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Review

A German Lenin? - The German Revolution and Paul Levi's political writings 1918-1930

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In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Writings of Paul Levi. Edited and introduced by David Fernbach. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, 349 pages, \$28 paperback.

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FOR RADICALS AND revolutionaries engaged in rebuilding an anti-capitalist movement in the early 21st century, the 20th century appears to be a record of disaster. Capitalism survived two great economic crises (1914-1934 and 1966-1982) that many on the left believed spelled the end of this form of class society.

The cost to humanity of capitalist recovery was enormous — the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, dozens of bloodthirsty anti-working class military and civilian dictatorships, a relentless attack on working-class living and working conditions, two world wars and scores of imperialist military interventions against revolutionary, nationalist and anti-capitalist movements in the global South.

The 20th century attempts to build alternative to capitalism also failed miserably. On the one hand, the first (and in the opinion of this author, the only) successful workers' revolution in Russia of October 1917 quickly abandoned the radical, democratic forms that brought the working class to power — the workers' councils — under the impact of civil war, foreign intervention and economic collapse.

Within a decade of the revolution, a new bureaucratic ruling group had displaced the working class in power. The bureaucracy's new form of political and social rule — where a single-party dictatorship administered a state-run command economy — became synonymous with "socialism" for most of the left in the 20th century.

In the end the bureaucratic economies of the Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe, Vietnam and Cuba proved incapable of developing the productivity of labor and preserving the social welfare gains (guaranteed employment and the universal guarantee of housing, health care and the like) of these societies. Their bureaucratic rulers have now, to one extent or another, embraced the "market" and restored capitalism in the former "socialist countries."

The left in the capitalist world has fared no better. [1] The social-democratic and labor parties have been transformed. Formerly these parties attempted to reform capitalism through strong unions, extensive social services, and state economic regulation into a system that benefited both capital and labor. Today they have abandoned the fight for pro-working-class reform for “social liberalism,” combining residual rhetoric about social justice with the implementation of the neoliberal economic and social program of privatization, austerity and attacks on organized labor.

The Communist Parties of Europe and the United States, by the late 1920s, had become extensions of the foreign policy of the rulers of the Soviet Union. Until the mid-1970s (with the exception of Tito’s Yugoslavia and Ceausescu’s Romania, which followed independent Stalinist policies), they faithfully followed the twists and turns of the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy, moving between ultra-left denunciations of reformist social-democrats as “social fascists” to long-term alliances with working-class reformists and capitalist liberals.

After nearly three decades of integration into their domestic union officialdom and local government apparatus, the Communist Parties abandoned their connection to the Soviet Union. “Euro-communism” completed the process of the “social-democratization” of the European Communist Parties, leading to their political marginalization and collapse, or in the case of the Italian party, transformation into a mainstream, liberal capitalist party.

Examining Deform

Why was the 20th century such an unmitigated disaster for the anti-capitalist left? From the right — and much of the so-called left — we hear the familiar refrain that all projects of radical transformation, especially radical anti-capitalist transformation are doomed to fail. “Human nature” for the right, “grand narratives” and “Enlightenment rationality” for some on the left, make such projects not only utopian, but dangerous. They necessarily lead to dictatorship and human catastrophes.

For those of us who reject the notion that human beings have some trans-historical need to “truck, barter and trade” and who believe we have the capacity to understand and transform the world, such arguments have little sway.

Instead, we should be looking for “lost opportunities” — those specific historical conjunctures where a “different world” was actually possible, and assess the costs of not exploiting these openings.

For those of us in the tradition of revolutionary “socialism from below,” a crucial historical conjuncture were the years 1917 through 1923. The Russian Revolution initiated a wave of mass strikes and near revolutions across central Europe. Nowhere did workers’ revolution seem more possible than the most advanced capitalist society in Europe — Germany. [2]

Defeated in the first World War, German capitalists were unable to stabilize their class rule for almost five years. The 1918-1919 revolution produced a situation of “dual power” between workers and soldiers councils and the fledgling bourgeois Weimar Republic. The revolution was drowned in blood as the social-democratic led Republican government unleashed gangs of right-wing veterans against radical and revolutionary workers. The *Freikorps* would become the cadre of the Nazis and other fascist gangs in the 1920s and 1930s.

Less than a year later, the German military attempted to overthrow the Republic in the Kapp Putsch, which was defeated by a general strike and a mobilization of socialist workers’ militias.

Finally, the French occupation of the Ruhr and hyper inflation produced sharp class and political polarization in 1923 — again opening the possibility of revolution in Germany. Ultimately, the German revolution was defeated in 1923 — opening the road to the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the consolidation of bureaucratic rule, and to the victory of fascism in 1933.

Why did the German revolution fail? As in many complex historical events, there are many causes of the defeat of the most promising revolutionary movement in the West. However, central to the failure of workers' revolution in Germany was the absence of an organization of revolutionary workers, with deep roots among the "militant minority" of the class, independent of the forces of official reform with a rich experience in the class struggle prior to the revolutionary crisis.

The existence of such an organization — the Bolsheviks — in Russia was the result not of a superior theory, but the particular circumstances of the Russian state and society. [3] In the rest of western Europe, revolutionary worker activists remained in the same organizations with the forces of official reformism before 1914. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, revolutionary minorities across Europe attempted to construct new parties "on the fly."

In Germany, despite a long history of left-wing activism and theory in Germany before World War I, the left remained in the reformist German Social-Democratic Party (SPD). Initially, the Spartacus League and early German Communist Party (KPD), which emerged as independent organizations only in 1918, were sects made up of primarily of politically inexperienced youth — war veterans, students and young workers without roots in their workplaces.

These youth were attracted to the politics of "Left Communism" — principled abstention from elections, non-participation in Social Democratic led unions and factory committees, and opposition to any common actions that included the reformist party and union leaders. But the vast majority of the pre-war "militant minority" — the radicalized miners and skilled metalworkers — remained loyal to the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), an offshoot of the pro-war SPD. The USPD brought together reformist socialists who had come to support a negotiated end to the war with hundreds of thousands of workplace leaders.

While Rosa Luxemburg, the historic leader of the revolutionary wing of the pre-1914 SPD, was the best known figure of the Spartacus League and early KPD, she and her co-thinkers often found themselves in a small minority in their own organization. Luxemburg opposed the precipitous split of the Spartacists from the USPD, and argued against the KPD's attempt to hot-house a revolutionary minority action in Berlin in January 1919.

Rosa understood that a workers' revolution could only succeed with the active participation of the majority of the working class. With greater insight and prescience than her own comrades, and most of the Bolshevik leaders prior to 1920, she grasped the majority of workers remained loyal to the SPD — and that a majority of the actual workers' vanguard remained loyal to the USPD. This revolutionary minority had to be won to the necessity of an independent revolutionary organization, which could, through common activity in the class struggle, eventually break the majority of workers from reformism.

Paul Levi's Leadership

After Luxemburg's assassination by the *Freikorps* (ordered by Berlin's social-democratic police chief), Paul Levi — Rosa's lawyer, some-time lover and comrade — assumed leadership of the fledgling KPD.

Levi is one of the most controversial figures in the history of western Communism. He has alternatively been praised as a potential “German Lenin” [4] and condemned as a “scab” and a “left social democrat... resistant to Leninism and democratic centralism.” [5]

David Fernbach provides English speaking audiences for the first time with some of Levi’s key political writings from 1918 through his death in 1930. Together with Fernbach’s excellent biographical introduction, these writings provide the beginnings of a basis for assessing Levi’s politics, his role in the formation of the German revolutionary left and his enduring political legacy.

In the essays and letter in the first part, “Leading the KPD,” we can trace Levi’s role in transforming the KPD into a mass party — the largest Communist party outside of Soviet Russia.

Allying with Lenin and the ostensible majority of the Communist International (Comintern) in late 1919 and early 1920, Levi elaborated on the arguments in Lenin’s Left Wing-Communism: An Infantile Disorder, pushing the KPD to seek unity with the working-class left-wing of the USPD, and to build a revolutionary alternative to the SPD in the electoral arena and in the reformist dominated unions and factory committees.

In April 1920 the Left Communists were expelled from the KPD and formed the splinter Communist Workers Party (KAPD). Levi was able to lead the KPD into a successful unification with the left-wing of the USPD in December 1920, transforming the KPD into a mass party of over 400,000 members (sometimes called the VKPD, Unified Communist Party of Germany).

The newly united KPD pioneered the strategy of the “united front” in the west. Through common actions against capital and the state over immediate economic and political issues, unified working class struggles would become more widespread, powerful and radical; and the limits of the reformist party and union leaders to even effectively defend the workers’ past gains could be demonstrated in practice.

A Comintern Disaster

Despite Levi’s embrace of the public position of the Comintern, as articulated by Lenin and Trotsky at the Second Congress during the summer of 1920, key elements of the International’s leadership were encouraging a very different strategy for western Communism in late 1920 and early 1921. [6]

The earliest manifestation of this strategy was the decision to recognize the KAPD as a “sympathizing section” of the Comintern. As the Russian Bolsheviks faced increasing popular opposition at home, culminating in the rebellion of sailors at Kronstadt in March 1921, and were compelled to make significant concessions to private property and markets in the New Economic Policy (NEP), Zinoviev and the day-to-day leadership of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) sought ways to “speed-up” the pace of class struggle in the west.

The ultraleft “theory of the offensive” — the notion that minority actions by Communist workers and their supporters could spark the overthrow of capitalism in the west — became the de facto strategy of the ECCI and its agents in Western Europe in late 1920 and early 1921.

Already resentful of the ECCI’s support for the discredited Left Communists in Germany, Levi became alarmed with the role of the Comintern in the creation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). While a majority of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) had voted to join the Comintern in 1920, the leadership of the party remained in the hands of left-reformist parliamentarians and union officials who had done nothing to lead the semi-insurrectionary wave of factory occupations in 1919-1920

(the “biennio rossa”).

Against the wishes of most of the left in the PSI, but at the behest of left Communists like Amadeo Bordiga, the ECCI provoked a premature split in the PSI at the Livorno Congress in early 1921 — which left many left-wing workers in the left reformist party.

Levy drafted a lengthy critique of the ECCI’s encouragement of ultra-leftism in Germany and Italy (The Beginning of the Crisis in the Communist Party and the International), and he and his supporters (including Clara Zetkin) resigned from the top leadership of the KPD in early 1921.

The March Action

The resignation of the most experienced and independent members of the German party leadership allowed the ECCI, with the support of more malleable, younger German leaders to adopt the “theory of the offensive” to the German situation. The result was the disastrous Marzaktion of March 1921.

Responding to provocations by social-democratic state governments, the KPD launched a series of strikes and factory occupations and attempted to seize police stations and other government buildings without the support of most workers. With little support outside their own ranks, the Communists’ actions were easily isolated and defeated. Pierre Broue’s remains the best description of the disastrous aftermath:

“The days which followed the defeat of the March Action revealed the extent of the disaster which the VKPD leaders had inflicted upon their party. They had not even been able to lead all of their members into action. Some members publicly denounced the strike. Many left the Party, sometimes noisily, sometimes quietly slipping away. In a few weeks, the party lost 200,000 members [almost 60% of their membership — CP]. Moreover, it was facing repression; its newspapers were being banned or suspended; and its members being arrested, sometimes held for a few hours or days, but often charged and jailed for many months. The courts-martial went to work with a vengeance; by the beginning of June, it was calculated that of the strikers or fighters in March there were already 400 sentenced to some 1,500 years hard labor, and 500 to 800 years in jail, eight to life imprisonment and four to death, and there were still plenty awaiting trial...Tens of thousands of strikers lost their jobs, and were blacklisted by their employers. Moreover, in many factories and localities, the action of the authorities and the dismay of the workers led to the severing of the links between the Communists and the working class, links that had often only been recently forged.” [7]

Levi, outraged by the near destruction of the mass party of revolutionary workers committed to winning the majority of German workers to revolutionary activity, publically condemned the March Action. *Our Path: Against Putschism* is perhaps one of the most passionate and rigorous defenses of the united front strategy for majority revolution in the west.

Constantly reminding his audience — KPD leaders and militants — that the majority of workers’ support for reformism could only be overcome through common experience and activity in class struggles against capital and the state, Levi dissected the “theory of the offensive” as the day-dream of radicals impatient with the difficult task of winning workers’ to communist politics.

Expulsion and Coverup

Rather than accepting Levi’s criticisms and attempting to rectify the disastrous Marzaktion, the KPD leadership expelled Levi for “indiscipline.” His speech to the internal party trial body that reviewed

his expulsion, *What is the Crime: The March Action or Criticizing It?* again mercilessly dissected the political assumptions of his opponents and demanded that the Comintern discipline the KPD leadership for its indisipline — its failure to follow democratic decisions of the second Congress.

The Comintern failed to either reinstate Levi as a party member and leader or call the KPD — and the ECCI — to account for the disaster in Germany. Instead they engaged in what can only be described as a coverup. [8]

The Third Congress of the Comintern, convened in Moscow during the Spring of 1921, formally endorsed the analysis and strategy that Levi, Zetkin and other German “rights” (as their opponents described them), even embracing the KPD’s “Open Letter” of early 1921 calling for united actions of the SPD, USPD and KPD against wage cuts, attacks on the eight-hour day and state austerity. Yet the March Action was portrayed, in public discussions, as a “defensive action” that was “forced upon” the KPD.

There was no public criticism of Zinoviev and the ECCI — or any removal of those responsible for the Marzaktion from leadership positions in the Comintern. More ominously, Levi’s expulsion was upheld and even defended by Trotsky and other Russian leaders.

The long-term impact of Levi’s expulsion on the development of the Comintern and the western Communist parties was tragic. Tens of thousands of seasoned workplace and union militants in mining, metal working and construction abandoned the KPD, many never to return to its ranks. The KPD leadership was deprived of the person “best placed...to seek a synthesis between the specific revolutionary tradition of the German workers’ movement and the successful example of Bolshevism.” [9]

Instead, the new leadership of the KPD around Heinrich Brandler became thoroughly dependent, politically and organizationally, on Zinoviev and the Comintern leadership. The result was a KPD leadership constantly “looking over their shoulders” for ECCI guidance on strategy and tactics in the complex revolutionary situation that unfolded in 1923 — and their failure to capitalize on the last revolutionary opportunity in the west before the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37.

Later Writings

After attempting to gain readmission to the KPD for himself and a small group of supporters organized in the Communist Working Group (KAG), Levi and his supporters rejoined the USPD and eventually the SPD. As an SPD member of parliament, Levi attempted to maintain a left current — of “socialists of the Rosa Luxemburg school” until his death in 1930.

In his writings from these years, Levi attempts to grapple with the evolution of the Soviet Union toward bureaucratic rule and the role of revolutionary socialists in a relatively stable capitalist republic. These sets of writings — at least those that are reprinted In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg — do not display the same rigor and consistency as his writings between 1918 and 1921.

On the Soviet Union, Levi was one of the few western Marxists to grasp that the Tsarist state was not a repressive capitalist state, but a feudal-absolutist state. This shaped the Bolshevik experience, not, as the “textbook” interpretation of Lenin would have it, by making them “authoritarian” and “undemocratic,” but undermining working-class reformism in pre-revolutionary Russia. Unlike revolutionaries in the west, the Bolsheviks did not face a well rooted officialdom of parliamentary politicians and union bureaucrats — in short, they did not face a reformism with deep social roots.

However, Levi's writings on the post-revolutionary Soviet regime misidentify, in my opinion, the roots of its bureaucratic degeneration.

Echoing Luxemburg's hastily drafted pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*, [10] Levi argued that the roots of the erosion of workers' rule in Russia were rooted in the undemocratic dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in 1918 and in concessions to the peasantry — first the distribution of land in 1917, and later greater freedom for marketing of grain and other farm products under the NEP.

Although many of the arguments Bolshevik leaders made at the time were problematic, it was clear that the elections for the Constituent Assembly did not reflect the will of the Russian population as accurately as did the elections for the workers, soldiers and peasants councils in the Fall of 1917. [11] Levi's claim that the concessions to the peasantry under NEP opened the road to capitalist restoration and strengthened pro-capitalist bureaucratic tendencies in the Soviet state, a criticism that Trotsky and the Left Opposition shared, is also questionable.

As John Marot has demonstrated, the Russian peasantry remained, for the most part, independent household producers — who produced primarily for their own and their neighbors' subsistence and marketed only physical surpluses they did not consume. [12] Put simply, the main threat to workers' power in isolated Russia was not the peasantry, but the emerging party-state officialdom that would use its control of the state to reorganize a non-capitalist bureaucratic command economy.

Levi's post-1921 political writings on the Weimar Republic also contain some important ambiguities. On the one hand, Levi remained sharply critical of the right-wing leadership of the SPD — their reliance on the institutions of the German democratic capitalist state rather than the organization of workers in the struggles against capital and the growing fascist threat. On the other, he seems to have believed that a socialist revolution was no longer on the agenda in Germany. He rejected Trotsky's analysis in *Lessons of October* that a revolutionary opportunity had been missed in 1923.

This assessment motivated his call for workers to defend the bourgeois republic "even in the form in which it exists today" (288) against the growing menace of the far right. As Peter Drucker has pointed out, Levi seems to confuse — in the same way as would left-social democrats and "popular front" communists for most of the 20th century — defending the democratic freedoms necessary for the workers and oppressed to self-organize against capital with the defense of the institutions of the capitalist state. [13]

Two great challenges facing the German and other western Communist parties in the early 1920s: becoming deeply rooted in the national realities of their workers' movements as the Bolsheviks had been in Russia; and developing a strategy for winning the majority of workers to revolutionary socialism — the "united front." The failure to restore Levi and his supporters to the leadership of the KPD, and to hold accountable those responsible for the Marzaktion, were both catastrophic for German and International Communism.

Whether a KPD led by Levi and his co-thinkers would have been able to steer the complex class polarization of 1923 to a working-class seizure of power is a matter of historical speculation. However, Levi's practice and key texts from 1918-1921 are part of a very small body of literature left by the classical (pre-Stalinist) Marxist tradition on the problem of durable working class reformism under capitalism.

Along with Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike*, Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism*, and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Levi's *Our Path* and *What's the Crime* are invaluable resources for rearming a revolutionary anti-capitalist left in the 21st century.

P.S.

* * From Against the Current n° 168, January/February 2014.

Footnotes

[1] The following is based on my "What's Left of Leninism?: The New European Left Parties in Historical Perspective," Socialist Register 2013: The Question of Strategy (London: Merlin Books/New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).

[2] The discussion of the German Revolution is drawn from P. Broue, The German Revolution, 1918-1923 (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006) and my review of Broue and Lih's Lenin Rediscovered, "[Party and Class in Revolutionary Crises](#)," ESSF (article 19696)].

[3] See Lih, Lenin Rediscovered, and my review, "Party and Class," op. cit.

[4] Broue, The German Revolution, Appendix I.

[5] For the "scab" accusation see I. Birchall, "Review of Jean-Francois Fayet's Karl Radek (1885-1939)," Historical Materialism (2009), 14:3: 265; for "social-democrat" see B. Palmer, James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 224.

[6] The following follows S. Zehetmair's review of Levi's writings, "Germany's Lost Bolshevik: Paul Levi Revisted," International Socialism Journal, 136 (Autumn 2012), 149-155. [<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=850&issue=136>].

[7] The German Revolution, 505-506.

[8] ee Zehetemair, "Germany's Lost Bolshevik," 157-159.

[9] David Fernbach, "Editorial Introduction to Paul Levi, Our Path and What Is the Crime?" Historical Materialism, (2009) 17, 3: 103.

[10] R. Luxemburg, The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism? Introduction by B.D. Wolfe (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1961).

[11] See S. Farber, Before Stalinism: The Fall and Rise of Soviet Democracy. (London: Verso Books, 1990), 56-58.

[12] J. Marot, The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect: Interventions in Russian and Soviet History. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), Chapters 1-2.

[13] P. Drucker, "[Paul Levi: a Luxemburgist alternative?](#)", available on ESSF (article 25783).