



Pierre Broue. *The German Revolution, 1917-1923.* Leiden: Brill, 2005. xxvii + 991 pp. \$169.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-13940-4.

Reviewed by Jennifer Benner (Department of History, University of Washington)

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A Defeated “Socialist Revolution”

Originally published as *La révolution en Allemagne, 1917-1923* in 1971, this volume does bear some marks of its age. As Eric D. Weitz points out in his cogent introduction, Broue treats the working and capitalist classes in the singular and virtually ignores women’s activism, both approaches challenged in more recent historiography (pp. xiv, xv). However, *The German Revolution* remains a remarkable account of these tumultuous years both in the context of German history and in the history of international communism. Broue’s particular strength is in restoring a sense of contingency to this historical moment, when Germany was regarded as the center of the international communist movement and believed to be on the verge of following the path of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

To call *The German Revolution* a history of the early German Communist Party (KPD) does not convey the scope of Broue’s study adequately. Broue assumes a solid knowledge of German history and familiarity with the history of international communism, and such knowledge is essential for reading his work. The book offers densely detailed accounts of worker and popular actions, internal and intra-party politics (both international and local), and disputes, many highly personal, over theoretical and practical matters at all levels. Party factions, splits, and realignances (which only multiplied in the period under study), along with shifts in policy and tactics are thoroughly recorded and analyzed by Broue. His descriptions of the most intense revolutionary agitation in Germany and of the pivotal decisions made in international and private conferences often include developments by the hour. Broue devotes considerable attention to relevant events in Germany, such as the sailors’ mutinies of 1917 and the Kapp Putsch of 1920, as well as abroad, like the 1921 split in Italian Socialism.

Broue begins by outlining the nineteenth-century origins of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany. He then quickly moves onto the “Crisis of Social Democracy” during World War I, which culminated in the first split of German Social Democracy—the founding of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in April, 1917. The split was precipitated by the decision of the SPD to support the German war effort by voting for war credits. Yet even before 1917, the major fault line of organized socialism in Germany was already visible in the struggle over that old question: “Reform or Revolution?” The SPD had long since chosen the former (p. 19). As is clear throughout the book, Broue believes the SPD never had the ability or desire to lead a true socialist revolution. Indeed Broue credits the SPD’s commitment to the bourgeois Weimar Republic, along with the strength of the German bourgeoisie, as two of the greatest obstacles to revolution, making the German situation qualitatively different than the Russian one (p. 168).

The history of the brief “German Republic” under Friedrich Ebert and the announcement of the “German Socialist Republic” by Karl Liebknecht, culminating in the foundation of the German Communist Party (KPD) and the murders of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg by Freikorps on January 15, 1919 (p. 257) is well known. The new party faced many difficulties. Determining the role of the KPD in German parliamentary government and its relationship to the Communist International (Comintern) were complicated and contentious issues. However, as Broue argues, the KPD’s biggest problem was its failure to win a critical mass of workers away from the SPD. The lack of committed workers spelled failure for the German Communists’ attempt to force a “second revolution” in the weeks before the murders (pp. 224-225). According to Broue, Berlin workers

were simply not ready “to engage in armed struggle” or to participate in the “civil war” breaking out between the USPD and the KPD, “both of which equally claimed to be socialist” (pp. 246, 248). In addition to these unfavorable circumstances, Broue attributes this early failure to indecisive leadership and poor planning: “The leadership of the Communist Party had not been able to prevent the crushing of the movement which it had helped to unleash, and which it had done nothing to prevent or to check. ... it was to pay dearly for the ultra-left action which had been undertaken without adequate reflection by Liebknecht and the majority of the revolutionary delegates” (p. 255). Yet while these problems persisted, exacerbated by the presence of hard to control ultra-left elements, those within and outside of Germany continued to see the nation as ripe for revolution. In 1920, the KPD absorbed much of the left-wing USPD membership, creating the VKPD (United Communist Party), and bringing total membership to half a million (p. 502). Despite the setbacks of the previous year, in 1920 German communists were optimistic, for, as Broue writes: “for the first time since the Communist International was founded, a mass Communist Party existed in one of the most advanced countries of Europe, Germany, the country which revolutionaries always regarded as the pivotal point of the world revolution” (p. 449).

Yet the projected revolutionary actions would be frustrated repeatedly: in 1921 and again in 1923. The so-called “March Action” of 1921, inspired by Bela Kun, ended in defeat for the striking workers and the KPD, leading to the loss of 200,000 members after striking miners were involved in violent altercations with police and the party leadership rescinded its March 24th call for a general strike. In the wake of the March Action, the Third Comintern Conference convened early, in May, 1921, remaining hopeful that revolution would triumph both within the workers’ movement and in the German setting. Broue points out the difficulties in Germany however, where “the simultaneous existence of two workers’ parties, one reformist [SPD] and the other revolutionary [KPD] ... contributed to the prostration of the masses, and to the frustration of their strong desire for unity” (p. 560). In Fall, 1923, it appeared as if the KPD, SPD left, and the trade unions might finally produce the “united front” that would guarantee the success of socialist revolution.

In one of the most detailed sections of the work, Broue points to “an unprecedented pre-revolutionary

situation” (p. 709) before the “German October” of 1923. The crisis in the Ruhr after the French occupation of 1922 had “declassed” the country, with inflation and unemployment leveling differences (p. 713). The German government’s policy of “passive resistance” failed, sending inflation out of control. When Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno’s government fell on August 11, Broue writes, Communist leaders saw “the sign that the situation was riper than they had believed. The bourgeoisie rushed to conclude a compromise which would free their hands on the international level for disposing of the threat of revolution” (p. 753). When, in September, Communists joined the SPD-led governments of Saxony and Thuringia (p. 794), the military responded by proclaiming a state of siege in Saxony (p. 798). Communists believed that the threat of military action against the SPD government in Saxony would mobilize workers throughout Germany, and calls for a general strike were issued by a workers’ group at the suggestion of KPD chairman Heinrich Brandler. Even the left Social Democrats ultimately refused to support the strike, however, and held out for “a deal with the Reich government to protect Saxony” (p. 807). The planned insurrection was in serious trouble, and, as Broue writes, “[i]t had to be recognized that Zeigner’s government, despite the presence of three Communist ministers, had done nothing to arm the workers” (p. 809). The Saxon ministers were forcibly expelled, and a general strike announced by the confederation of trade unions “lost its momentum in 24 hours, and had petered out by the end of the third day” (p. 815). The new national government under Gustav Stresemann was able to stabilize the economy and ensure the short-term survival of the Weimar Republic. Broue argues that the inglorious end of the German October killed the chance for a revolution led by German Communists and sent power, control and initiative from Berlin back to Moscow. He concludes the chapter with a devastating judgment: “The fiasco of 1923, combined with internal crisis of the Russian Party and the political struggle seen by historians as the battle for Lenin’s succession, marked the end of a period in its history. From now on, the policies of the KPD were to be written almost entirely in Moscow, and in Russian” (p. 816). After 1923 the KPD became “a party of a new type, which was soon to be known as Stalinist” (p. 835).

In 1971, Broue was consciously writing against the official histories of the Communist parties, especially the SED of the GDR. To this end he includes chap-

ters reassessing the contributions of Paul Levi and Karl Radek, who were written out of official histories. Since 1923, the lost revolution had warranted little discussion, though Broue contends this discussion was badly needed if anything was to be learned from the failure (p. 899). Yet, as Broue points out, “[i]t would have been imprudent to recall that the Communist International in Lenin’s time had the world revolution as its aim, not the construction of socialism in a single country,” and that the Bolsheviks, in attempting to create a Germany party after their own image, had ignored the tradition of German proletarian democracy (p. 842). Further, Broue argues that Western historians have essentially accepted the history sanctioned by Walter Ulbricht (p. 848).

The chapter “History and Politics” is one of the book’s best, perhaps because Broue is so upfront about his own commitments and reasons for writing. In his task of rescuing the history of the German Revolution from its dismissal as a pseudo-socialist revolution, Broue is especially concerned to situate it within the context of the longer history of Social Democracy and of worker activism in Germany. It is this history that made the attempt to apply the Bolshevik experience to the German case especially problematic. Broue writes, “Bolshevism was, in a certain sense, an experience and a doctrine external, not to say alien, to the German worker’s movement” (p. 852). Again stressing the importance of the German context, Broue shows convincingly that “[t]he KPD cannot be understood apart from the crisis of Social Democracy” (p. 851). It is therefore unfortunate that Broue’s analysis of the SPD lacks nu-

ance. His treatment of SPD motivations is, if not as dogmatic as official histories, nonetheless somewhat one-sided. Broue concludes with the assertion that “German Revolution” might have been successful (p. 849). Broue is thus sympathetic to the 1957 history by “an old Communist Robert Leibbrand” who attacked the Stalinist thesis that “the November Revolution of 1918 had been ‘not a socialist but a bourgeois revolution.’” Leibbrand rather “saw the German Revolution as a defeated ‘socialist revolution,’ ‘in its historical tasks, its fundamental forces and the aims of the proletariat’” (p. 844).

Considering its prodigious length (the text itself runs 913 pages) and detail, *The German Revolution* is remarkably readable. Broue’s style is clear and concise; translator and editors have done an admirable job. Broue includes many long passages of quoted text, but they are always well selected, capturing the mood and energy of the events they describe and analyze. His selections also show well the nature of theoretical differences and practical debates. Forty-seven individual chapters with descriptive sub-headings make the dense text easier to navigate. Though there is no general index, the biographical index is immensely helpful. This edition includes Broue’s bibliography as well as a useful guide to further reading at the end of Weitz’s introduction. Because of its superior organization and detail, *The German Revolution* will be useful both for those interested in the history of the SPD, KPD and Comintern in the period, as well as those who want to know more about a particular event or personality.

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