

Reaction, Revolution, And What?

GERMAN revolutions come rarely, but when they do come political changes follow one after the other with kaleidoscopic rapidity. In the period of a week a royalist revival has been followed by a communist uprising, to be gradually replaced by a return of the moderate majority to power.

This second German revolution is in its broad lines a repetition and a continuation of the first: a struggle between the old order and the forces of liberalism, with alongside a constant and growing pressure from the masses for a complete social readjustment. The first revolution resulted in a purely political change in Germany. In this crisis, however, political questions are becoming more and more merged in larger social issues.

Several lessons can already be learned from the present upheaval in Germany. No radical change can longer be made in the government without consulting the wishes of the people. This is a positive gain won in the previous revolution which monarchists like Dr. Kapp, who imagined that nothing had been accomplished by the fall of the old regime, are now obliged to take into account.

The reactionaries also discovered that, while the people have but a very low opinion of the Ebert government and its accomplishments, they resent vigorously any effort made to saddle them again with the old system.

Of vital significance is the discovery that the masses have made for the first time of the power of the general strike. In the past the workers have not been conscious of enough community of interest to turn to the general strike. Most of them belonged to the prosperous Socialist Majority party and regarded strikes with much the same conservative disdain and anxiety as their employers. They were not inclined to risk their party funds on uncertain ventures. The Christian Socialists were of course organized to be kept aloof from any such general action.

But now that the war has reduced them all to the proletariat their attitude toward class action has considerably changed. The feeling of many is that they have nothing more to lose, and possibly something to gain by further adjustments between capital and labor.

The several attempts prior to this one at a general strike have failed, however, for want of a common organization. The labor unions and the Communists have been at loggerheads as competitors in the same market. The Communists,

twice in January of this year, tried to call a strike. But they had not a broad enough platform to attract all the workers. The government, with the assistance of the railroad labor unions, blocked the move. Public opinion was indignant that the workmen should do anything which might increase the cost of living, or delay the return of their prisoners of war en route from France.

But this time Ebert begged them to strike. For twenty-four hours at least (this is the time limit Ebert set) it was their patriotic duty to join in smashing the reactionaries, or at least to remain idle, and the workmen found both tasks attractive. The opportunity was so unique, indeed, that they decided to prolong the strike and make a thorough job of it. At the same time that they were disposing of the Von Lüttwitz troops, they included such of the government forces as had been particularly offensive to them.

The royalist-militarist coup d'état now seems but an incident in the German revolution in relation to the bigger developments which have followed. It might be compared to the shot at Sarajevo. Their act belongs to the same class of bravado. German militarists have usually demonstrated an abundant technical knowledge, and an unbounded energy in their undertakings. But they have almost always fallen just short of success. They threw away both peace and victories in the course of the war by their failure to leave sufficient margin for the all important factor of human fallibility. They let their policy be governed by the immediate situation.

In this enterprise they have lived up to their tradition. Their scheme was undoubtedly carefully planned. The situation on paper was most favorable. Foreign powers were not likely to intervene. We, for the time being at least, were out of it. Great Britain was not inclined to increase liabilities on the Continent. France was embarrassed by a general strike at home and the demobilization of another class. The Poles, too, were occupied on their eastern frontiers.

The situation at home, too, seemed a favorable one. A good part of the army was behind the Conservatives. The Ebert government was never weaker. The people had been disappointed in all their hopes about the revolution, were completely disillusioned, and seemed ready enough for any change.

This estimate was fully confirmed in the first phase of the recent uprising. The impression one

gathers is of two surprisingly weak governments disputing together for something which neither seemed to have in his power nor seemed strong enough to go out and take. They were very much like two small boys standing a distance apart and exchanging abuse, but hesitating to come closer together.

It is difficult to predict which way the revolution might have turned had it not been for a third factor, the general strike. Neither of the two governments had taken it sufficiently into account. Herr Ebert apparently declared it in a moment of fright when the first word came of the advance of the reactionaries on Berlin. In the past he had gone to every length to prevent it.

The strike spread to amazing proportions. It closed not only the factories, but also the public works, and, of capital importance, the railroads. There was bound to be disorder resulting from idleness and difficult living conditions. But the strike took on other aspects which made it alarming to the moderate and conservative classes. The Ebert group began to fear that it was a coincidence rather than common interest which explained the presence of workers on the barricades with the Ebert forces against the reactionaries. They became convinced of this when it was evident that even the labor leaders were losing control over their men. Many of the leaders agreed to stop the strike when Ebert requested and were ready to support the government in action against the Communists. But they found that their following was slipping out from under them and turning to the Communists.

It was then that Ebert discovered that in calling the strike to save his Cabinet from the militarists he had abdicated into the hands of the strikers. They, with the masses behind them, now became potential masters of the situation. Their action has undoubtedly dominated the course of events since then.

The issue was now no longer one between the von Kapp and the Ebert forces but between them, separate or combined on the one hand, and the masses on the other. Although Ebert issued his ultimatum to Dr. von Kapp it was not a decision in Stuttgart but the urgent advice of Herrn Daumig und Kohn, leaders respectively of the Independent Socialist and Communist parties which decided Dr. von Kapp to hasten his departure. After these gentlemen called he even decided to reject "withdrawal without condition" and demand an amnesty. Was it because he begrudged Herr Ebert this cheap, if temporary, satisfaction, or because he knew that the government would be negotiating the

next day for the support of the very forces which had just attempted to crush it?

It is difficult to tell how close the understanding reached between the enemies of yesterday has been. The majority parties in power at least lost no time in coming to terms with the conservative parties on the promise of general elections in the near future. This bait is typical of the change in the attitude of the two groups toward each other and the people. It was less to satisfy the conservatives, who knew perfectly well that after their present fiasco they would be snowed under in any election in the near future, than to reach the hesitant followers in the general strike, who are looking for a possible pretext to avoid the violent methods now being used.

It is probable that the understanding between the government and the conservatives did not get much further than a military agreement to join forces against the common enemy. At the moment that the government was negotiating the termination of the general strike, the conservatives announced that they had no intention of entering the Cabinet at present and "preferred" to await the outcome of the general elections.

Another curious coincidence at this time were the rumors that Noske would tender his resignation owing to the feeling in the Cabinet that the Minister of War should at this time be a soldier. Noske is nothing if not that, by temperament and training if not by method. At this moment he and the reactionary officers had their heads together in Berlin planning the most effective way to deal with the strike and Noske with his usual frank brutality was declaring that they would stamp it out in the approved Prussian way.

The government could not fail to see that all this did not check the general strike but only spread it. They turned therefore to the Strike Committee for a way out. Here the strike leaders made a show of an apparent if not a real strength. In return for a promise to call off the strike they forced the Ebert government into an agreement which is a complete abdication. The Cabinet must immediately be revised to give full satisfaction to labor; the entire administrative system must be purged of the reactionaries who supported von Kapp and be "democratized." Noske and the insurgents in the army must go, and in their places workmen and teacher units be substituted.

But the labor leaders themselves have lost the effective control of the strike to the Communists. By instructing the men to go back to work they relieved the immediate crisis in Berlin but did not check the uprisings in western Germany. It is now evident that the effective leadership there has passed

to the Spartacides and they propose to force an issue on their whole program.

The force of the German Communists is a real one. A year ago the revolution was made by the soldiers' and workmens' councils. But these names were new to most of the Germans who were members of the councils. They had adopted the Russian organization as the most convenient means of overthrowing the old regime but they were not familiar with the actual working of the system in practice.

Since then, however, the Germans have received the same intense education in communistic doctrines that they received in pure Marxism thirty years ago. They know something about conditions now in Russia and they also have profited by their own previous short experience and failure. The first tangible result of this propaganda was seen at the November convention of the Independent Socialist party which came out for the Third International, the communist system. Prior to this they had been astride the parliamentary system on the one hand, and the communist on the other.

The German workman, whatever his party convictions, still continues to be more interested in immediate gains than in distant ideals. The German, whether communist or not, has a national consciousness which inclines him secretly to despise the Russians for their want of orderliness and to fear them for their numbers.

It may however be doubted whether the Communists have sufficient experienced leadership. With the exception of Herr Daumig, the eloquent and violent orator of the Independent Socialist party, I know of none who have the combined qualities of statesmanship and mass control of a Lenin. There are many able popular leaders, it is true, of the stamp of Ledebour and Crispian but they do not stand out as men of large calibre. It is possible, therefore, that the strike movement disseminates its forces in misdirected effort.

So extensive are the concessions which the government has already made labor in the agreement of March 20th that it makes little difference what the outcome of the immediate military struggle will be. Not only did the agreement include the radical changes in the government mentioned above, but also a socialization program which will affect all industry, and land ownership, and put the effective control of the state in the hands of labor. The question, therefore, is no longer whether Germany will go backward or forward in social reforms, but whether these will take place over night from a violent overthrow of the government or as the result of compromises over a longer period of time.

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That Sort of American

“MY dear Mr. H.” the letter began and my eye fell to the bottom of the page to see what acquaintance was writing me. The name was that of an American author popularly known for his articles on the Great Outdoors—whom, however, I have never happened to meet. [How I dislike our modern habit of intimate address! Where is the protecting reserve of the old “My dear Sir”?] “Knowing you to be that sort of American who is a friend of General Wood,” my confidential correspondent continued, “I am asking you to write me a few lines for publication stating why at this grave crisis of national affairs, etc., etc.” I am not for General Wood. There is not a drop of blood in me that is not antagonistic to the militant general. Why should Mr. W. assume that I am “that sort of American” who believes in General Wood? Then I guessed the little riddle: I am the sort of American whose name and address, with ten or twenty thousand others, happen to be included in Who’s Who, and we have all been circularized in the same intimate and confidential manner. But I am sure Mr. W. and General Wood’s publicity committee have made a mistake. They should have taken the Blue Book, not Who’s Who, for a list of “that sort of American who is a friend to General Wood’s” candidacy.

A little while ago I was dining with some of the real friends of the General. It was a very good dinner, abundant, rich, succulent, and the wines were more than good and also abundant. It was a very pleasant house. As I looked over the cheerful dining room and across the glittering, flower spread table, at my host and hostess and fellow guests all comfortably ageing and fattening, I wondered how anything could evince so little change in this mutable world as this house, this circle of agreeable people. It was in each detail as I remembered twenty-five years back, to the pictures on the wall, to the silver and food and wine—even to the flowers and the ideas. The hurricane of the war, it seemed, had passed miraculously over this house and these people and had left as little mark as heat lightning on the horizon after a sultry summer day.

As we got on towards the salad the conversation, never animated, languished. The pretty Frenchwoman at my left was stuffing herself in speechless repletion. My host’s lawyer brother, who had recently returned from a prolonged residence in England because of the double income tax, was growling about the democratic administration [twenty years ago his anathema was Roosevelt]. Our hostess, wearied by the vituperative croaking of the old lawyer, thought of a happy diversion: