosa Luxemburg's urging and stated: "... that the International Bureau declares it the bounden duty of all Social Democratic groups in Russia seriously and honestly agree to attempt the restoration the unity of the party organisation, and to put an end to the present damaging and discouraging disputes."

This resolution casts a light on the way in which the reorganisation among the Russian Social Democrats was viewed by Socialists outside Russia: as a deranged and damaging process that one ought to overturn.

Internal party opposition in the pre-war SPD: The Bremen Left

Rosa Luxemburg was unable to form an oppositional structure around her before 1914, though from December 1913 she produced together with Franz Mehring and Julian Karski the *Social Democratic Correspondence*, which appeared three times a week. However there were others on the left. The most outstanding example was the so-called 'Bremen Left', whose politics exerted a significant influence over the later SPD Opposition and later the newly constituted KPD.

The Bremen Left was a product of the intensive class struggle that took place in this Hanseatic city: the printers' strike of 1891, the dockers of 1896, the shoemakers and the workers in the Jute textiles industry of 1897, the barrel makers and the streetcleaners of 1899, the construction workers and the gasworks of 1900, the tailors and painters of 1901, the plumbers and shoemakers' assistants, the workers from the Vulcan and the Rickmers-Reismühle of 1903, the carpenters, painters and construction workers' lock out of 1904, the shipyard workers of AG and the tailors of 1905. The shipyard workers formed the core of the revolutionary workers in Bremen and were the mainstay of the radical left wing of the local SPD. They were supported by a group of radical teachers around Johann Knief, who around 1906 was emboldened by the experience of class struggle and the theoretical working out of texts like Rosa Luxemburg's *Mass Strike*, which declared war on the local right wing of the party. The left succeeded in winning a majority on the executive board and among the educational workers. In 1910 the Dutch socialist Anton Pannekoek was sent to Bremen to act as an educational leader on Marxist theory – as a fiery personality, Pannekoek was one of the

theoretical leaders of the Dutch left splinter party the SDP. Up to 1500 people attended these educational events, mostly workers.

The Trade Union Bureaucracy, who determined the outward manner of the SPD in Bremen, were naturally displeased with these general developments. The conflict sharpened during the course of the shipyard strikes of 1910 and 1913. This was especially the case in 1913, when the Trade Union leadership turned their organisation and organisational discipline on the strikers, by capitulating to the employers and exposing the workers who had struck at the onset to the employers' campaign of victimisation. The woodworkers' newspaper expressed the findings of the workers: the strikers were not defeated by the employers but by the "shortsightedness of their representatives".

This experience left a mark on the Bremen left - it radicalised their critique of reformist positions into a fundamental critique of the bureaucracy in the party and the unions. In the words of Johan Knief: "like any other bureaucracy, ours exists to attain power. But it was not a means to attain power over the bureaucracy of the state, but rather to perform its task of assisting the state bureaucracy in the exploitation of the masses."¹

Shortly before the war, the Bremen left had a hundred members and was one of the best radical workers' groups anchored within the local SPD. They made use of a well-known newspaper that was regional. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg in 1912, they were the "spearhead of radicalism in Germany." Politically they refused to stand for positions, and were what we would today describe as ultra-left. Their critique of the trade unions took the form of a refusal to participate in reformist dominated unions, and their critique of parliament took the form of refusing to participate in bourgeois parliaments.

Following the outbreak of war: Whether to remain in the SPD

The evening of 4th August 1914: a handful of supporters of the SPD-Left gathered in Rosa Luxemburg's apartment in Berlin. The atmosphere is oppressive, the inconceivable has taken place: a few hours before the SPD-faction in the Reichstag has voted in favour of war credits. In that moment the party threw in its support for a war that it had warned about for years previously.

Up to this point the SPD had expressed a clear anti-war standpoint. Only two years earlier they had furnished a resolution which stated: "In the event of the outbreak of war, it is the duty of Social Democracy to bring it to a swift end, and strive with all of their power against those who would use the war to shake up and exploit the people, and to hasten the elimination of the capitalist ruling class." Yet when words had to be supported by deeds, the SPD leadership were moved by the outcome of their integration into the Kaiser's regime.

The left around Rosa Luxemburg had met to discuss what they should do about the situation. The group was tiny – a consequence of the lack of organisational work prior to the war.

Everyone present agreed to develop an anti-war movement among the workers. The dispute was over the organisational consequences of the betrayal of the SPD leadership for the left. The notion

¹ I have excluded the following sentence, which I felt did not add any significant meaning to the text being quoted and struggled to translate properly: "Keine instanz ist Davon auszuschliessen: Parteibürokratie, Gewerkschafts – und Genossenschaftsbürokratie."

of a collective and open exit from the party was discounted – and dismissed by all participants after a short discussion. A couple of years later Rosa Luxemburg wrote: “One can easily leave a sect or conventicle to pass into another sect or conventicle, or found a sect or conventicle. It is nothing but an immature fantasy, to free the masses from the heaviest and most dangerous yoke of the bourgeoisie through a simple exit, and by this act to offer them a brave example to follow.”

Luxemburg’s long-standing companion, Leo Jogiches, set out clear criteria for remaining within the SPD. “The components of the existing opposition in the SPD can be maintained, as long as their independent political action is not impaired. The opposition should remain in the party, but only to struggle against the majority and thwart them step by step, by using the party as a space to recruit for a working class anti-imperialist class struggle.”

Luxemburg and her comrades therefore came to the conclusion that the grassroots of the SPD were confused, but were uneasy over the leadership’s change of course. On this basis they decided to pursue a dual-strategy. Firstly they would use pamphlets to appeal directly to the workers, and so develop an extra-parliamentary opposition to the war. Secondly they would fight against the war at all levels of the SPD. The pamphlets would go under the title of the *Spartacus Letters*, and so the group around Luxemburg during the course of the war became known as the ‘Spartakusbund’.

Fermentation within the party

The strategy spread very quickly as a rumour in the SPD. In many local branches the protests against the war were vocal. On 6 August the overwhelming majority of the Stuttgart branch meeting expressed dissatisfaction with the Reichstag faction. The left made progress there, excluded the right of the party and took over control of the local newspaper. This was not a standalone instance: *Der Braunschweiger Volksfreund* in Brunswick, *das Gothaer Volksblatt* in Gotha, *Der Kampf* in Duisburg, as well as the party papers in Nuremberg, Halle, Leipzig and Berlin protested equally against the vote for war credits, reflecting the rejection being expressed by the greater part of the grassroots of the party. The Bremen newspaper and left had naturally switched to anti-war agitation, and fired from both barrels at the leadership of the party.

This dissatisfaction affected even the Reichstag-faction of the SPD. On 4 August all of the representatives had voted for the war credits – even Karl Liebknecht, a close collaborator with Luxemburg – in order not to breach discipline. From that point Liebknecht was sharply criticised at the party-meetings for his conduct, and he began openly within the faction to work against the war. In this way he managed to draw more representatives to his position. By the time that another motion on war credits was tabled on 22 October 1914, five SPD representatives walked out of the chamber in protest. Barely a month later on 2 December, Liebknecht was the first representative to vote against war credits. When the vote was taken in March 1915, 30 SPD representatives walked out of the chamber, and a year after the outbreak of war, on August 19, 36 SPD representatives voted against war credits.

Die Internationale

In order to spread their ideas and critique of the SPD leadership, Luxemburg and her comrades decided to bring out a newspaper. The paper should bring together the most well-known anti-war personalities who could be found throughout the party. Furthermore, this would act to establish a

solid ideological basis for an anti-war network. The first issue of *Die Internationale* came out in April 1915 and was a huge success: out of 9,000 printed copies, 5,000 were distributed on the first evening. The demand among the grassroots of the SPD for anti-war ideas was enormous.

Due to the success of the first edition of *Die Internationale*, a second edition never came out – the censors of the authorities were merciless. Yet it only partly worked: as a consequence of the war-weariness, the movement against the war made progress.

On 1 May 1916, around 10,000 people in Berlin marched in the streets against the war. Liebknecht seized the moment and cried: “Down with the war! Down with the government!” Thereupon he was imprisoned and a wave of protests was triggered. By 27 June 25,000 workers demonstrated in Berlin for his release. The following day 55,000 workers protested by going on strike for his release.

In parallel to this burgeoning movement the power structure within the SPD began to shift. In 1916 the opposition had linked-up SPD members in 300 towns. The leadership came under ever greater pressure.

Three Currents

By this time the SPD was split into three internal party currents. To the left there were the revolutionary internationalists. They consisted of two key groups: the first was the Spartakusbund around Rosa Luxemburg, who were organisationally weak, but had well-known figures like Liebknecht or the renowned party-historian Franz Mehring among its ranks. The other group was the Bremen Left, which was certainly less well-known, but had built a more realistic organisational structure, and had spread out to nearby cities, most notably Hamburg.

The internationalists stood by the political principles that they had formulated in the pre-war SPD: no co-operation with their own ruling class in the war, but international workers’ solidarity in order to bring about the end of the war. They held by the analysis of the French socialist Jean Jaurès: “Capitalism contains war within itself, like clouds contain the rain.” On this account they sought to shake up the domination of the capitalists. They saw protests and mass strikes by workers and soldiers as the means to achieve this end.

On the right side of the spectrum there were the ‘Social Patriots’. These were the Social Democrats who had taken the side of the Kaiser and supported the war. A few of them were harnessed by the Kaiser and the government to make war-propaganda. The Social Patriots controlled the leadership of the trade unions and tried to ensure that the embattled workers in occupations protected from active service, did not disrupt the ‘truce’ with the government. The burgeoning protest movement in the SPD sought to disrupt the authority of the Social Patriots, as those who were opposing the war were being excluded or extradited by the police. Many left-wing radicals were being seized and marched off to the front, while the patriotic functionaries were being spared.

Between these wings there stood those known as the ‘Centrists’. Their representatives followed a politics of ‘so-so’. At first the majority of them had supported the war. Through the combination of the ensuring horror from the front and the influence of the revolutionary internationalists they moved in an anti-war direction. At the same time the Centrists did not conduct an open struggle against the Social Patriots, as they did not wish to risk the unity of the party. They appealed to the Kaiser and the military leadership to bring the war to an end, and took part in peace groups to no

avail. They refrained from supporting the development of an anti-war movement that had broadened into a revolutionary movement, or only lent it half-hearted support. The leader of this current was the Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky. In March 1916, they collected themselves together within the SPD to form the Social Democratic Workers' Society (SAG).

How would these fluctuating currents play out? This was a major question facing Rosa Luxemburg and her comrades. One proposal was to build an organisation within the SPD. Luxemburg was against this move. At an anti-war conference convened in the winter of 1916, she wrote: "our tactics at this conference must be, not to put under one roof the entire opposition, but rather to draw out of this mish-mash a kernel of small groups that are capable of taking action, who we could group around our platform. In summing up the organisational task, caution is needed. A merger of the left would, according to my long and bitter experience in the party only bind the hands of the few people capable of taking action."

It counts for nothing that Luxemburg was against the concrete practical unification of the opposition to the war. All told, she believed that the internal differences between the Centrists and the revolutionaries was so great, that by an organisational merger the ability of revolutionaries to act would be impaired. This could be seen over the lack of unity on the question of whether it was worthwhile to support strike action against the war.

The USPD, the Spartakusbund and the ISD

By the end of 1916 the SPD had drifted continuously towards a split. During the autumn a greater number of local branches decided not to handover the membership dues to the Party leadership. By the time that the opposition organised its first national conference on 7 January 1917, the leadership of the SPD decided the fate of all the opposition, the revolutionaries as well as the greater part of the Centrists. Their separation from the SPD was complete. At the commencement of the war, the party had around 1 million members. Following the split it was around 200,000.

Those who had been expelled organised a national conference in Gotha at the beginning of April, at which they agreed to the formation of the Independent Social Democrats (USPD). At their founding conference delegates took from the SPD a share of 91 Social Democratic constituency organisations and 15 Reichstag seats. The USPD was made up of a heterogeneous membership: among their prominent founders were those who opposed the war from the first moment, such as Hugo Haase and Kurt Eisner, Marxist theoreticians like Karl Kautsky, but also theoretical precursors from the right like Eduard Bernstein, who certainly rejected participation in the war, but did not strive for a revolutionary reconstitution of society.

Following the foundation of the USPD the question of organisation took on a new form for revolutionaries. Work in the SPD was prevented by disciplinary measures meted out by the leadership, yet the relationship with the new party was still to be determined. Is it better to agitate outside the party or to participate in the internal factional work within? Revolutionaries were divided on this point. The Bremen Left stayed out of the USPD, because they had earlier attacked the Centrists for their half-hearted and fluctuating position.

Rosa Luxemburg also did not withdraw her previous critique of the half-heartedness of the Centrists – to the contrary. In spite of this she argued with some success for the Spartakusbund to enter the

USPD. Her reflections were as follows: The German workers' movement needed a mass party, which was not only against the war, but was also receptive to the struggle against the whole capitalist system. Such a party does not just drop down from the sky, but is the result of a process of maturation, whose first phase was decided by the organisational split from the SPD and the formation of the USPD. The USPD had positioned itself some way to the left of a substantial portion of the SPD apparatus and those dependent on the SPD. At the same time the new party spanned such a broad space that, in the event of a major social crisis, such as a mass revolutionary movement, a crisis in the USPD would be inevitable.

Rosa Luxemburg's closest companion in struggle over many years, Leo Jogiches summed this up: "It can be said that while the new party unites a greater portion of the masses, it also acts as a space to recruit to our position, and for a decisive oppositional direction to benefit; it finally can be said that the party as a whole could be driven forward through relentless critique, through our activity within the organisation itself and also through independent actions, so that eventually they can be weaned off their damaging influences by the counter-influences of the class."²

The Bremen Left sharply criticised the move of entering the USPD claiming that the Spartakusbund had sacrificed its independence. That was in no case the reality. In their activity in the party the Spartakists did not let go of their activity in the anti-war movement. When all is said and done, the organisation grew, and by the end of 1917 the bourgeois state sought with all its power to strike a blow at the radical left. So many Spartakists were sent to the front or incarcerated, that the Russian emissary Josef Joffe wrote in sober tones about the situation for the German left at the beginning of 1918: "There is no real opposition. The Independents [USPD] are beaten down and disgustingly lacking in principles. The Spartakists are completely smashed, the greater part of them are doing time in prison, while others are silenced and powerless." By the summer of 1918 this picture had not altered, as Joffe wrote to Lenin: "If I write directly about the concerns of the revolutionary workers, that the Independents are absolutely unreliable, and the Spartakists, meanwhile, are smashed. An illegal apparatus can achieve nothing, and the illegal literature, except for the pamphlets we bring here, achieves nothing ... it is very difficult to do anything, when the best people sit in prison, and the others are barely any use, whether they are young or old."

The Bremen Left meanwhile founded a new organisation, the International Socialists of Germany (ISD) and produced a magazine, *Arbeiterpolitik*, which continued the successful history of the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung*. Through a close connection with Karl Radek (who had already in 1907 been active in the SPD and knew supporters of the Bolsheviks in Germany) they gained quasi-exclusive rights for the *Arbeiterpolitik* to report on and analyse the Russian Revolution that had been unfolding since February 1917. In Germany the ISD was essentially the advocate and recruiter for the politics of the Bolsheviks and quickly acted as their German section. In spite of its prestige in the eyes of radical workers, the organisation's development was hampered by similar problems as the Spartakusbund – its core activists like Johann Knief were sent to the front, and many other cadre were in prison.

The left during the revolution

In November 1918 the long-awaited moment for the radical left arrived. In spite of the adversity it had faced, the Spartakusbund had broadened its organisational network up to this time. It had used

² I am not sure if I have understood the final clause of this sentence.

eight publications with a circulation of between 25,000 and 100,000, which is exemplary, given that – up to that moment – almost the entire leadership of the Spartakusbund was in prison. Therefore the radical left (the Spartakusbund and the ISD) were barely able to form a relationship with the gigantic revolutionary movement that broke out: the organisations combined had barely 3 or 4 thousand members.

Rosa Luxemburg feared that the SPD would take over the head of the revolutionary movement and stifle it. Already the party was in the Government of the wavering Kaiser. Luxemburg wrote at the time: “The reigning socialism is positioning itself right now by entering the government as the rescuer of capitalism, and to get in the way of the coming revolution.” Therefore she campaigned from the beginning of the revolution for the USPD to back the revolutionary soldiers and workers without any ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’. Her essential argument was that once the revolution ceased to spread, in the event of the workers not having taken power away from the owners of the factories, the old order would be able to return and take its frightful vengeance.

The course of the revolution and the ensuing civil war proved her right, though in the revolutionary crisis of November 1918 Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartakusbund were in the position of a minority. Meanwhile the SPD set out to form a unity government with the USPD.

On one occasion the Spartakusbund sought to take back the rudder and called for a conference with the USPD to debate a new course. As soon as they failed, they decided to leave the USPD and to set up a new party. Luxemburg proclaimed: “there was no longer any room for half-heartedness and doubt in the revolution”, and the Spartakists expected a sudden exodus from the USPD. To sum up Luxemburg said: “We have listened to the USPD, and must draw out of the USPD whoever can be drawn out, and attract the most valuable elements in the USPD who could be radicalised (however slight the achievement). In the meantime the USPD acts as a fig-leaf for the Ebert-Scheidemann SPD government.”³

As a result a new party, the Communist Party (KPD), was founded during a conference that lasted from 30 December to 1 January. It was essentially a merger of the Spartakusbund with the ISD, who, in the meantime had changed their name to the International Communists of Germany (IKD). This merger had an organisational precursor. In October 1918, and thus prior to the outbreak of the November Revolution, the Spartakists had invited members of the IKD to their national conference in order to discuss a joint political platform. There were noticeable differences between the Spartakists and the Left Radicals. Their representative Fritz Wolffheim put forward the demand that the Spartakists leave the USPD and establish a standalone Communist Party. At that point in time Spartakists refused, stating that leaving the USPD: “is absolutely crazy and in this moment pointless.”

Wolffheim’s only proposal was to discuss the question of trade unions and political severance of the future communist organisation from them. Wolffheim and his colleagues argued for a united organisation which brought together the party with radical trade unions. The consequence was understood to be that communists should exit from the existing trade unions. This was a form of politics that was strictly rejected by the Spartakists, who understood the task to be to influence SPD

³ I am not sure I have got this translation right, but the original is not footnoted, so I cannot check this against other translations.

workers to join a mass organisation linked to the workers' movement. The debate was protracted, and the trade union question would hang like a sword of a Damocles over the young party.

The gathering at the turn of the year 1919⁴ was marked by the wider revolutionary process and the events that were radicalising the workers. Misjudging the situation, in which the SPD were taking control of the revolutionary movement in order to improve the grip of the old elite, many of the participants wanted the party to avoid long detours and tactical manoeuvres, and to attack the system directly and destroy it. In such a mood the Left Radicals found a strong resonance. Rosa Luxemburg and those supporting her, were unable to win the debate over the question of trade unions and to dissuade the delegates from supporting the call to establish new revolutionary trade unions; they were also unable to achieve anything more in the debates over the parliamentary vote: the conference decided to support a boycott of the up and coming national constituency elections.

In short, the delegates had high hopes at the founding conference of the KPD. Yet one of their greatest assumptions turned out to be false: the breaking apart of the USPD.

On the contrary, the USPD grew rapidly: over the same weekend in which the KPD was founded, the USPD walked out of the coalition with the SPD and turned sharply to the left. It tripled its membership from 100,000 in November to nearly 300,000 in January. The protracted strike wave in the Ruhr, the Bavarian Soviet Republic and the Kapp Putsch all contributed to the growth of the party. In October 1920, it came close to having 900,000 members. By the time of the June 1920 elections it polled 17.9% of the electorate, just short of the SPD, which polled 21.3%. Not only did the party attract radical workers, but it also radicalised itself.

The KPD, on the contrary made few inroads into the labour-force. In the beginning of 1919 the party was banned, and only a few weeks after being set up, Luxemburg, Liebknecht and Jogiches were murdered, robbing the party of its most experienced leaders. As a result the party was damaged by internal strife, and the disputes with the Left Radicals widened until the party split during its 1919 conference in Heidelberg. From that point the leadership sought to use elections as a tactical means and to establish the party within the trade unions, and the Left Radicals were expelled. They set up the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD), taking approximately half the membership of the KPD with them (according to research it is estimated that out of 100,000 members 45-60,000 left). New life was breathed in to the party with the splitting of the USPD. Rosa Luxemburg had been right: the USPD eventually fell apart due to its contradictions. The split took place during the USPD party conference in October 1920. The members of the party had moved so far to the left that the majority of those in the conference voted to merge with the KPD. It is unclear how many people were in the KPD, but overnight they had 300,000 new members and were a mass party. The United Communist Party of Germany (VKPD) would have a significant impact on the history of the Weimar Republic.

Conclusion

Was the KPD founded too late by Rosa Luxemburg? The leader of the party in 1920, Paul Levi dealt with this question in the following way: "Where the proletariat is yet to be engaged in revolutionary

⁴ I have not translated the opening sentence: "Dies zeichnete sich schon bei der dann zum Jahreswechsel 1918/1919 abgehaltenen Gründungsversammlung ab." Rather I have sought to truncate it with the following sentence.

action, so [we can say] it is never too soon to establish a Communist Party. No Communist here in Germany is in any doubt that the establishment of a Communist Party should have been carried out before the war, and that back in 1903 those Communists who were too small to form anything but a sect, should have gathered to form a small but clear group.”

1903 as a point in time was not chosen at random. Rather it signified the year when Lenin and the Bolsheviks reputedly established themselves as the majority of the Russian Social Democrats. Though it is less clear whether Lenin had in mind the clarification of a platform, than the enactment of a split. In any case, before he undertook the split, he had recognised the need to address weaknesses in the organisational form and content [of Russian Social Democracy].⁵ One does not, however, need to guess that Lenin was operating in Russia, which was a different situation. Luxemburg came to Germany in 1898 to a party that had a long tradition with a well-established structure. Meanwhile Lenin joined Russian Social Democracy in the 1890's when it was still a loose federation of local workers' groups.

Luxemburg's position on the question of the way the radical left should organise is contradictory. On the one hand she held fast to the view since 1904 of Lenin as a 'splitter'. Most interesting is her rationale, that Lenin's struggle against the opportunistic right-wing was conducted too sharply, because opportunism had no real social basis in Russia. This was in contrast to the West, where the trade union bureaucracy acted as a transmission belt for revisionist ideas to be established in the party.⁶

Yet Rosa Luxemburg did not draw the conclusion that Lenin's way was the right one to pursue against the German right wing. The reason was not down to carelessness or inconsequentiality, but rather due to an alternative conception, which she had developed in *The Mass Strike*. Here she set out the idea that a massive upsurge in the class struggle would push aside the right wing and the trade union bureaucracy. A tragic error flowing from this position was that the exact opposite happened during the November Revolution: the right wing suppressed the revolution.

An upsurge in class struggle only helps, if there is an organised, experienced and influential enough body to act as a leadership in waiting, who can replace the old leadership at the onset of a wave of class struggle.

Historical hindsight is always a fine thing, yet there are some considerations worth making: there are good grounds for stating that a splitting of the SPD before 1914 would have achieved nothing if the Dutch example is anything to go by. In 1912 August Babel died, and he had long held such authority and credibility, that anyone who split his party, would be isolated.

What the example of the Bremen left showed was a way, within the SPD, to develop a left faction that was capable of action, with a firm structure of party cells and supported with publications. In a crisis such a faction can play a necessary part that is clear and comprehensible to the working class.

⁵ This is a very free translation of the following sentence: 'Allerdings nahm er eher die Spaltung in Kauf, als das organisatorisch und inhaltlich als richtige Erkannte zu verwässern.'

⁶ I have omitted the following sentence because I could not render it in a way that flowed into the argument of the following paragraph: 'Die Logik dieser Position wäre, dass die radikale Linke in der deutschen SPD sich noch viel besser hätte organisieren müssen als die Bolschewiki. Weil die rechten Gegenkräfte auch viel starker waren.'

Essentially the outbreak of war in 1914 acted as such a crisis, and the radical left inserted themselves as majority at this point in time, which they maintained up to the revolution.

Richard Müller, the leader of the Berlin revolutionary shop stewards' movement, commented that the absence of a party caused the failure of the revolution. Looking back in 1925 he wrote: "The proletariat could barely understand the take-over by the powers that be, when the activists and most experienced portion of their political leaders did not understand, and there was no party with a clear political programme and revolutionary experience present at hand." The outcome, as we know, was catastrophic, and is reason enough for these historical experiences to inform political and organisational debate today.