The Spartacus Rising and the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg

Florian Leuthner
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1. Introduction

On the 5th of January 1919 the memorable event place took which provoked the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht during the night of the 15th to the 16th January. It was the beginning of the so called ‘Spartacus Rising’\(^1\), which would have such a great impact on the history of the Weimar Republic in the following years.

The trial which followed the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg was one of the most curious trials Germany has ever seen.\(^2\) The death of the two leaders of the Spartacus League was not explained completely and the convicted members of the Free Corps were either freed from prison or were punished in a ridiculous way.

It was in too many peoples’ interest to keep the truth secret.\(^3\) Because of that there are still many rumours dealing with this dark part of German history. Who was the wirepuller of the execution of the leader of the Spartacus league? Were only the Free Corps involved or were there also other groups like the Ebert-Scheidemann government or “Association for Combating Bolshevism” involved?

2. Spartacus Rising\(^4\)

The reason for this rising was a very simple one. Emil Eichhorn, Chief of the Police of Berlin, and also member of the USPD\(^5\) refused his removal from this position by the Prussian SPD\(^6\) Minister of the Interior. After the USPD resigned from the Prussian government, on the 3rd of January, it was clear that their party comrade Eichhorn would not be able to maintain himself in office.\(^7\)

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\(^1\) This name is misleading because the Spartacus league did not support this rising. Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck attended the ‘Joint Revolutionary Committee’ as private persons, not as part of the party leadership.

\(^2\) The last judgement in this case was pronounced in 1971.


\(^4\) To get another very subjective or communist version of the Spartacus Rising it is very interesting to read the following books:

\(^5\) USPD = Independent Social Democrats

\(^6\) MSPD = Majority Social Democrats

His removal was hastened by the Council of People’s Representatives with the support of the army leadership, because Eichhorn was the leader of one of the two most important leftwing armed forces, the Marine Division and Eichhorn’s Security Force, in Berlin. But he was not willing to abandon his position and asked the USPD for support in this struggle for power. Eichhorn insisted that the Berlin working class had appointed him and so only they could remove him. The Berlin workers felt that he was being dismissed for siding with them against the attacks of right-wing officers and employers.

And so the party executive of the USPD, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, two members of the KPD, Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck, and Emil Eichhorn met on January to decide what to do against Eichhorn’s removal and how they should react to the sacking of one of their members from such a key post. They decided to call for a peaceful mass demonstration for the next day, a Sunday. They also distributed a leaflet, which spelt out what was at stake:

‘The Ebert-Scheidemann government intends not only to get rid of the last representative of the revolutionary Berlin workers, but to established a regime of coercion against the revolutionary workers. The blow which is aimed at the Berlin police chief will affect the whole German proletariat and the revolution.’

The response of the workers was greater than anyone expected. ‘A huge mass of hundreds of thousands responded on the Sunday to the call of the organisers to show that the spirit on November is not yet beaten.’ Noske wrote subsequently about the situation on the 5th of January: ‘If the masses had determined, clear-thinking leaders instead of swashbucklers, they would have had Berlin in their hands by noon of that day.’

But it was more than a demonstration, it was more like a marching-up of hundreds of thousands, mostly armed, workers, who wanted to act somehow against the government. And so they decided spontaneously to seize all big newspapers bureaus. Their primary aim was the social democratic Vorwärts, the unofficial newspaper of the government. Later on armed workers also seized the important railway stations.

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9 Ibid., p. 74.
10 KPD = German Communist Party
The KPD was founded by the ‘Bremen leftwing radicals’ and the ‘Spartacus Union’ only a few days before on the 1st of January.
13 Quoted in: ibid., p. 75.
Nobody was more surprised and impressed by this powerful mass demonstration and the following occupations than the few men who had met a day ago in the police headquarters. After a long discussion, which dealt with their current situation, they decided that they should try to overthrow the government.\(^\text{15}\) Liebknecht was one of the most active agitators against the government, although the Spartacus leadership had met the previous day and had been unanimous that an uprising must be avoided at all costs. Paul Levi wrote one year later in the *Rote Fahne* on the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) of September 1920:

> ‘The members of the leadership were unanimous: a government of the proletariat would not last more than a fortnight. [...] It was necessary to avoid all slogans that might lead to the overthrow of the government at this point. [...] Our slogans had to precise in the following sense: lifting of the dismissal of Eichhorn, disarming of the counter-revolutionary troops, arming the proletariat. None of these slogans implied an overthrow of the government. [...]’\(^\text{16}\)

Liebknecht and all the other trusted in the promise of the commander of the Marine Division that all Berlin regiments would support the uprising and were willing to force the cabinet of Ebert-Scheidemann to resign. Therefore they decided ‘to start the fight against the government and to carry on until the overthrow of the government’\(^\text{17}\) and set up a ‘Joint Revolutionary Commitee’\(^\text{18}\), which ‘distinguished itself by incredible incompetence and a lack of initiative.’\(^\text{19}\)

Liebknecht knew that the working class wasn’t ready for communist government, but he saw a chance to dismiss the hated Ebert-Scheidemann cabinet and to replace it by a more leftwing government. ‘Our government is impossible yet, it is true. But a government of Ledebour\(^\text{20}\) supported by the revolutionary shop stewards is possible.’\(^\text{21}\) For him, the overthrow of the government was possible and absolutely necessary.\(^\text{22}\) They issued another leaflet, which called for a general strike and a mass demonstration the next day, Monday concluding: ‘[...]’

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\(^\text{15}\) Cf., Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 123-126.
\(^\text{16}\) Quoted in: Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 75.
\(^\text{17}\) Quoted in: Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 126.
\(^\text{18}\) Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 78.
\(^\text{20}\) Georg Ledebour, a former social democrat deputy and now member of Berlin USPD executive board.
\(^\text{21}\) Quoted in: Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 76.
\(^\text{22}\) Coper, Rudolf: Failure of a revolution. p. 204.
Throw yourselves into the struggle for the power of the revolutionary proletariat. Down with the Ebert-Scheidemann government.’

Again the mass demonstration was a great success for the ‘Joint Revolutionary Committee’. Even more armed workers than the day before appeared in the city of Berlin ready to fight against the government. But nothing happened! Neither the Berlin regiments supported the rising nor the ‘Joint Revolutionary Committee’ told the workers what to do. All speakers attacked the government for its alleged counterrevolutionary activities, although none of them called for violent action. The armed workers seized a few further buildings, but they didn’t make the final assault to seize the administrative district without orders. Here the ‘Joint Revolutionary Committee’, which had so valiantly proclaimed armed resistance and the overthrow of the government, showed itself completely incapable of leadership. They compounded one error with another and so the USPD leadership asked for negotiations with the government.

Ebert and his new commander-in-chief and minister of defence, Gustav Noske, used this incapacity to prepare their counter-blow against the ‘Joint Revolutionary Committee’. Noske prepared the drawing-up of the Free Corps outside of Berlin, which would later play on the most important role in the hunt for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Ebert led the negotiations with the USPD and simultaneously he checked with the Berlin regiments if at least some them were willingly to fight against the rising. It seem that Rosa Luxemburg was the only one who realised what the government was planning:

‘The Ebert-Scheidemann clique are not wasting their time in endless discussion. Behind the scenes they are preparing to act with the usual cunning and energy of counter-revolutionaries; they are loading their weapons for the final surprise attack to destroy the revolution. [...] Act! Act! Courageously, consistently – that is the “accursed” duty and

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23 Quoted in: Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 126.
27 He was appointed after the withdrawal of the USPD members of Council of People’s Deputies. ‘Somebody has to be the bloodhound. I won’t shirk the responsibility’, he declared after his appointment. Quoted in: Coper, Rudolf: Failure of a revolution. p. 206.
28 Cf., Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 128-129.
obligation of the revolutionary shop stewards and the sincere leaders of the USPD. Disarm the counter-revolution. Arm the masses. Occupy all positions of power. Act quickly!\textsuperscript{29}

But nobody paid attention to her warnings from the 7\textsuperscript{th} of January. They gave the government the time to collect forces until they felt strong enough to throw them into a battle to dislodge the revolutionaries. Two days later, Ebert gave the order to crush the rising. This was the last time that the ‘Joint Revolutionary Commitee’ held its last of a series of ‘useless meetings’.\textsuperscript{30}

Between 9 and 12 January the ‘Spartacus Rising’ was crushed. The fight reached its pathetic zenith during the storming of the \textit{Vorwärts} building when the government troops murdered and maltreated many of the so-called Spartacists.\textsuperscript{31} ‘Little quarter was given to [...] defenders, who were shot down they were found. [...]’\textsuperscript{32}

All in all, Kolb describes the ‘Spartacus Rising’ as a rising, which was without a clear strategic plan, hopelessly mismanaged and to some extent half-hearted.\textsuperscript{33} ‘The government sought the opportunity to deal the revolution its death blow; the January movement offered this opportunity.’\textsuperscript{34} ‘Spartacus Week [...] ended in the complete defeat of the scattered, leaderless groups of the left wing radicals.’\textsuperscript{35}

3. The hunt for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and their assassination

3.1 ‘Restoring’ order

The determined leadership of the government forces enabled them to drive the revolutionaries from their positions very quickly. But this order in Berlin was not good enough for Ebert and Noske since it depended on armed Social Democrat workers and soldiers. ‘They preferred to control Berlin with more “reliable” troops – the thousands of pro-monarchist Free Corps who are assembling outside the capital [...].’\textsuperscript{36} they also called the old police force of the monarchs back to duty in order to support the Free Corps in their hunt for Spartacists\textsuperscript{37} ; ‘a clean-up

\textsuperscript{29} Quotes in: Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 83-84.
\textsuperscript{30} Waldman, Eric: The Spartacist Uprising. p. 178.
\textsuperscript{31} Cf., Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 129-132.
\textsuperscript{32} Quoted in: Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 85.
\textsuperscript{33} Kolb, Eberhard: The Weimar Republic. p. 16.
\textsuperscript{34} Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 87.
\textsuperscript{35} Waldman, Eric: The Spartacus Uprising. p. 181.
\textsuperscript{36} Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 85.
\textsuperscript{37} Cf., ibid., p. 85.
operation began.’

‘[...] The SPD leaders more and more openly sought close co-operation with the officer corps and higher bureaucracy, and intensified their contacts, which had never been broken off, with the bourgeois parties.’

Ebert and Noske used the counter-revolution with their Free Corps to restore the order in Berlin. On 15th of January the south and the west of Berlin were occupied by Free Corps, the working-class areas in the north and east of Berlin would follow later on because of the expected resistance.

The western part of Berlin was controlled by the ‘Garde-Kavallerie-Schützendivision’ (GKSD) and was under the command of Captain Waldemar Pabst. During the ‘Spartacus Rising’ he went to Noske and offered him his support in the fight against the revolution. Pabst was one of the most ambitious counter-revolutionaries. Rosa Luxemburg was for him the reincarnation of evil and even more dangerous than the armed masses. According to this he decided to kill her in order to rescue the fatherland.

General Maercker said nearly the same: ‘[...] (Germany) is threatened by the group of Spartacists, by Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg [...] Rosa Luxemburg is a she-devil, and Liebknecht is a fanatic who knows exactly what he wants. [...]’

Pabst and his GKSD would now play the most important part of the hunt and assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

### 3.2 The hunt for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg

The hate against the Separatists culminated in a hunt for Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Radek. ‘They became major targets.’ They were accused of being the political leaders of the ‘Spartacus Rising’, used as scapegoats, but this totally false assessment by the Free Corps would cost them their lives.

Liebknecht and Luxemburg refused to flee from Berlin after the occupation of the Free Corps and, furthermore edited the newspaper *Rote Fahne*. But they had to live in hiding, because numerous Free Corps and Home Guards searched the whole city for Liebknecht and Luxemburg. The social democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* also took part in this hunt. It gave

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39 Kolb, Eberhard: The Weimar Republic. p. ?.
40 Cf., Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 135-137.
‘every encouragement to the murderous hysteria, calling openly for slaughter of the Spartacist leader.’ On the 13th of January Vorwärts published the following poem:

‘Many hundred corpses in a row
Proletarians.
Karl, Rosa, Radek and company
Not one of them lies there –
Proletarians.’

3.3 The capture of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and their assassination

On the evening of the 15th January five members of the Wilmersdorf Home Guard, which was under the direct command of the GKSD, entered the last hiding-place of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. They were captured by the Home Guard and they were brought, after some obscurities relative to their identity, to the headquarter of the GKSD in the Eden Hotel. After a short examination, Pabst decided to hand over to their firing squads, which were set up during the meantime.

Karl Liebknecht was the first one who left the Eden Hotel with his firing squad. First he was hit very hard by a butt in his face and nearly fainted away. He was forced into a car, which drove away to the Tiergarten. Karl Liebknecht was assassinated there by a shot to the head. His firing squad drove on to the next morgue and declared his corpse as the corpse of an unknown man.

A short time after the departure of the first firing squad with Karl Liebknecht, the same happened to Rosa Luxemburg. Like the first time Karl Liebknecht she was also hit brutally by a butt in the face. The firing squad ‘threw’ her into another car and drove away. After a short ride Rosa Luxemburg was assassinated by a shot to the head and was thrown in the Landwehrkanal.

After the assassination of the two leaders of the Spartacus league the two firing squads reported to Pabst. Pabst informed his senior officer Lieutenant-General von Hofmann at 3

44 Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 86.
46 Gietinger, Klaus: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 23.
a.m. in the morning about the assassination. Von Hofmann told him that he had not given the order in this way, but he would accept the responsibility for this crime.48

The official comment about the death of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg was preposterous Karl Liebknecht was shot by his guards during an attempt to escape on their way to the Moabit Jail; a roaring mob tried to snatch Rosa Luxemburg away from her guards in order to lynch her; during their escape a man jumped up on the running board of the car and killed Rosa Luxemburg by a shot in the head; near to the Landwehrkanal the car was stopped again by a roaring mob. On this occasion the corps was snatched away by the mob.49

‘Vorwärts’ had the honour of announcing in advance of all other papers on Thursday 16 January that Karl Liebknecht had been “shot while trying to escape” and Luxemburg “killed by the people.”50 Berlin was partly enraged, partly shocked and partly amused when it read about the assassination of the Spartacus League leadership.51

3.4 The trial

The government promised a severe investigation and a relentless persecution of the culprits responsible for this crime. But the trial which followed the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, was a farce. Gietinger describes this trial as one of the ‘most shameless mendacious trial in the German legal history.’52 The firing squads had to justify themselves in front of a military court of the GKSD with their senior officers as judges. Important eyewitnesses were not interrogated, suspects were not arrested and evidence was faked or suppressed. The military court did everything to protect their comrades. The soldier who hit Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in the face with his rifle butt was sentenced to two years in jail for attempted manslaughter. The chief of the second firing squad was sentenced to two years and four months because he threw the corps

Gietinger wrote a minute statement of the facts what happened during this night in the Eden Hotel, who assassinated Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and how the murderers were protected by many sides.

48 Cf., ibid., p. 24.
50 Harman, Chris: The lost revolution. p. 86.
52 Gietinger, Klaus: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 31.
of Rosa Luxemburg in the Landwehrkanal. All the other involves members of the GKSD were acquitted of the crime.

3.5 Who were the wirepullers of this crime?

On has to distinguish between people directly involved in the crime and the wirepullers. In 1962 Captain Pabst glorified himself and his firing squads for the assassinations they did in order to rescue their fatherland. Gietinger found a confession of the naval lieutenant Pflugk-Hartung who told Ernst von Weizsäcker that he had shot Karl Liebknecht in the head. The case of Rosa Luxemburg is more complicated. The autopsy could not established if the brutal rifle butt attack or the shot in the head were the cause of death. The soldier who attacked Rosa Luxemburg with his rifle butt claimed that he had ‘[... ] strict orders from the officers to club those scoundrels to death [...]’. Gietinger describes this similarly. In his version another captain bribed the soldier to attack Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. But shoot her in the head? In the official version of the GKSD, there was a seventh unknown man mentioned who executed Rosa Luxemburg by a shot in the head. In 1966 Pabst wrote that another naval lieutenant called Souchon assassinated Rosa Luxemburg. Gietinger sees in Souchon only another marionette of Wilhelm Canaris who was in the employ of Noske. But who were the real wirepullers of this crime? Uncontentious is that the pursuit of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had already started before the Spartacus Rising. Beside the aforementioned poem in Vorwärts, which was calling for the slaughter of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, there were other passages in the social democratic Vorwärts. The leader of the Spartacus League were insulted as ‘brutal beasts’, ‘sluggards’ and ‘criminals who can be

53 After a few days in jail he managed to escape with the help of an unknown officer and fled to Holland. Nobody strived a serious attempt for his extradition to Germany.
54 Cf., Gietinger, Klaus: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 31-41.
55 Cf., Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 148-149.
56 Cf., Gietinger, Klaus: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 32.
57 Cf., ibid., p. 33.
59 Cf., Gietinger, Klaus: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 22.
60 Cf., ibid., p. 54.
61 During the Third Reich Canaris was the head of the counter-intelligence.
62 According to Gietinger Canaris freed the punished officer from the jail and gave him a new identity so he could flee to Holland. Cf., Gietinger, Klaus: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 34-41.
countered only with force.’ Anonymous handbills and posters were to be found everywhere calling upon their readers to kill Luxemburg.

And with the appointment of Noske as the minister of defence the man hunting started with full power. His new assistant commander-in-chief immediately sent out men to arrest the leader of the Spartacus league. But they were not successful. And so they monitored the mail and the telephone of Karl Liebknecht.

During the uprising the government did not show any mercy. The officer who commanded the assault on the Vorwärts building received an order that authorised an all-out offensive against the Spartacists. He was ordered not to negotiate and to win unconditional surrender with mercy, or without. Even a right-wing Independent deputy and military adviser of the government told this commander that negotiations were not possible and that force was the only way fight against the Spartacists. This major, who was responsible for the execution of the peace negotiators of the Vorwärts building, claimed that he had the orders from the City Command. They were also confirmed by phone from the Reich Chancellery.

Haffner even alleges that Phillip Scheidemann and a friend of his offered a reward of 100,000 Marks for the assassination of the Liebknecht and Luxemburg. But this contention is wrong. Scheidemann’s son-in-law spread this contention abroad and this false document, which offered the reward, was definitively forged. However, it is true that a reward of 10,000 Marks was offered by the “Association for Combating Bolshevism” for any information leading to the arrest of Karl Radek.

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64 Cf., Coper, Rudolf: Failure of a revolution. p. 231.
65 Cf., ibid., p. 211.
70 Cf., Haffner, Sebastian: Der Verrat. p. 144-145.
71 Cf., Gietinger, Karl: Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal. p. 76.
4. Conclusion

As you see it is very complicated to find out who were the decision-maters in this case. Meanwhile it seems to be clear that the two naval officers who shot Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg got their orders from the commander of the GKSD, Captain Waldemar Pabst. But the social democratic government and their newspaper Vorwärts are also guilty or responsible. With their articles which denounced the leader of the Spartacus league as ‘beasts’ and ‘criminals’. Their famous “poem” which called for the slaughter of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg or their brutal behaviour against the armed workers who attended the uprising the government offered the Free Corps a good possibility to execute them. So the SPD is the least responsible or guilty in a way as a spiritual fire-raiser (geistiger Brandstifter). As far as all the individuals like Gustav Noske, Anton Fischer or Wilhelm Canaris are concerned, it is nearly impossible to make a final statement about their involvement in the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

What remains the question why Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had to die?

5. List of references