Working class susceptibility to the NSDAP

Why did 'Communists' rend to join the NSDAP more often?

3rd. essay

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I. Introduction

“There is more that binds us to Bolshevism than separates us from it. There is, above all revolutionary feeling [...] I have made allowance for this circumstance, and given orders that former Communists are to be admitted to the party at once. The petit bourgeois Social Democrats and the trade-unions boss will never be a National Socialist, but the Communist always will.”

This quotation shall serve as basis for my thesis that ‘Communists’ tended to join or at least to vote more often for the NSDAP than the ‘Social Democrats’. It seems to be at the first glance an enormous contradiction: Members of the extreme left-wing party joined the extreme right-wing party during the Weimar Republic?

In the course of this essay I will try to show that there was no ‘red’ or ‘brown’ ideology, but a mixing of both ideologies, which made it possible for members of both parties to switch sides quite easily. ‘National Bolshevism’, ‘Schlageter line’ and the left-wing circle with the Strasser brothers and Goebbels of the NSDAP shall be sufficient as headwords for the movement.

In order to prove my thesis, this essay contains first some informations in general about the ‘working class’ and how likely they were to vote for the NSDAP. In a second step I will try to prove that the SPD and KPD were totally different in their social composition and age structure so that the membership of the SPD had fewer reasons to switch sides. But this alone is not sufficient to explain why the KPD tended to switch sides more often. Because of this I will try to prove in a third step that the two extremist parties of the Weimar Republic had many things (like the same social composition and age structure) in common. In the fourth and last step the ideology and propaganda of the KPD and the NSDAP towards the ‘working class’ shall be examined where is evidence that supports my thesis.
II. ‘Working class’ during the Weimar Republic

II.1 General information about the ‘working class’

It is necessary to examine the ‘working class’ more closely in order to distinguish between the different parts of the ‘working class’. The ‘working class’ did not constitute a sociologically homogenous stratum within the Weimar society that could be characterised as being united in common lifestyles, attitudes or pattern of behaviour, especially voting behaviour.

The lowest common denominator of ‘working class’ identity was the insurance legislation: those who contributed to the state health insurance fund were counted as workers. According to this, the range of working and living conditions concealed behind the collective term ‘worker’ was really huge: the East or Pomeranian farm labourer, the factory-employed craftsman, the highly specialised skilled worker, the homeworker and the domestic servant, were all counted as ‘workers’.

23% of the electorate were, according to the national census in 1933, ‘workers’. With the inclusion of their enfranchised family members and of pensioners, the ‘workers’ reached a level of approximately 45%; they were biggest group within the electorate. This inclusion can be done without any problems because of the fact that the socialisation normally takes place within the family and/or the social class, in this case the ‘working class’.

Take now in consideration the fact that the two ‘classic’ socialist workers’ parties in the Weimar Republic, the Social Democrats and the Communists, attracted together about 30% and in 1933 only about 27% of the registered electorate, at least one 1/3 of members of the ‘working class’ voted for non-socialist parties or abstained from the elections. All in all roughly 17% of the whole German electorate, which belonged according to the definition to the ‘working class’, voted for non-socialist parties.

This fact is even more plausible when you remember that only a minority of Weimar’s ‘working class’ belonged within the classic industrial ‘working class’ milieu. Even in the secondary sector of the economy only a minority of about 30% of the ‘workers’ were employed in medium and large-scale companies. And only fewer than 10% of the ‘working class’ worked for unambiguously large firms with a thousand or more employees.

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4 Ibid., p. 198.
5 Cf., ibid., p. 199-200.
It can be said that:

“The urban proletariat, which is generally recognised as the typical manifestation of the modern industrial working class constituted only a minority of the working class in the Weimar Republic. This was not only an economic and social fact, but one which also informed attitudes and was bound to leave its imprint on the political outlook of the workers.”

As I already mentioned above I will consider in this essay only these 2/3 of the ‘working class’ who voted for the ‘classical’ socialist parties and especially the KPD. The minimum of at least 1/3 of the ‘working class’ who voted for non-socialist parties shall not be taken into account for this essay.

From this point on the definition of the terms ‘working class’ or ‘worker’ in this essay will only include the 1/3 of the ‘working class’ who voted for the SPD or KPD.

II.2 ‘Working class’ susceptibility to the NSDAP

Before I explain why many ‘workers’ joined or at least voted for the NSDAP it is necessary to provide some figures about the susceptibility of the ‘working class’ to the NSDAP. According to the ‘Mittelschichthypothese’ or ‘Mittelstandsthese’, the NSDAP was seen for a long time as a party exclusively for the middle-class, the petit-bourgeoisie and the white-collar workers. An important component of this theory was that the ‘working class’ was not part of the NSDAP electorate - a kind of immunity of the ‘working class’ against the Nazi-movement and its ideology and its threat for the Weimar Republic.

But the ‘Mittelschichthypothese’ or ‘Mittelstandsthese’ was disproved completely during the last decade. No profession dominated the NSDAP electorate, although some professions and classes were over-represented and tended to vote more often than the average of the electorate for the NSDAP: the middle class was certainly over-represented with 40% of the electorate, but about 40% of the voters for the NSDAP in the 1933 Reichstag election were employed, unemployed or retired workers and their relatives - all in all members of the ‘working class’.
in general. “This does not of course make the NSDAP a ‘workers’ party, but the same token neither was it a purely middle class party.”

The two ‘classical’ socialist parties lost large numbers of voters between 1928 and 1933 to the NSDAP. According to Falter the SPD lost about two million votes and the KPD lost approximately 350,000 votes net during this time to the NSDAP. Winkler uses nearly the same figures, although the loss of voters for the SPD to the Nazi movement is, with 2.3 million, slightly higher. About 6% of the SPD and 9% of the KPD November 1932 electorate voted in the 1933 Reichstag elections for the NSDAP. In return for increase, the NSDAP lost during these elections 1% to the SPD and 2% to the KPD.

This statistical result can be proved especially when you take a closer look on the ‘Stormtroopers’, the SA, of the NSDAP. Appreciable transfers of membership between the KPD and the SA have been noted, although the membership of these organisations was not the same. Clear figures are unfortunately not available, but the transfer of ‘Communists’ to the Nazi movement and its organisations was considerable.

After Hitler’s take-over the SA “[...] not only attracted the previously uncommitted in large number, but broke decisively into the ranks of their left-wing opponents, especially the KPD.” Individual KPD members and whole units of the ‘Rotfrontkämpferbund’ (RFB), as well as ‘Social Democrats’, were recruited and for some new units it can be said that “[...] half of the recruits formerly belonged to the enemy camp.” There is even some evidence that in the Berlin SA, which grew between January and November 1933 from 60,000 to 110,000 men, about 70% of the membership, was formerly ‘communists’.

Other sources and witnesses reported that roughly 30% of the SA membership were former ‘Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold’ and Social Democrat members, although Fischer sees this

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9 Falter, Jürgen W.: How likely were workers to vote for the NSDAP? p. 35.
15 Fischer, Conan: Stormtrooper. p. 211.
16 Quoted in: ibid., p. 211.
17 Winkler, Heinrich A.: Der Weg in die Katastrophe. p. 910.
figure as exaggerated. In contrast to Fischer’s point of view Winkler claims that only a very few members of the ‘Reichsbanner’ joined the NSDAP or the SA. Several other authors also back up Winkler’s theory.

II.3 ‘Working class’ as members of the NSDAP and its organisations?

II.3.1 The differences between the ‘Social Democrats’ and the ‘Communists’

The split between the ‘Social Democrats’ and the ‘Communists’ is closely connected with the establishment of the first German democracy and its further historical course. The ‘Spartacus Uprising’ in 1919 or the ‘Kapp-Lüttwitz-Putsch’, ‘Red Armies of the Ruhr’ and, according to this, the so-called betrayal of the ‘working class’, or the betrayal of Marxism by the SPD with all its bloodshed shall be sufficient as headwords for this essay.

While the SPD formed a coalition government after the breakdown of imperial Germany and accepted the responsibility for the first German democracy, even if this was only possible with the betrayal of several of its fundamental principles and the alienation of some of its members, the KPD behaved much more radically after its foundation and stabilisation. Several attempted uprisings symbolise their wish to establish the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and to effect radical changes in the society and in the economy. This caused some problems within the majority of the organised workers, because they “[...] perceived the Republic as ‘their’ Republic and therefore worth defending at the very time the KPD wished to destroy it.”

The KPD confined itself during the Weimar Republic mostly to denouncing the SPD as ‘Socialfascists’ at Moscow’s command. They established their own organisations like ‘Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition’ (RGO) and so the KPD deepened the ideological split, instead of realising that the two 'socialist' groups had totally different approaches in dealing with their aims:

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23 About the ideological split between the SPD and KPD see for example: Mallmann, Klaus-Michael: Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik. Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung. Darmstadt 1996.Esp. Ch. 5.3.
“Wir haben den gleichen Weg. Wir maschieren die gleiche Strasse. Nur machen wir die
längeren Schritte. Sie wollen für ihre Enkel das erreichen, was wir noch für uns erreichen
wollen.”

II.3.1.1 Social composition

But the split within the ‘working class’ was not only an ideological split. The social division
at the very base of the German ‘working class’ was reflected in the fact that the SPD and the
KPD became increasingly different in their social composition. The most important difference
between the two parties was the fact that only about 30% of the SPD membership was
unemployed while the KPD membership had a disproportionately high unemployment rate, so
that the End of 1932 roughly 80% of the members of the KPD were unemployed.

According to KPD sources, the member of the SPD were increasingly recruited from the
better-off sections of the German ‘working class’, while the KPD became increasingly
unskilled in its composition – Lenin’s theory of the ‘labour aristocrats’. But when one takes a closer look at the class composition one realises, that the thesis of the
‘labour aristocrats’ and the favouring of the ‘Social Democracy’ cannot be maintained,
because the KPD membership included clearly more skilled than unskilled ‘workers’,
although the SPD was more likely to attract middle-class groups than the KPD.

II.3.1.2 Age structure

Another striking difference between the two ‘socialist’ parties was the division in the age
structure, between younger and older workers. In 1927 about 65% of the KPD membership
were under 49 and about 32% were under 30 years of age. During the depression the party
membership became even younger. On the other side in 1930 45% of the SPD membership
were younger than 40 years and only 8% of its membership was under 25. Fowkes delivers
slightly different figures: About 33% of the KPD members were between 30 and 40 years old.

Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. London 1984.
25 Cf., Geary, Dick: Unemployment and working class solidarity: The German experience 1929-33. in: Evans,
Richard J./ Geary Dick (eds.): The German unemployed. Experiences and consequences of mass unemployment
26 Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the German Republic. p. 176.
28 Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 173-175.
and only about 14% were over 50, while within the SPD the proportion of the over 50 was about 27%.  

But when one compares the different figures one detects a general trend. The KPD was male dominated, “[...] young party [...] but not a party of the very young! Only about 12.3% of the KPD members were under 25. [...]” And according to the age structure of the SPD membership, the Reichstag delegation was in fact the oldest of all the political parties. The age structure of the KPD was accompanied by the great fluctuation of its membership. In contrast to the SPD with its long-lasting membership, the KPD had an enormous fluctuation rate. Many members left the party after a short period of membership again because of the immense burden of party work, so that the backbone of the KPD included at its best time a maximum of 100,000 members. 

This is the reason why the KPD was not able to establish, to the same extent, a membership system with long-lasting members like the SPD, in which in 1930 53% of the members had joined the party before 1925 and even 21% of them were pre-war members. This also affected the deep rootedness in the free trade union system of the ADGB, which was clearly dominated by the SPD. According to this, the SPD recruited the majority of its membership from the free trade union system.

### II.3.2 Less attraction for ‘Social Democrats’?

The SPD lost between 2 to 2.3 million votes to the NSDAP, but the KPD only 350,000. Should be there a lower susceptibility to the Nazi movement for the SPD membership than within the KPD? Several reasons back-up for this assumption:

The two figures of the total net loss of the two parties are hardly comparable. While the SPD lost during 1928 and 1933 more than 2 million votes, the KPD was able to gain in the same period more than 1.5 million votes. Because of this it makes more sense to compare the Reichstag election of November 1932 and 1933. As mentioned above, the SPD lost 5% and the KPD 7% net of its electorate to the NSDAP. There is a therefore a small statistical

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30 Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 173.
31 Ibid., p. 173.
32 Cf., Geary, Dick: Unemployment and the working-class solidarity. p. 268.
33 Cf., Bracher, Karl Dietrich: Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. p. 66-68.
34 Mallmann, Klaus-Michael: Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik. p. 93.
35 Cf., ibid., p. 91-93.
significance that the KPD membership were slightly more susceptible to the NSDAP than the SPD.

But a side from this not very impressive statistical evidence, there are other factors, which influenced the probability that the SPD electorate tended to vote less often for the Nazi movement.

In 1930 Carlo Mierendorff made a clear statement about the differences between SPD and the NSDAP.

“Die nationalsozialistische Bewegung hat zuviel, was die SPD zuwenig hat (die Betonung der gefühlsmäßigen Komponenten bei der politischen Willensbildung), und sie hat zu wenig, was die Sozialdemokratie fast ausschließlich hat (Erziehung der Wähler zu einem bewußten und klarem Denken).”

Bracher agrees in his book that Mierendorff’s observation and thesis are correct.

“Diesem Funktionärstyp entsprach ein rational-nüchterner, ja oft biederer Charakter der Führung, in der aufklärerischer Eifer den emotionalen Appell verdrängte - oft bis zum Verzicht auf massenpsychologische Gefühl propaganda. [...] (Dies machte die) SPD im Urteil der, einem neuen Irrationalismus verfallenen, Massen zur Verstandespartei und raubte ihr zunehmend den Gefühlskontakt vor allem mit der Jugend, die schließlich mehr und mehr dem irrationalen Tatappell der radikalen Parteien verfiel. [...]”

Especially the sentence “Erziehung der Wähler zu einem bewußten und klarem Denken” and the fragments of Bracher’s quotation “aufklärerischer Eifer”, “Verzicht auf massenpsychologische wirksame Gefühl propaganda” and “Verstandespartei” back-up the assumption that the membership was less attracted by the NSDAP that the former KPD members. The ‘Communists’ were, in contrast to the ‘Social Democrats’, never able to establish to the same extent a long-lasting membership in the party, for their fluctuation rate was too high. A clear party line was also never established, while with a new party leader or under the influence of Moscow the tactic and its party line changed again.

The SPD was a party with a relatively old age structure and, according to this, a high proportion of long-lasting members with a long-lasting tradition in the free trade union system of the ADGB.

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40 Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. Esp. Ch. 6 and 7.
long-lasting membership in the ADGB is seen, aside from the catholic denomination, as the second important factor in the resistance against the NSDAP.\textsuperscript{41} An additional factor was the unusually low percentage of unemployed within the SPD membership. This allowed the SPD later on to be less radical in their demands for their electorate. Finally the whole conception of the ‘Social Democrats’ in not rejecting the parliamentary system like the ‘Communists’ led to an active involvement in several coalition governments and the high regard of, and the responsibility of the SPD, to the Weimar Republic. They did not search for their salvation in the radical destruction of the Weimar Republic; their aim was to achieve some improvements for the ‘working class’ in a parliamentary system and not with the establishment of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.

\textbf{III. ‘Working class’ between the two extremist parties}

\textbf{III.1 The common features of the KPD and the NSDAP}

“Oh yes, we admit that we’re in league with the National Socialists that we together with the National Socialists, want to destroy the existing social system [...] Bolshevism and Fascism share a common goal; the destruction of capitalism and of the Social Democratic Party. To achieve this aim we are justified in using every means.”\textsuperscript{42}

This quotation from a member of the Saxon Diet in 1930 shows very impressively the common features of the two extremist parties in the Weimar Republic.

According to Bracher, it was the reverse of parliamentarian system that, with the election results of 1930 and 1932, allowed parties like the KPD and the NSDAP to gain a majority of seats, which they were not willing to compromise. Those parties, which were willing to compromise, became a minority in the Reichstag.\textsuperscript{43}

“Für das Schicksal der Weimarer Republik wurde es entscheidend, daß diese Gruppen von vornherein darauf festgelegt waren, sich im Parlament antiparlamentarisch zu verhalten, die sozialpsychologische Integrationsfunktion, die politisch-praktische

\textsuperscript{41} Cf., Falter, Jürgen: Hitlers Wähler. p. 277.
\textsuperscript{43} Cf., Bracher, Karl Dietrich: Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. p. 87.
Gesetzgebungstechnik, die Solidaritätswirkung des Parlaments zu blockieren und damit den Parlamentarismus selbst ad absurdum zu führen.”

It can be pointed out that the most important common feature of the NSDAP and the KPD was their wish to crush the hated Weimar Republic with its existing social system. The destruction of the SPD together with the parliamentarian system was another important feature for them in order to establish the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ for the KPD, and the ‘national’ revolution for the NSDAP.

Alongside their already mentioned common fundamental extremist basis, the KPD and NSDAP also had an impressive similarity between their social composition and the age structure of their membership.

For both parties the ‘working class’ was an important or even the most important part of their electorate. Both parties attracted skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers for their membership, no matter if they were employed or unemployed, although in the KPD the unemployed worker dominated in the membership.

Like the KPD the NSDAP had, in the period between 1925 and 1933, an extremely young membership. But with an average of slightly more than 30 years, it was even younger than the KPD membership and, according, to this the youngest in the party political set-up of the Weimar Republic. Until the Nazi seizure of the power in 1933, both extremist parties were male dominated parties, the female proportion being low in the KPD and was not worth mentioning within the NSDAP.

When one considers these facts one realises and recognises that there was quite a lot of overlapping between the KPD and the NSDAP in the daily political process. The two extremist parties of the Weimar Republic shared more or the less the same social composition and age structure in its membership. But even more important, in his context, is the fact, that the KPD and the NSDAP shared also the same basis of ideology.

44 Ibid., p. 87.
45 Fischer, Conan: the German Communists and the rise of Nazism. p. 1.
48 Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 182.
At this point the question should appear now of how the KPD and the NSDAP organised their ideology and propaganda in order to convince their opponent's membership and electorate to switch sides. The answer to this question suggests, beside the not very impressive statistical significance, the reasons why 'Communists' tended to join, or at least to vote more for, the Nazi movement than the membership of the 'Social Democrats'.

III.2 The KPD

III.2.1 General development

The KPD strategy to woo the working class consisted of a total rejection of the capitalist system and promise of an idyllic future based on the construction of a Soviet Germany. After the failure of the ‘German October’ in 1923\textsuperscript{49} enlarged the KPD, its strategy employed nonrevolutionary methods to build up its own organisations while awaiting a more propitious climate for a revolutionary seizure of power.\textsuperscript{50} Its final aim was the establishment of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.

The most striking feature of the KPD during the Weimar Republic was its inability to provide a proper party line and, because of this, several splinter groups broke away from the KPD and rejoined the SPD, or else remained as independent parties with absolutely no political influence. Only the interferences of the ‘Executive Committee of the Communist International’ prevented further splits within the KPD, which was usually linked with purges within the party membership and the establishment of a new party leadership.\textsuperscript{51} These internal party problems paralysed the party, although the accusation of the SPD as ‘Social Fascists’ and the emphasis of the unemployment issue as the party central theme worked quite well.\textsuperscript{52} Additionally, the co-operation with the NSDAP against the Weimar Republic and its parliamentarism, as well as the defence of the Soviet Union, completed the appearance of the KPD during these days.

\textsuperscript{49} For further details see: Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. Ch. 5.
Fischer, Conan: The German communists and the rise of Nazism. Ch. 3.
\textsuperscript{50} Cf., Brustein, William: The logic of the evil. p. 135.
\textsuperscript{51} Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 110-114.
\textsuperscript{52} Cf., Brustein, William: The logic of the evil. p. 135.
III.2.2 Right-wing ideology and propaganda

“It is clear that Fascism and Communism oppose one another like fire and water and alliance between them is an impossible thing. [...] We should [...] fight against the counterrevolution and that special form of counterrevolution, Fascism.”\(^\text{53}\)

Unfortunately, this appeal given in 1924 given to the Fifth Comintern Congress was forgotten too fast. Moreover Ernst Thälmann denied in 1932 any basic connection between the two extremist parties: “National Socialism is rubbish with gravy on it!”\(^\text{54}\)

But these quotations were more or less empty talk. In order to compete with the NSDAP for the working class as members and voters, the KPD appropriated Nazi slogans, particularly the nationalistic ones.\(^\text{55}\)

With the occupation of the Ruhr by the French the KPD introduced a new kind of ideology the so-called ‘National Bolshevism’. The KPD itself (!) characterised ‘National Bolshevism’ in this way:

“The German bourgeoisie can not longer carry the banner of the struggle for national liberation in Germany, it is neither capable of fighting the Entente, nor does it want to. The task of the KPD is to open the eyes of the broad petty bourgeois nationalist masses to the fact that only the working class, after it victorious, will be able to defend German soil, the treasures of German culture, and the future of the German nation.”\(^\text{56}\)

‘National Bolshevism’ culminated in the famous ‘Schlageter’-speech, which was delivered by Karl Radek in June 1923 after the execution of the Freikorps member Leo Schlageter\(^\text{57}\) by a French firing squad. Schlageter immediately became a national hero and a symbol of German resistance for the NSDAP and even for the KPD. With his speech Radek opened the door for

\(^{53}\) Quoted in: Fischer, Conan: The German Communists and their rise of Nazism. p. 68.
\(^{54}\) Quoted in: ibid., p. 108.
\(^{56}\) Quoted in: Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 95.
\(^{57}\) Schlageter fought against the Russian Red Army in the Baltic, then he participated in the Kapp-Lüttwitz/Putsch, and was an active member of the Freikorps that crushed the communist uprising in the Ruhr after the Putsch. Next he fought against the Pols in Upper Silesia, became an active member of the NSDAP and according to this he decided to fight the underground struggle against the French occupation of the Ruhr.
nationalistic and even more radical right-wing ideology within the KPD and replied to Clara Zetkin’s speech, which called for working class defence against fascist terror.\textsuperscript{58}

“[... ] The fate of this German nationalist martyr should not be passed over by us in silence, or with a contemptuous phrase [...] Schlageter, the courageous soldier of the counterrevolution deserves honest and manly esteem from us, soldiers of the revolution [...] Against who do the German nationalist want to fight? Against the Entente capital or the Russian people? With whom do they wish to ally themselves? With the Russian workers and peasants, together to shake off the yoke of Entente capital, or with the Entente capital to enslave the German and Russian peoples? [...]”\textsuperscript{59}

Radek’s speech implied in more general terms that the widespread popularity of nationalism in Germany had be to accepted by the KPD, and should be included in the KPD ideology in order to gain further mass support. “To win the masses to their side they must make their national ideology as the starting point; the nationalism created by the occupation of the Ruhr was a revolutionary factor which the KPD must exploit.”\textsuperscript{60}

The so-called ‘Schlageter-line’ was established, and as no evidence of any opposition was seen, the KPD members accepted Radek’s speech and adopted it for day to day political business.\textsuperscript{61} On several occasions ‘Communist’ leaders appealed directly to the right. In July 1923 Ruth Fischer addressed Nazi students and declared:

“Whoever declares against Jewish capital, gentlemen, is already a class warrior, even if he doesn’t know it. You are against Jewish capital and wants to crush the stock market jobbers. Quite right! Crush the Jewish capitalists, hang them from the lampposts. [...]”\textsuperscript{62}

This obscure party line culminated in a meeting with a right-wing splinter movement, that declared: “[...] we’ll work together; you hang the Jews and we’ll hang the other capitalists.”\textsuperscript{63}

Both quotations were conformed 100% to the party line during this time and, according to this, Remmele declared that the KPD would prefer to work together with NSDAP than the

\textsuperscript{58} Cf., Fischer, Conan: The German Communist and the rise of Nazism. p. 54-55.
\textsuperscript{59} Quoted in: ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{60} Quoted in: ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{61} Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 97.
\textsuperscript{62} Quoted in: Fischer, Conan: The German Communists and the rise of the Nazism. p. 59.
\textsuperscript{63} Quoted in: ibid., p. 79.
‘Social Democrats’, whom he branded with their familiar nationalist smear ‘November Traitors’.\(^{64}\)

In 1924 the ‘Schlageter line’ appeared to fall victim to the struggles between left and the right within the KPD and within the Soviet Union. All in all the adoption of it was not a real success. Only a few members of the right switched sides, but the groundwork for further co-operation was laid down. The Bolsheviks’ achievements in Russia were often regarded with admiration and some of the right-wing movements saw in the ‘Communists’ just another variant of their now nationalistic ideas.\(^{65}\)

The KPD did not launch any of these obscure and extreme pamphlets until 1930. The ‘Communists’ confined themselves now to co-operation with the Nazi-movement to create a more revolutionary situation, linked together only by their shared negative aims.\(^{66}\) During this time the KPD regularly denounced the existing social and parliamentarian system, the SPD, the Treaty of Versailles, and the League of Nations and demanded a revolutionary campaign for national and social liberation.\(^{67}\)

The KPD’s reply to the NSDAP threat after the Saxon Diet election in June 1930 was to publish of the ‘Programme for the National and Social Liberation of the German People’, which Fowkes characterises as an “[...] extraordinary mish-mash of nationalist and communist demagogy [...].”\(^{68}\) The KPD claimed to be the only party fighting against the Young Plan, the ‘robber peace of Versailles’ and that national liberation and the socialist revolution were an indissoluble unity.\(^{69}\)

The KPD in these final years was caught up in a contradiction between its political line and the instinctively felt requirements of the time. For example, Heinz Neumann’s suggestion that the main attack should now be directed against the Nazis instead of the SPD was dealt with by his removal from the leadership.\(^{70}\)

When one takes a closer look at the early KPD propaganda it is really hard to figure out what was going on in their minds. ‘National Bolshevism’ and the ‘Schlageter line’ particularly created a really strange atmosphere and ideology within the KPD. “As Fischer and Remmele

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\(^{64}\) Cf., ibid., p. 60.
\(^{65}\) Cf., ibid., p. 62-63.
\(^{66}\) Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 125.
\(^{67}\) Cf., Fischer, Conan: the German Communists and the rise of the Nazism. p. 70-71.
\(^{68}\) Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 161.
\(^{69}\) Cf., ibid., p. 161.
\(^{70}\) Cf., Fowkes, Ben: Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic. p. 167.
borrowed some of the worst images from the anti-Semitic vocabulary, one has to wonder just who was influencing whom."\(^71\)

but the most striking result of the adoption of Radek’s speech was, beside the small numbers of defectors to the KPD, that the links to the right-wing spectrum and the NSDAP were established and should survive the next 10 years. The groundwork for the co-operation between the KPD and the NSDAP was laid down, and it played an important part for the susceptibility of ‘Communists’ to the NSDAP even before their seizure of power in 1933. It implied nationalistic and racist ideas to the KPD ideology and lowered in this way the threshold to compete with the Nazi movement in adopting parts of their ideology.

**III.3 The NSDAP**

**III.3.1 General development**

Not only the KPD tried to convince the membership of the NSDAP to switch sides. At the same time the NSDAP tried to convince ‘Communists’ – with quite similar obscure propaganda and ideology – to leave their party and social milieu in order to join the Nazi movement and its organisations.

This propaganda battle and the strange KPD party line caused Otto Strasser to write the following statement: “The official KPD in Germany, has therefore, become a nonsense and should, in Stalinist spirit, rename itself the NSDAP.”\(^72\)

the working class was included as an important part of the parties’ propaganda since the foundation of the NSDAP, and the workers played an important role in the Nazi view of social reality. Only with the support of at least a portion of the largest voting group in the Weimar Republic – the workers – was it possible to gain power.\(^73\)

With the publication of the ‘Twenty-Five Points’ as the official programme in 1920 the NSDAP laid down the foundation of its propaganda towards the working class. Eleven of these ‘Twenty-Five Points’ were clearly pro-labour, as for example the right to work, elimination of the dominance of investment capital, confiscation of war profits,

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\(^71\) Fischer, Conan: The German Communists and the rise of the Nazism. p. 61.

\(^72\) Quoted in: Fischer, Conan: The German Communists and the rise of the Nazism. p. 80.

\(^73\) Cf., Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 4.
nationalisation of trusts, the extension of an old-age pension system and the creation of a national education programme for all classes.  

During the following years two completely different wings established themselves within the NSDAP. These were the right-wing faction, with its connections or links to the middle-class, industry and big capital (which were necessary to finance the party), and the left-wing under the leadership of Gregor and Otto Strasser and Goebbels, which emphasised the importance of a 'socialist' and anticapitalist pro-labour policy in order to win the working class for the NSDAP. Hitler, as party leader, was somewhere in between or above these two different positions and made no clear statement about which direction the further development of the NSDAP should go.

In the eyes of the left-wing faction the ‘Twenty-Five Points’ were more or less half-hearted and so the Strasser brothers developed, with the help of the Goebbels, a “socialist programme” that contradicted the “reactionary” ‘Twenty-Five Points’ – “Hitlerism” against “Strasserism”!

Brustein suggest that “the magnitude of the Left-Right rivalry has been overstated; the distance between Hitler’s and the Strasser brothers’ positions was not substantial”, otherwise the defeat of the Strasser brothers and Goebbels and their ‘socialist’ anticapitalistic pro-labour policy on the Bamberg meeting in 1926 would have come to an end. But even after this disastrous defeat of the left-wing faction and the rejection of their ‘Draft of a Comprehensive Program of National Socialism’, in which ideas as for example corporatism were heavily stressed, the NSDAP “[...] never deviated from its strategy of wooing the working class to its ranks”, although there were quite a lot of zigzags the Nazi party line.

The centrepiece and also the zenith of the National Socialist economic policy before 1933 was not the ‘Fourteen Points’ or the ‘Draft of a Comprehensive Program of National Socialism’ of the Strasser brothers and Goebbels, but rather the ‘NSDAP’s Immediate Economic Program’

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75 For detailed discussion about the left-wing of the NSDAP and the Strasser circle see: Kühnl, Reinhard: Die nationalsozialistische Linke 1925-1930. Meisenheim am Glan. 1966.
77 Ibid., p. 84.
78 Brustein, William: The logic of the evil. p. 146.
(Wirtschaftliches Sofortprogramm) of May 1932, which was followed by the ‘Plan for Economic Reconstruction’ (Wirtschaftliches Aufbauprogramm) in November 1932, both drafted by Gregor Strasser. But his proposals were subjected to vitriolic denunciation by the parties of the left, centre and right, because everybody was afraid that implementation would lead to new harmful inflation, although quite a lot of the working class were in favour of these programmes, which laid “great emphasis on job creation and commitment to a major scheme of public and related works to soak up the unemployed.”

In 1925, the newly established Nazi trade union also played an important part in convincing the ‘working class’ to join, or at least to vote, for the NSDAP and its organisations. The trade unions were seen as “bread-and-butter-organisations” during this time and were the only way to break into the proletarian milieu – and so the NSBO (National Socialist Factory Cell Organisation) was founded. It can be said that “evidently the NSBO was more attractive to workers than the party itself”

As long as this kind of ‘Socialism’ was sufficiently abstract Hitler had few objections to the propaganda of the left-wing faction of the Nazi movement. But when the left-wingers became too serious and too specific Hitler cracked down before the left could either alienate the party’s middle-class followers or threaten his absolute leadership of the party.

III.3.2 Left-wing ideology

When one takes a closer look at the NSDAP ideology and propaganda, one sees that “they were plunderers and simplifiers of ideology.” A striking feature of the NSDAP propaganda in general was their simplicity in contrast to the KPD propaganda and the early labour writings of some Nazis in the past. Hitler emphasised the “Volkstümlichkeit” of the NSDAP propaganda and according to this the following guide was published: “The style of our

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81 Cf., Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 29.
85 Cf., ibid., p. 119-120.
88 Ibid., p. 28.
89 Bracher, Karl Dietrich: Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. p. 112.
propaganda must be clear, unequivocal, concise, unromantic, nonprolix (phrasenlos). It will be suited for the background and character of the masses. [...]"

Not only did the Nazi movement adopt the language and symbols of ‘Socialism’ such as “workers, break your chains” or “workers, unite”, they also used several different economic theories and mixed them up.

“National Socialist economic thinking sought to create ‘a third path’ between Marxist centralised state planning and laissez-faire capitalism. This ‘third path’ had roots in the German national/statist school and Keynesian economics. The Nazis were not the first in Germany to advocate or even to implement national/statist and Keynesian economic principles, but they were the first to merge the principles of both schools into a seemingly coherent and innovative programme.”

The concepts of “state socialism, autarkic economic development and Lebensraum” are closely linked to this kind of Nazi economic ideology. The NSDAP was able to offer the working class with its economic programme three additional features, which are quite important in order to attract the ‘working class’. From the outset Hitler emphasised that the NSDAP would not be a working class party like the SPD or the KPD.

Firstly the NSDAP was above all German nationalist workers’ party and because of this they would put the interests of German labour above those of the international labour community. In their eyes the classical ‘socialist’ parties and especially the KPD had betrayed the German working class and placed the interest of international bolshevism before the national interests of the German working class.

Secondly the NSDAP offered the workers a view of society that differed from the view taken by the traditional ‘socialist’ parties. The Nazi movement legitimised the desires of the working class for social mobility and promised to provide them an opportunity to climb up the social leader. As I already mentioned above, the majority of the German working class did

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90 Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 171.
93 For further details see: Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. Introduction.
95 Ibid., p. 146.
96 Cf., Brustein, William: The logic of the evil. 141-142.
97 Cf., Brustein, William: Blue collar Nazism. p. 150.
nit fit into this stereotype of the urban proletariat\(^98\) and so it is a false assumption that the German working class in general “opposed private property and were favourably disposed towards Marxism.”\(^99\)

The next feature is closely linked with the second one. A chief characteristic of the working class in the 1920s was its tendency towards “embourgeoisment” (Verbürgerlichung) and the economic crises created a new social group, the “proletarianized” middle class. The NSDAP was the only party during the Weimar Republic which appealed to the “embourgeoisized” working class and to the “proletarianized” middle class.\(^100\)

**III.3.3 Left-wing propaganda**

The Strasser brothers, Goebbels and the leader of the NSBO, Muchow, launched several newspapers like ‘Der Angriff’ or ‘Nationalsozialistische Briefe’, which were designed primarily for the working class. The aim of this left-wing propaganda towards the workers was only to strengthen the influence of the NSDAP within the ‘working class’ and try to absorb as many voters as possible from the classical ‘socialist’ parties. They pressed ahead with their propaganda and emphasised the common features of the NSDAP and the KPD in order to make it easier for former ‘Communist’ to switch sides and make Nazi ‘socialism’ attractive to the workers.\(^101\) Indeed, they saw themselves as the “[...] deadly enemies of today’s capitalist economic system.”\(^102\)

According to Goebbels only the question between “national or international in way and goal [...]” distinguished the two parties.\(^103\) This made him write in January 1926: “I think it is terrible that we and the Communists are bashing in each other’s heads [...] Where can we get together sometime with the leading Communists?”\(^104\) And at another occasion at the end of 1925: “You are as anti-Semitic as I [...] The Jew in the National-Bolshevik state is an absurdity.” In conclusion, he asked the ‘Communists’ to abandon the KPD and to join the

\(^98\) See cp. 2.
\(^99\) Brustein, William: The logic of the evil. p. 147.
\(^100\) Cf., Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 69-71.
\(^101\) Cf., ibid., p. 91.
\(^102\) Quoted in: ibid., p. 181.
\(^104\) Quoted in: Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 91.
NSDAP.\textsuperscript{105} Goebbels’ socialism became more and more militant, and Kele suggest that Goebbels became something of a “National Bolshevik”.\textsuperscript{106}

Even after the Bamberg defeat of the Strasser circle the left wing of the NSDAP continued with their propaganda. Muchow wrote in 1931, after the NSDAP was accused of being the ‘Fascist’ enemies of the working class, that the economic principles of fascism and National Socialism were completely different; that “fascism was capitalistic and Nazism was socialistic”. And later one: “We are not fascists! We are socialists. Nationale Sozialisten!”\textsuperscript{107} All in all these propaganda activities were described by Hitler in 1932 as the “[...] hope to supply the proper offset to the Communist ideas”\textsuperscript{108}, even if the Nazi “‘Socialism’ was reduced to a vague, verbal invocation of a national, community directed economic idea.”\textsuperscript{109} But “by combining national/statist thinking with creative Keynesian economics the NSDAP, more than any other party, fashioned a programme that addressed the material concerns of many German workers.”\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{IV. Conclusion}

The aim of this essay was not to gloss over or to underestimate the role of SPD during the Weimar Republic and accuse the KPD of being the lackey of the NSDAP and the gravedigger of the first German democracy. Nonetheless, there was the necessity to present the KPD in a different light. The ‘Communist’ fighting in the streets against the Stormtroopers should not become the target of this criticism. The aim was, on the contrary, to present the discrepancy between how the KPD saw its own role during the Weimar Republic and how at least the leadership of the KPD acted in reality.

The membership and the voters of the SPD, which were denounced prayer wheel like by the KPD as ‘Social Fascists’, tended not to vote for and to join the Nazi movement more often than the KPD. No, it seems to be that ‘Communists’ had a greater susceptibility for the NSDAP and ist organisations. Beside the not very impressive statistic evidence of Jürgen Falter, this assumption is backed up, in my opinion, by several reasons:

\textsuperscript{106} Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 91.
\textsuperscript{107} Quoted in: ibid., p. 182-183.
\textsuperscript{108} Quoted in: ibid., p. 178.
Firstly it is necessary to mention the two different approaches towards the Weimar Republic. While the KPD rejected any kind of parliamentarism and started after its stabilisation several uprisings in order to establish the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, the SPD accepted responsibility and participated actively in the first German democracy and in its parliamentary membership and electorate. The SPD represented the older socialist ‘working class’ with long lasting members in the free trade union system, a low fluctuation rate within the party and a membership, which was less often unemployed than the membership of the KPD. These differences in the social composition and the age structure allowed or forced the KPD to be much more radical than the SPD.

The SPD was all in all more conservative party. Yet beside this conservatism the SPD developed one virtue, namely the “Erziehung der Wähler zu einem bewußten und klaren Denken” and the development towards a “Verstandspartei”, even if this meant to lose contact with the younger generation.

But these three factors are not sufficient to explain why the KPD membership and electorate should be more susceptible to the NSDAP. They only show that is rather unlikely that the SPD membership joined the Nazi movement, simply because they had less reasons to do it.

After the comparison of the two extremist parties of the Weimar Republic, three striking common characteristics can be pointed out:

Firstly, they had the common attitude towards parliamentarism. Both parties rejected any kind of parliamentarism:

“For das Schicksal der Weimarer Republik wurde es entscheidend, daß diese Gruppen von vornherein darauf festgelegt waren, sich im Parlament antiparlamentarisch zu verhalten. die sozialpsychologische Integrationsfunktion, die politisch-praktische Gesetzgebungstechnik, die Solidaritätswirkung des Parlaments zu blockieren und damit den Parlamentarismus selbst ad absurdum zu führen.”

Secondly, they shared a quite similar social composition and age structure, which made the exchange of membership without big problems possible.

Thirdly, and most importantly, they shared their ideology and propaganda towards the particular opponent. The KPD tried, with the establishment of ‘National Bolshevism’ and the implementation of the ‘Schlageter line’, to convince members of the right to join the KPD.

Brustein, William: Blue-collar Nazism. p. 139.
Apart from the fact of some defectors from the right to the left, this kind of ideology was not successful, although it started a fateful development. It brought nationalistic and racist ideas to the KPD ideology and in this way lowered the threshold to compete with the Nazi movement and laid the groundwork for the co-operation between the two extremist parties of the Weimar Republic.

The NSDAP also tried to absorb as many members and voters of the ‘working class’ as possible. Conditional to the left-wing ideology and propaganda of the Strasser circle and their emphasis on socialist and anticapitalist ideology, the adoption of the socialist propaganda and – later on – through the implementation of more moderate pro-labour policy, the NSDAP appealed especially to the nationalistic minded workers in Germany. Goebbels’s ‘“National Bolshevism’ tendencies in 1925 had laid the groundwork for later years when Nazi pronouncements would hardly be distinguishable from those of the Communists.”

“All in all it can be said that the KPD and the NSDAP had more in common that what distinguished the two parties, but that ‘Totalitarianism’ was a common feature of both parties. The KPD membership knew the nationalistic and even racist ideology since the adoption of ‘National Bolshevism’ and the ‘Schlageter line’ in 1923 and became quite familiar with this kind of propaganda, while the propagated ‘Internationalism’ remained only an empty cliché. After the seizure of power by the NSDAP in 1933, the change for them was not so striking. And so more members of the KPD than of the SPD changed the colour of their shirts: they simply wore their new ‘brown’ instead of their old ‘red’ shirts. The following slogan became popular: “At first we Communists were in the SPD, today we are National Socialist fighters in the NSDAP!” Hitler’s quotation had become reality!

113 Quoted in: Kele, Max H.: Nazis and workers. p. 188.
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