

### D.3. The Republic Besieged, 1918-1923

#### The Spartacist uprising:

On the far left of the USPD a radical revolutionary group had been waiting for increasing chaos in order to provoke an allegedly "true," socialist revolution according to the Bolshevik model. This was the **Spartacist League**, originally a part of the USDP, but calling itself **Communist Party of Germany (KPD)** on 1 January 1919. Its leaders, Karl **Liebknecht** and Rosa **Luxemburg**, had opposed the war and had spent several years in prison for their pacifist activity. Although they admired the success of Lenin's revolution in 1917, they had reservations about the undemocratic style in which Lenin consolidated his power.

Shortly before the elections to the National Assembly, on 5 January, the most radical workers in Berlin got out of control and started an armed uprising. Liebknecht and Luxemburg considered the moment too early for a revolution but felt compelled to go along. Out of a sense of loyalty, the leaders followed the masses into catastrophe. The radical workers occupied newspaper offices and public buildings and called for a socialist revolution in Germany. In some other cities similar uprisings occurred. The government, now led exclusively by the SPD, called Free Corps into Berlin to repress the rebellion. For several days fighting occurred in the center of Berlin. On 15 January the uprising broke down. Luxemburg and Liebknecht were brutally murdered by Free Corps officers. Their corpses were thrown into the central canal of Berlin. Although the USPD and many of the workers who mistrusted the SPD had not supported the Spartacist uprising, the bloody intervention by the Free Corps, which were called and directed by an SPD minister, did irreparable damage to working-class unity. Even many moderate workers without sympathies for the Spartacists' cause now deeply resented the SPD.

#### Revolution in Munich:

As if there had not been enough trouble already, a turbulent and bloody episode seized Munich. On 21 February a rightist student shot the Bavarian Minister President, Kurt **Eisner**, a USPD member. Eisner, whose party had only received two percent of the vote at the Bavarian state elections, was on his way to the Bavarian parliament in order to submit his resignation. The senseless act of terror against him triggered more violence. Shootings occurred in the parliament building in Munich, and the USPD called a general strike in Bavaria. For several months Bavaria remained unstable. On 7 April some Independents seized power in Munich and proclaimed a soviet republic for all of Bavaria. The regular government, led by an SPD member, fled to another city. Journalists and writers formed an insurrectionary Bavarian government (among them the author Ernst **Toller**). After standing aloof for a while the Communists entered the revolutionary government and became the dominant force, further radicalizing the government. The Communists took and murdered several hostages. In early May 1919 a Free Corps and regular army units repressed the Bavarian revolution with utmost and often blind brutality incommensurate to the real danger.

#### Right-wing putschism:

Free corps and a vast number of paramilitary units formed out of some remainders of the old army, partly drawing younger people who had not been old enough to be drafted into the army during the war. They were on the one hand radically anti-democratic, on the other hand passionately nationalist and opposed to every clause of the peace treaty. They secretly hoarded arms to fight Communists and participate in a war of liberation against France and Poland. Increasingly, they became a serious threat to the Republic. In March 1920, some Free Corps attempted a putsch. They occupied Berlin (without encountering any resistance) and proclaimed the rightist Wolfgang Kapp (formerly a close political associate of Tirpitz) new chancellor (**Kapp Putsch**).

When Germany's rump army refused to fight the putschists and declared itself "neutral," the legitimate government under SPD leadership fled to the south of Germany. The state administration in Berlin, however, did not cooperate with the putschists (because they doubted the success of the Kapp Putsch, not because they feared the destruction of democracy). The working-class parties, moreover, proclaimed a general strike. This brought down the Kapp government within a few days, even though the war hero Ludendorff joined it. The putsch showed dramatically how little the German army cared for the Weimar Republic; it was not adverse to fighting leftist putschists with great brutality but "neutral" toward rightist putschists. The same was true for the justice system, as the mild punishments of the putschists revealed. The success of the general strike, proclaimed by the KPD, USPD, and the SPD strengthened worker confidence in socialist action, but the strike turned into communist uprisings in many industrialized areas and thus brought further trouble and chaos to the Republic.

In the aftermath of Kapp's failure radical rightists resorted to terrorism. The murder of Kurt Eisner had set a bloody precedent, and Matthias Erzberger (former Minister of Finance and Center Party leader) and Foreign Minister Walther **Rathenau** were killed by rightist terrorists in 1921 and 1922.

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