Revolutionary Violence in Germany and the American Socialist Press, 1919

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In 1919, the newly established Weimar Republic faced uprisings that threatened the constitutional government’s continued power. In the Spartacist Uprising of 1919, German radicals Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were captured and summarily executed by Freikorps soldiers working for the German government.¹ These killings were taken as an act of aggression against the revolutionary Left by the Social-Democratic Party of Germany, which headed the government at the time.² It was not only Germans who watched the events of the uprising unfold, many were eager to understand what was happening in the recently defeated nation. The suppression of the uprising was particularly controversial among socialist groups around the world. The early 1900s were a high point for the socialist movement in the United States, with the Socialist Party of America (SPA) receiving “more than 900,000 votes in elections in 1912 and again in 1920,” according to the Mapping American Social Movements Project from the University of Washington.³ News about the events surrounding the ongoing revolts in Germany spread through many different socialist newspapers and magazines in the United States, with opinions on the conflict taken up by publications falling along sectarian lines. While right-leaning publications studiously opposed the Spartacist Revolt, left-leaning publications tended to first express neutrality and later support for the uprising following the killing of Rosa Luxembour and Karl Liebknecht. For example, The Appeal to Reason, later called the New Appeal, was the largest socialist publication in the United States in the early 1900s and did not support the Spartacist revolt, yet they maintained a positive view of Liebknecht as an

¹ Dillon rejects Spartacist Revolt as a name for the conflict, favoring the January Uprising “because [the uprising] was neither planned nor led by Spartacists.” Both terms will be used interchangeably in this paper. Christopher Dillon, “The German Revolution of 1918/19,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic. ed. Nadine Rossol, Benjamin Ziemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 59.

² Abbreviations SPD and MSPD will be used interchangeably.

activist against the war in Germany. The paper leaned toward the right of the SPA at the time, diverging from SPA leader Eugene Debs regarding pacifism and World War I under its second editor Emanuel Haldeman Julius. The Ohio Socialist, in contrast, affiliated with the Socialist Party and a voice of the Left did little to hide its support for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Yet, the paper still called for a degree of neutrality in the period shortly preceding the Spartacist Revolt. The monthly radical magazine Liberator seems to have initially expressed support for neutrality. However, after the killings of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, they became overtly pro-Spartacist. Through the study of American socialist newspapers’ reactions to the Spartacist Revolt, the factional split in the American socialist movement can be better understood.

The Postwar Situation in Germany and the United States

The First World War traumatized a generation and changed the outlook many people had on the world. The concept of unending historical progress toward a desirable end was snuffed out by the reality of industrialized warfare. Historian Jill Lepore, in her general history of the United States These Truths, summarizes this change with a rhetorical question: “What sane person could believe in progress in an age of mass slaughter?”

Concurrent with the war in the United States was the first Red Scare. What Lepore calls, “anti-Bolshevik hysteria” swept across the nation as the Russian Revolution and immigration from Europe stoked fear of Communism. Woodrow Wilson’s Espionage Act of 1917 and Sedition Act of 1918 would, according to American Yawp “[strip] dissenters and protesters of their rights to publicly resist the war.”

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4 The paper was in decline by 1919 but held a record for the “largest edition of any paper ever printed, up to [1905].” Harold A. Trout, "The History of the Appeal to Reason: A Study of the Radical Press" Electronic Theses & Dissertations (Pittsburg State University, 1934), 58.


6 Ibid 361.

SPA leader Eugene Debs was jailed for opposing the war during this time. The late 1910s was a time when the radical Left in the United States simultaneously saw some of its greatest relevance in politics and some of its harshest suppression.

At this time, the SPA was also undergoing factional conflict that would, by 1920, result in the party splitting. Historian H. Wayne Morgan, in the introduction to his SPA primary source reader *American Socialism 1900-1960* divides the SPA into three factions,

On the right stood Victor Berger and his step-by-step socialists, committed to education and the democratic process. In the center stood the moderates, also committed to education and the ballot, but inclined to sympathize with a stronger socialist tone in their program. On the Left stood the revolutionaries, led by the many rather than one man.8

These factional divides were visible in socialist newspapers at the time. *The Ohio Socialist*, for example, leaned radical, and one of its editors, Alfred Wagenknecht, would be a founding member of the Communist Labor Party of America.

Germany, a main participant in the conflict, underwent sharp societal changes as the end of the war loomed. Morale among German soldiers was disintegrating. In a shortsighted attempt to raise morale with a “stirring engagement with the Royal Navy,” “the naval top brass was developing an ambitious scheme to launch the entire High Seas fleet toward Britain in late October of 1918.”9 Sailors mutinied once they received orders to execute the plan, seeing it as a guaranteed failure. Mutineer sailors would, according to Dillon, become “rail-borne revolutionary evangelists,” traveling across the country and sparking further unrest. By November 9, Dillon writes, the Kaiser had abdicated, and Majority Social

8 Morgan’s claim that the revolutionary faction had no leaders is contested by other historians of the SPA. A description of the papers of Alfred Wagenknecht, a radical in the SPA and editor of *the Ohio Socialist*, describes him as being “State Secretary of the Ohio Socialist Party” and later “National Secretary of the Communist Labor Party of America.” Wagenknecht was both a radical and had a leading position in the SPA. “Guide to the Alfred and Hortense Wagenknecht and Helen and Carl Winter Family Papers,” TAM 583, the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York. H. Wayne Morgan, *American Socialism, 1900-1960* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1964), 4.

Democratic (MSPD) leader Friedrich Ebert found himself thrust into the chancellorship.  

A provisional government would be set up pending the first elections in the new Germany. The primary governing body of the provisional government, the Council of People’s Deputies, was split evenly between the MSPD, the less radical element of German socialist politics that had supported Germany during the war, and the Independent Social Democrats (USPD), a more radical element which had split from the MSPD over support for the war. Seeing the Russian Revolution succeed and socialists coming to power in Germany convinced many American socialists that the world revolution was imminent. When January of 1919 saw an attempt by German radicals to seize power, much of the American Left watched with anticipation.

The Spartacist Revolt and the American Socialist Press

The Spartacist Revolt was a roughly week-long insurrection in Berlin between January 5 and January 15, 1919. It occurred in reaction to the dismissal of USPD Berlin police chief Emil Eichorn by SPD Interior Minister of Prussia Wolfgang Heine on the 4th of January. During spontaneously organized protests against the firing of the police chief, violence erupted with the occupation of the building of the Social Democratic newspaper Vorwärts by left-wing protestors supported by the USPD, Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).

The protests quickly escalated into an insurrection in Berlin. The man who would be tasked with the responsibility of putting the revolt down was Gustav Noske, SPD Minister of the Interior. This was an opportune time for Noske, who had recently overseen the raising of Freikorps formations in the aftermath of a previous conflict with left-wing revolutionaries. The Freikorps made up of largely right-

10 Ibid.

11 Dates given for the end of the revolt seem to vary, Breitman writes “By 15th January order was restored.” Richard Breitman, German Socialism, and Weimar Democracy (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 37.

wing World War I veterans, were ruthlessly effective in suppressing the revolt, which was largely disorganized and severely outgunned. By January 6, the Freikorps began suppressing the revolt with indiscriminate violence. Historian Mark Jones, in *Founding Weimar: Violence of the German Revolution 1918-1919* discusses accusations of Freikorps atrocities made by the newspaper of the Independent Socialists, the Freiheit. He explains:

The Freiheit claimed that searches of the bodies of civilians killed by government soldiers at the Reichstag on 8 January revealed that none of them had a weapon. One example described how, in front of the Brandenburg Gate, seconds after an officer had called upon a small crowd to leave the area, the same group of soldiers immediately opened fire upon the crowd. Elsewhere, the same report claimed that government soldiers abused the use of the white flag. Freiheit also accused the government of using dum-dum bullets...There was an element of truth to the Freiheit’s accusations.13

Among the atrocities against civilians that occurred as part of the suppression of the revolt were the assassinations of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht described at the beginning of this article. Luxemburg and Liebknecht were leaders of the KPD and famous among contemporary American Socialists for their opposition to the First World War. *The New Appeal* published two articles on the revolt in January 1919. The first, “Bolshevism in Berlin,” covers the insurrection itself. The newspaper took an intriguing stance that both supported Liebknecht and opposed the revolt he led. *The New Appeal* is unequivocally against the revolution unfolding in Berlin, writing “We cannot endorse this attempt to forcibly establish [Liebknecht’s] group at the heart of affairs in Berlin.”14

At the same time, however, Liebknecht’s position as a leader of the revolt was minimized. The article noted that the Spartacists planned to halt elections to the National Assembly and that “Liebknecht in this respect counseled restraint to his associates, advising them to participate in the elections.” The anonymous writer asks: “It is all very easy to sit calmly amid our peace and security and eloquently deplore


the way the Germans and Russians are carrying on. But are we justified in thus judging them?" This seems to be a way to avoid making a moral judgment against Liebknecht while at the same time remaining against the revolution that he led.

*The New Appeal*, in its coverage of the deaths of Luxembourg and Liebknecht, accepts the account of their killing given by the German government. The next article in *The New Appeal* referencing the revolution is entitled “The Death of Liebknecht,” an obituary both for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourg. To understand what is going on in the article, one must also understand the controversy surrounding the killing of Liebknecht and Luxembourg. The historian Mark Jones explains press statements made by one of the men involved in the killings, Captain Waldemar Pabst, writing:

In collusion with the killers, Pabst wrote a statement for the press. The next day it told the German public that Liebknecht had been shot while trying to escape after the vehicle that transported him had to stop because of a puncture. The statement was even more creative when it came to explaining the fate of Rosa Luxembourg… Pabst invented claims that a large and threatening Spartacist mob surrounded the hotel. When it recognized Rosa Luxembourg, this mob supposedly tore her out of the hands of her guards and beat her ‘senseless’ before she was reportedly shot. It claimed no knowledge of the fate of her body. The truck was reported as found without the body, close to the Landwehr canal. The statement added that it was impossible to come to her aid.

In reality, both were murdered by their captors, members of the Horse Guards *Freikorps* division under the leadership of Waldemar Pabst. How a given paper reported on the deaths of Luxembourg and Liebknecht is critical to their view of the uprising generally. Accepting the account of somebody known to be involved in the suppression of the revolt personally signals support for that suppression and for the government ordering the suppression. It is already clear from their first article on the revolt that *The New Appeal* did not support the Spartacists, yet up until this point, writers for the newspaper had remained adamantly supportive of Karl Liebknecht as a person. In *the New Appeal’s* article “The Death of

15 Ibid.
17 Ibid. 121, 238.
Liebknecht,” published on January 25, 1919, the anonymous writer describes the deaths as follows:

Rosa Luxemburg was beaten to death by a street mob. Karl Liebknecht was shot to death as a prisoner attempting to make his escape. Thus ends the careers of two of the noblest forces in present-day Germany… We were left to ascribe the affair to the reaction of peace and revolution upon Germany aided by Liebknecht’s extreme revolutionary zeal. We regret that they could not cooperate with the majority of their comrades in forming a German Socialist republic.\(^{18}\)

\textit{The New Appeal} maintained a position that both accepts the account of the killing of whom they call “the two noblest forces in present-day Germany” given by their killers and admonishes them for being unable to unite with the Social Democrats.\(^{19}\) \textit{The New Appeal} is not at all supportive of the actions taken by Liebknecht and Luxemburg, yet continually tempers its lack of support for their cause with personal praise for the individuals Liebknecht and Luxemburg.

Compared to \textit{the New Appeal}, \textit{the Ohio Socialist} offered a more radical interpretation of the course of events. In its January 1, 1919, issue, an article entitled “Liebknecht’s Appeal to German Workers” includes content published throughout multiple newspapers at the time, the preface of the article describing a manifesto that had “circulated” in Germany.\(^{20}\) In my research, the earliest English language publication of this manifesto I found was published in \textit{The Labor World}, a left-wing Quebecois newspaper, on December 7, 1918.\(^{21}\) The manifesto predates the Spartacist revolt by at least a month, but its publication in \textit{the Ohio Socialist} signals its support for Liebknecht’s tactics. The manifesto is a call for a violent socialist revolution in Germany. As part of the manifesto, Liebknecht directed returning German soldiers:

\begin{quote}
In extreme cases, it is advantageous to open fire on cities where are stationed, numerous government troops. However, such firing must be stopped at once when the object is secured… Rise, organize, and seize the arms and direct them against those who are planning to end the war and return to enslave you. End the war yourselves and turn the weapons against them yourselves.\(^{22}\)
\end{quote}


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) “Liebknecht’s Appeal to German Workers,” \textit{The Ohio Socialist} January 1919.

\(^{21}\) “The Red Flag in Germany,” \textit{The Labor World} December 7, 1918.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Interestingly, at the same time, the Ohio Socialist seems to have tried to appear neutral. If one looks to the left of “Liebknecht’s Appeal to German Workers” on page 3 of the January 1 issue of the Ohio Socialist, there is an article entitled “Socialists in the German Revolution.” The article summarizes the factional divides among German socialists at the time. There are “the so-called majority Socialists, the Scheidemann group” who “at present believe in a policy of co-operating as much as possible with the German business class to stabilize production and distribution.” Also, the Independent Socialists, led by Emil Barth, “[want] to socialize industry as fast as it can be taken over by the government.” Finally, there are the Spartacists, who, call for the working-class control, through soldiers and workmen’s councils, of all industry, demand that the workers and workers alone shall rule Germany and seeks to establish an industrial democracy with the capitalist class dispossessed rather than a political democracy with its slow and ineffective program of government ownership of a few principle industries. The paper further adds that “If the Liebknecht Socialists are successful in securing control in Germany… This will double the terror of the capitalist class and its press for what it calls the ‘red terror.’”

Yet, after its seeming anticipation of the terror that Liebknecht would inspire in the capitalist class, the Ohio Socialist ends the article with the claim: “It becomes the duty of every honest thinking worker to reserve judgment upon the German situation until the Socialist press can get and print the truth.” Similarly to the New Appeal, the Ohio Socialist attempted to maintain a sense of neutrality. It asked its readers not to come to conclusions too quickly, yet at the same time, its sympathies seem to lie with the Liebknecht faction. It describes the prospects of a Germany under Liebknecht with glee and published a manifesto written by him calling for what seems to be a much more radical revolution than what the Social Democrats had in mind.

The Spartacist sympathies of the Ohio Socialists are all but confirmed in their coverage of Liebknecht and Luxemburg’s deaths. On the editors’ page, written by Elmer T. Allison and Alfred

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.
Wagenknecht, is the obituary “Carl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.” The obituary reads

Even while the capitalist press openly rejoices at the murder of this noblest son and daughter of the revolution, the principles they enunciated and the tactics they employed are spreading over continents… They died as they lived, flinging in the teeth of conservatism, and compromising the truth of revolutionary tactics. And in so dying, they died gloriously for the revolution and the truth. No nobler deaths can close nobler lives than theirs.  

*The Ohio Socialist* clearly diverged from *The New Appeal* concerning neutrality. Both papers initially advised neutrality to some extent despite their open sympathy for Liebknecht. However, *The Ohio Socialist* did not attempt the sort of logical maneuver that *The New Appeal* did, in which it simultaneously condemned Liebknecht’s movement but supported him as a person, instead *The Ohio Socialist* ultimately was clear about its support for Liebknecht and his cause.

The monthly radical magazine *the Liberator* expressed largely similar ideas to *The New Appeal* and *The Ohio Socialist* in its initial line encouraging their readers to embrace neutrality. The February 1919 issue of *The Liberator* published an article titled “Who’s Who in the German Revolution,” an interview with an anonymous German newspaper reporter who “had the privilege of personal acquaintance with most of the present revolutionary leaders.” The interviewer was very cautious regarding criticism of left-wing leaders. For example, the interviewer asks the interviewee, called “Mr. X,” if he thought that Rosa Luxembourg looks like American Anarchist activist Emma Goldman. Mr. X replied that Luxembourg is “more able” than Goldman and that “she has no hysteria.” The interviewer responded “Well, I should not call Emma Goldman hysterical. She is not that kind of a person in the least.” The interviewer goes on to discuss with Mr. X the possible similarities between Liebknecht’s faction in Germany and Lenin’s Bolsheviks. The interviewer asked, “Do you think that there is a fundamental difference between Bolshevism and the propaganda of the Spartacus group?” Mr. X seemingly dodged the question, responding “Let us discuss that another evening” before relaying a story about an encounter between Liebknecht’s

father and August Bebel, a founder of the SPD. The interviewer continued to press, “You have something in your head about Bolshevism--go ahead and tell us. Again, Mr. X refused to answer at length but agreed with the interviewer that he hoped Liebknecht was not a Bolshevik and also remarked “Well think of all the poor people in Russia who hope he is!” Despite his reservations about Liebknecht’s politics, Mr. X claimed that Liebknecht was “very kind and smiling… full of humor” and “very much loved.”

Somewhat like The New Appeal and The Ohio Socialist, initial reporting on Liebknecht around the time of the Spartacist Revolt tended toward neutrality. Mr. X, the interviewee, expressed his concern that Liebknecht’s politics were Bolshevist yet still believes that he was beloved by the people. The interviewer seemingly corrected Mr. X when he described Emma Goldman, an American anarchist, as “hysterical.” This neutral stance changed after the Spartacist Revolt failed. The cover of the March 1919 issue of the Liberator presented a drawing of Liebknecht set against a crimson background. After a few ads, the magazine reprinted a manifesto calling for a world revolution originally issued by the Spartacus League on December 26, 1918. Originally published in Switzerland and signed by founding members of the Spartacus League, the manifesto can be summarized by its final paragraph: “Not Lloyd-George and Poincaré, not Sonnino, Wilson, and Erzberger or Scheidemann, must be allowed to make peace. Peace is to be concluded under the waving banner of the socialist world revolution.”

27 Ibid.
29 The first four names mentioned were of the heads of government during World War I of the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the United States. Erzberger, a German, was a government minister and instrumental in the talks which ended World War I. Scheidemann was the contemporary co-leader of the SPD, serving alongside Ebert. “The Hour of the People has Come,” The Liberator March 1919.
The cover art and the publication of the manifesto in *The Liberator* seems to be an endorsement of the January Uprising though it had already ended by the time this issue of *The Liberator* was published. If there had been any question of *The Liberator*’s stance on the revolt at this point, it is answered by a several-page long obituary by John Reed, “Liebknecht Dead.” The article is clear in its denunciation of the Majority Social Democrats, a party he calls “Kaiser Socialists” whose leaders “would not dare to take the power for the People.”

This is a marked shift in the way German socialists were written about in *The Liberator*, in which outright denunciations had not previously appeared.

Reed also took an interesting position on the killings of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. He wrote that “a mob of White Guards” gathered outside of the hotel where Luxemburg and Liebknecht were being held. While Liebknecht was driven away with his captors, the crowd “found Rosa Luxemburg--a slight, plain, little woman with a limp. And her they beat to death, throwing her body into the canal.”

This was essentially the same narrative pushed by Waldemar Pabst: Luxemburg was killed by a lynch mob, not summarily executed by the *Freikorps*. What was notable here was that Reed claimed that the mob, which

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31 Ibid.
supposedly killed Luxemburg is of “White Guards,” or reactionaries, rather than the Spartacists claimed by Pabst.

Despite mostly accepting Pabst’s account of Luxemburg’s killing, Reed was extremely skeptical of Pabst’s narrative when it came to the killing of Liebknecht. After summarizing Pabst’s narrative of Liebknecht’s killing, that he was shot while escaping, Reed writes,

But the autopsy showed that he was shot in the back… Oh comrades, does that convince you? For years the ley fuega was a government institution in Mexico—the law permitting the shooting of prisoners who tried to escape. Political prisoners in Mexico always tried to escape—at least that was what their guards said when they brought back a limp body riddled with bullets. Surely there are German officers intelligent enough to know that if they are going to make up a story about the shooting of an escaping prisoner, they must be consistent enough to shoot him in the back.32

While still not being completely on the mark, Reed’s article appears to be the most accurate of the primary sources I consulted concerning the death of Liebknecht. Unlike The New Appeal, which accepted Pabst’s account at face value, Reed applied skepticism and formulated an account of the killing much closer to what happened. He correctly called out a very suspicious narrative of Liebknecht’s death, which other journalists, even socialists, seemed reluctant to question.

Conclusion

There was no conformity in the way that American socialist newspapers reported on the January Uprising. Papers and magazines tended to take a stance on the conflict that reflected their faction. The New Appeal, a paper on the right of the American socialist movement at the time, supported Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg as anti-war activists imprisoned by the Kaiser. However, The New Appeal did not support the two as revolutionaries, however. On the more radical end of the spectrum, The Ohio Socialist took a much more supportive view of the Liebknecht Faction.

Despite imploring its readers to wait for more information to come in from Germany before

drawing conclusions about the factional conflict, the paper seemed to be sympathetic to Liebknecht before the uprising. The paper published a manifesto of his and relished in the idea that Liebknecht would unleash a German Red Terror. After the death of Liebknecht, the paper became crystal clear in its support for Liebknecht’s group. Another radical publication, *The Liberator*, took a somewhat similar approach to cover the January Uprising. Prior to the uprising, the magazine seems to have encouraged neutrality when writing about the German Socialists. A German interviewee acquainted with many people in the German socialist movement, Mr. X, was reluctant to outright criticize Liebknecht despite being concerned that he was a Bolshevik.

Then, once Liebknecht was dead, *The Liberator* made clear its support for the uprising. The cover of its March 1919 issue was a photo of the man understood as the leader of the revolt; its first article was a manifesto issued by the Spartacus League, and it contained a glowing obituary of Liebknecht and Luxemburg that criticized the people responsible for their deaths. The article also contained skepticism regarding Waldemar Pabst’s account of Luxembourg’s and Liebknecht’s killings. Overall, radical publications such as *The Liberator* and *The Ohio Socialist* tended to be supportive of the January Uprising. Conversely, the less radical *New Appeal* denounced the uprising. Despite varying opinions on the justice of the revolt itself, each of the three publications studied expressed open reverence for Liebknecht and Luxemburg.
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