The German October: The missed revolution of 1923

Part 3

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The following is the final part of a three-part article based on a lecture given in the summer of 2007. The first part was posted October 30; the second part was posted October 31.

Why did the KPD miss the revolution?

The easy answer to this question is to blame everything on Brandler. This was the reaction of Zinoviev and Stalin, who turned Brandler into a scapegoat. Simultaneously they accused the KPD (German Communist Party) of having provided wrong information on the situation in Germany that exaggerated the revolutionary potential of the situation. In this way, they challenged the entire assessment upon which the plan for a revolutionary insurrection had been based.

Less than three weeks after the insurrection had been called off, they began to reinterpret the events in Germany. They did so to cover their own role and for factional reasons, as the struggle with the Left Opposition had now fully erupted. On October 15 the first major document of the Left Opposition, the Statement of the 46, was published. At the end of November, Trotsky issued The New Course.

Trotsky rejected the easy approach taken by Zinoviev and Stalin. He did not agree with Brandler's decision to call off the insurrection. But he did not see it as an isolated event. After all, Karl Radek, who was present in Comintern as a representative of the Communist International, as well as the German Zentrale, the central party leadership, had agreed with Brandler's decision.

Brandler's insistence that the revolution would fail—and that the Communists would be isolated if they started an insurrection without the support of left Social Democrats—was in line with previous mistakes for which not only Brandler was responsible, but the Comintern was as well. Both the Comintern led by Zinoviev and the leadership of the German Communist Party (its majority and its left wing alike) for a long time had displayed a passive, typically "centrist" attitude to the events evolving in Germany. Despite the fact that the social and political situation had changed dramatically after the French occupation of the Ruhr in January, they continued to work with political methods developed at an earlier stage, when revolution was not on the immediate agenda.

It was only at a very late point, in the midst of the August events, that they changed course and began to prepare for insurrection. This gave them just two months to prepare, and the preparations were of a disjointed, hesitant and insufficient character.

Trotsky, in a speech given to the 5th All-Union Congress of Medical and Veterinary Workers in June 1924, gave the following reasons for the defeat: "What was the fundamental cause of the defeat of the German Communist Party?" he asked. "This, that it did not appreciate in good time the onset of revolutionary crisis from the moment of the occupation of the Ruhr, and especially from the moment of the termination of passive resistance (January-June 1923). It missed the crucial moment. ... It continued even after the onset of the Ruhr crisis to carry on its agitational and propagandist work on the basis of the United Front formula—at the same tempo and in the same forms as before the crisis. Meanwhile, this tactic had already become radically insufficient. A growth in the party's political influence was taking place automatically. A sharp tactical turn was needed.

"It was necessary to show the masses, and above all the party itself, that this time it was a matter of immediate preparation for the seizure of power. It was necessary to consolidate the party's growing influence organizationally and to establish bases of support for a direct assault on the state. It was necessary to transfer the whole party organization onto the basis of factory cells. It was necessary to form cells on the railways. It was necessary to raise sharply the question of work in the army. It was necessary, especially necessary, to adapt the United Front tactic fully and completely to these tasks, to give it a more decided and firmer tempo and a more revolutionary character. On this basis, work of a military-technical nature should have been carried on..."

"The most important thing, however, was this, to ensure in good time the decisive tactical turn towards the seizure of power. And this was not done. This was the chief and fatal omission. From this followed the basic contradiction. On the one hand, the party expected a revolution, while on the other hand, because it had burned its fingers in the March events, it avoided, until the last months of 1923, the very idea of organizing a revolution, i.e., preparing an insurrection. The party's political activity was carried on at a peacetime tempo at a time when the denouement was approaching.

"The time for the uprising was fixed when, in essentials, the enemy had already made use of the time lost by the party and strengthened his position. The party's military-technical preparation, begun at feverish speed, was divorced from the party's political activity, which was carried on at the previous peacetime tempo. The masses did not understand the party and did not keep step with it. The party felt at once its severance from the masses, and proved to be paralysed. From this resulted the sudden withdrawal from first-class positions without a fight—the hardest of all possible defeats."[1]

Was it possible at all to organise a successful nationwide insurrection in October 1923?

There exist a number of reports of leading German Communists, as well as leaders and military specialists of the Comintern, who were present in Germany, testifying to a very poor state of preparations. Fighting detachments—the so-called Revolutionary Hundreds—had been formed and trained, but there were hardly any arms available. The propaganda apparatus of the KPD—due to bans and oppression—was in a dismal state. The communication and coordination between the party regions...
functioned very badly.

On the other hand, the workers fighting in Hamburg showed an exceptional degree of courage, discipline and efficiency. Only 300 workers fought on the barricades, but they met with a wide, positive, although largely passive response in the larger population.

In his speech to the Medical and Veterinary Workers, Trotsky stressed that the dynamic of the revolution itself had to be taken into account. "Did the communists have the majority of the working masses behind them?" he asked. "This is a question which cannot be answered with statistics. It is a question which is decided by the dynamic of revolution."

"Were the masses in a fighting mood?" he continued. "The entire history of the year 1923 leaves no doubt at all on this account." And Trotsky concluded: "Under such conditions the masses could go forward only if there was present a firm, self-confident leadership and confidence on the part of the masses in this leadership. Discussions about whether the masses were in a fighting mood or not are very subjective in character and essentially express the lack of confidence among the leaders of the party itself."[2]

Lessons of October

Capitulation without a fight was certainly the worst possible outcome of the German events. It demoralised and disorganised the KPD and created the conditions where the ruling elite and the military could go on the offensive and consolidate their power. Trotsky therefore insisted that the lessons of the German defeat must be drawn ruthlessly. He strongly rejected singling out scapegoats, which was only a way to avoid the more fundamental political issues. Drawing these lessons was not only indispensable in order to prepare the German leadership for future revolutionary opportunities, which would inevitably arise. It was also crucial for all the other sections of the Comintern, who would be faced with similar challenges and problems.

Trotsky noted that the lessons of the Russian October Revolution—the only successful proletarian revolution in history—had never been properly drawn. In summer 1924 he published the book Lessons of October, discussing the successful Russian October in the light of the German defeat.

He insisted on the need "for the study of the laws and methods of proletarian revolution." There were issues that every Communist Party would face when entering a revolutionary period: "Generally speaking, crises arise in the party at every serious turn in the party's course, either as a prelude to the turn or as a consequence of it. The explanation for this lies in the fact that every period in the development of the party has special features of its own and calls for specific habits and methods of work. A tactical turn implies a greater or lesser break in these habits and methods. Herein lies the direct and most immediate root of internal party frictions and crises."

Trotsky then quoted Lenin, who wrote in July 1917: "It happens all too frequently, that when history makes an abrupt turn, even the most advanced parties are unable for a longer or a shorter period of time to adapt themselves to new conditions. They keep repeating the slogans of yesterday—slogans which were correct yesterday, but which have lost all their meaning today, becoming devoid of meaning 'suddenly' with the selfsame 'suddenness' that history makes its abrupt turn."

"Hence," Trotsky concluded, "the danger arises that if the turn is too abrupt or too sudden, and if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia and conservatism have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party proves itself unable to fulfil its leadership at that supreme and critical moment for which it has been preparing itself in the course of years or decades. The party is ravaged by a crisis, and the movement passes the party by—and heads toward defeat. ...

"The most abrupt of all turns is the turn of the proletarian party from the work of preparation and propaganda, or organization and agitation, to the immediate struggle for power, to an armed insurrection against the bourgeoisie. Whatever remains in the party that is irresolute, sceptical, conciliationist, capitulatory, in short, Menshevik—all this rises to the surface in opposition to the insurrection, seeks for theoretical formulas to justify its opposition, and finds them ready-made in the arsenal of the opportunist opponents of yesterday. We shall have occasion to observe this phenomenon more than once in the future."[3]

Zinoviev and Stalin rejected Trotsky's approach. Driven by factional and subjective motives, they falsified the events in Germany, covered their own tracks and made Brandler the scapegoat for everything that went wrong. The consequences were disastrous. The leadership of the KPD was replaced—for the fifth time in five years—without any lessons being drawn.

As Radek pointed out in a heated exchange with Stalin at a plenum meeting of the Russian Central Committee in January 1924, experienced Marxist cadre were replaced by people who had either a background in the centrist USPD (Independent SPD) or no revolutionary experience whatsoever. Heinrich Brandler, a founding member of the Spartakusbund with a 25-year history in the movement, was replaced by Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, young intellectuals from a wealthy bourgeois background with no revolutionary past. The Center group, that would now form the majority of the new leadership, had only joined the KPD in December 1920, when the left majority of the centrist USPD united with the KPD.

The replacement of the leadership set the course—for further purges and replacements in the following years—for the total subordination of the KPD to the dictates of Stalin, which would have such devastating consequences 10 years later when the disastrous line of the KPD paved Hitler's way to power. Stalin's alignment with the left of Fischer and Maslow was particularly cynical, as he had always held the most right-wing positions during the course of events. Stalin won the allegiance of Maslow, who was under investigation because he had allegedly given information to the police during the 1921 March events, by making sure he was cleared of the accusations.

Even the theory of Social Fascism, which equates Social Democracy with fascism, found its first expression in a document on the German events drafted by Zinoviev and adopted by the presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern against the resistance of the Left Opposition in January 1924. It reads: "The leading layers of German Social Democracy are presently nothing but a faction of German fascism under a socialist mask."[4]

After the party had failed to move in time from the tactic of the United Front to the struggle for power, Zinoviev and Stalin rejected the United Front tactic altogether. The theory of Social Fascism, which rejected any form of a United Front with the SPD against the Nazis, was revived in 1929 and played a fatal role in disarming the working class in the struggle against fascism.

In 1928, Trotsky once again summed up the basic lessons from the German October. Criticising the draft programme for the Comintern's Sixth Congress, he wrote: "The role of the subjective factor in a period of slow, organic development can remain quite a subordinate one. Then diverse proverbs of gradualism arise, as: 'slow but sure,' and 'one must not kick against the pricks,' and so forth, which epitomize all the tactical wisdom of an organic epoch that abhorred 'leaping over stages.' But as soon as the objective prerequisites have matured, the key to the whole historical process passes into the hands of the subjective factor, that is, the party. Opportunism, which consciously or unconsciously thrives upon the inspiration of the past epoch, always tends to underestimate the role of the subjective factor, that is, the importance of the party and of revolutionary leadership. All this was fully disclosed during the discussions on the lessons of the German October, on the Anglo-Russian Committee, and on the Chinese Revolution. In all these cases, as well as in others of lesser importance, the opportunistic tendency evinced itself in the adoption of a
course that relied solely upon the ‘masses’ and therefore completely scorned the question of the ‘tops’ of the revolutionary leadership. Such an attitude, which is false in general, operates with positively fatal effect in the imperialist epoch.”[5]

Concluded

Notes:
2. Ibid., p. 169. [return]
5. Leon Trotsky, (The Third International after Lenin, New Park, 1974), p. 64. [return]