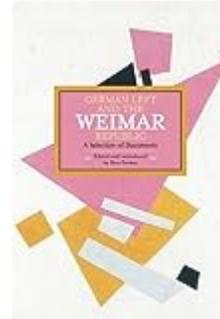




**Ben Fowkes.** *The German Left and the Weimar Republic: A Selection of Documents.* Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015. 399 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60846-486-9.



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## The German Revolutions

Ben Fowkes has produced a book that is much more than a standard documentary reader. Thanks to his skillful translations and expert commentaries, it gives English-language readers a sense of the broad range of issues which animated the German Left during the Weimar Republic (1918-33). Weimar Germany had the largest socialist party and the largest communist party (outside the Soviet Union) in the world so the relations between those two left-wing parties had world-historical significance. Since this book is a study of the political Left rather than the entire German working-class movement, Fowkes devotes little space to the politics of the German trade union movement (which was also the largest in the world).

Fowkes organized 176 documents around twelve key issues that correspond to the twelve chapters in the book. Although some complete documents are provided, most entries are short excerpts from longer documents. His choice of documents demonstrates Fowkes's expert knowledge of the key primary sources on the Weimar Left and includes party congress proceedings, periodicals, unpublished archival sources, and published docu-

mentary collections. The brevity of the excerpts keeps the reader focused on the key issues being discussed in the chapter and prevents the introduction of extraneous issues present in the longer documents.

The chapters are organized around the following themes: 1) social democracy's role in the establishment of the Weimar state, 2) council democracy versus parliamentary democracy, 3) communism's insurrectionary politics, 4) the Weimar Left's attitudes toward Weimar democracy, 5) social democracy (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands or SPD) between government opposition and coalition, 6) the German Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands or KPD) and the Comintern, 7) social democratic foreign policy, 8) democratization of the armed forces, 9) the gender and sexual politics of social democracy and communism, 10) social democratic and communist long-term political objectives, 11) party structure, base, and milieu, and 12) parties and groups of the dissident Left.

The bulk of the book concentrates on the policies

of the two main Left parties of the Weimar Republic. Fowkes reserves his last chapter for a discussion of Left dissidents from the beginning to the end of the Weimar Republic and includes a selection of documents outlining their party programs and critiques of the two major Left parties. It is a little surprising that Fowkes does not have a chapter on SPD and KPD views of, and policies toward, the Weimar Right, especially the Nazis, but these views and policies emerge in part in the above chapters.

Each chapter has an introduction in which Fowkes, with reference to exemplary historical research, explains the significance and context of the key issues raised by the documents. There is also a general introduction to the period and its central issues and extensive footnotes in every chapter that explain key terms, events, individuals, and organizations for the general reader. At roughly seventy pages, taken together the introductions constitute a small and well-informed monograph on the Weimar German Left.

The general introduction lays out the main political issues that the two major left-wing parties confronted in the Weimar Republic and the stances they took toward those issues. At the most fundamental level, most SPD leaders believed that capitalism was a permanent feature of German life and from that assumption they pursued policies that promoted parliamentary democracy as the best means to secure workers' interests and piecemeal improvements. KPD leaders, on the other hand, thought capitalism and bourgeois rule were doomed (p. 1) and believed a revolutionary state based on workers' councils would best secure the interests of the broad working class. The SPD strove to be a party of governmental stability while the KPD strove to be a party of governmental overthrow. That neither party succeeded in their quest is one of the main outcomes delineated by this book.

While it engaged in state- and local-level alliances (see chapters 3 and 6), the KPD shunned coalitions with other parties at the national level. The SPD welcomed such coalitions and the documents in chapter 1 clarify the role of the SPD's leaders in supporting a national parliamentary government during the revolution of 1918 and the early years of the republic against more radical left-wing groups that sought to create a council-based democratic socialist government controlled by workers and against SPD stalwarts who proposed to socialize the major industries of Germany. The documents in chapter 1 illustrate the range of opinion within the SPD and the reform measures that the SPD attempted to enact with its coalition partners. Fowkes points out the major con-

tradition in which SPD leaders found themselves: only a vigorous mass workers' movement (which made SPD leaders uneasy) could put enough pressure on the SPD's bourgeois coalition partners to generate reforms but as soon as the pressure let up, the reforms were undone.

Chapter 2 revisits this early history but it focuses on the issue of the movement by radical workers for council, rather than parliamentary, democracy and SPD opposition to that goal. The documents show the lively debate among members of the SPD and the breakaway Independent SPD (USPD) about the desirability and feasibility of the councils as a new form of state. As the documents and commentary by Fowkes makes clear, many council members were not sure that they wanted to assume power and the SPD was able to use these divisions and its alliance with the military to suppress the more militant elements and have the more moderate elements vote to dissolve the workers' and soldiers' councils and institute factory councils that were not organs of state but would assist in securing social peace and efficient running of factories. A council form of government was a major plank in the KPD's program throughout the Weimar period.

The first few years of the Weimar Republic were years of worker rebellion and civil war. Chapter 3 contains documents relating to discussions among communists of 1) the possibility of a united front with socialists and 2) the efficacy of insurrection. Fowkes' introduction to this chapter contextualizes KPD politics and explains important internal dynamics and disputes within the party about vanguardism and armed uprisings. His discussion is nuanced as he explains that German communism was not synonymous with armed insurrection or vanguardism during this period and that KPD leaders had varying views on both. Such disputes often ended with leadership changes, particularly in the aftermath of failed uprisings. The upshot was that, after several failed uprisings from 1919 to 1923 the KPD, while committed in theory to the violent overthrow of capitalism and the realization of a socialist revolution along Bolshevik lines, no longer fostered plans to seize state power but focused instead on opposition to the Weimar system and support for the Soviet Union.

Throughout its history in the Weimar Republic, the SPD had a love-hate relationship with the bourgeois parties with which it formed national government coalitions. Unlike the KPD, it saw the defense of the parliamentary republic as a defense of working-class interests, but coalitions often meant compromising on those interests. Chapters 4 and 5 provide documentary evidence of

the internal struggles of the SPD regarding its strategy of coalitions with bourgeois parties in an unstable and sometimes hostile parliamentary democracy, along with documentary evidence of the problems faced by the SPD and KPD in their attempts to form a united working-class front against the bourgeois parties of Weimar. In both situations, ideological divides were deep and trust was in short supply. As Fowkes indicates, such coalitions were episodic. Efforts at a united front with communists officially ended when the communists began to refer to SPD leaders as "social fascists" after 1928 (although informal alliances did persist at the local level) and efforts at coalition with bourgeois parties ended in early 1930 with fundamental differences over social policy. Once fear of the Nazis took hold in late 1930, the SPD assumed a policy of toleration of the Brüning government, which led to its capitulation to right-wing parties bent on eliminating the republic.

Chapter 6 focuses on the relationship of the KPD to the Communist International (Comintern) headquartered in Moscow. Fowkes explains that the emotional and ideological connection of the KPD to the Comintern was always strong even as the relationship grew from one of relative independence and equality in the early Weimar Republic to greater financial and bureaucratic dependence to the point that, after 1928, the party's general policy in most important strategic and tactical questions was determined outside Germany (p. 174). While the documents presented make this growth of centralized control evident, they expose the ambiguities and dissensions of the earlier period. Fowkes explains the "class against class" policy of the KPD after 1928 and its "social fascist" line was partially a result of a new Comintern line in the "Third Period" but also partially the result of a genuine and deeply held opinion of KPD leaders and rank-and-file members that the SPD was counter-revolutionary in the early Weimar period and remained counterrevolutionary in its continued repression of radical worker demonstrations in Prussia and its support of the capitalist Weimar state.

The next chapter presents the reader with documents regarding the SPD's foreign policy ideas and practices, which Fowkes frames as pro-Western and anti-Soviet. The SPD worked to revise the Versailles Treaty through cooperation with the Allies while the KPD favored an alliance with the Soviet Union. Fowkes offers only a few documents on KPD foreign policy, which he argues was anti-Western (that is, anti-capitalist) and pro-Soviet. While purportedly about foreign policy, the documents themselves reveal a proto-nationalist bent within

the SPD and even the KPD. In this chapter Fowkes's commentary greatly surpasses the reach of the documents.

Socialists had long wanted to democratize the German military. Such a desire stretched back before World War I. The documents in chapter 8 lay out the various socialist and communist positions about the proper relation of the military to civilian power in the new republic. As Fowkes elaborates, because of their fear of a radical takeover of political power, the SPD aligned itself with the old imperial officer corps in the aftermath of the German Revolution and used the military to suppress worker uprisings, patrol eastern borders, and guarantee food supplies. The Soldiers' Councils argued for subordination of the military to civilian power, election of officers, abolition of rank, and other democratizing moves but the new SPD-led government sided with the High Command and kept the old structures intact. By 1920 the time for reform had passed and the military retained a great deal of autonomy and began to influence foreign policy and budget decisions regarding military expenditures and illegal rearmament. Communists took a dim view of all of these developments and worried about a resurgence of German militarism, while the SPD passed a resolution in 1929 for civilian control of the military that carried no weight. Fowkes's commentary again greatly surpasses the reach of the documents in this chapter. One wishes he had included documents that extended as far as his observations.

The documents in chapter 9 engage issues of women's equality and sexual politics. According to Fowkes, both parties promoted women's equality in society and the workplace, but the SPD had a traditional view of women's roles and neither party had many women in leadership positions and both promoted gender divisions of labor within their party and affiliate organizations. The documents show that SPD women were not happy with this situation. According to Fowkes, the SPD was very tentative around issues of sexuality while the KPD used "demands for sexual reform as an agitational tool" (p. 243). Such demands included decriminalizing abortion and making birth control and sex education freely available. Fowkes elaborates the parties' position on the other main issue of Weimar sexual politics, homosexuality, explaining that communists advocated complete decriminalization while socialists backed conditional decriminalization, but he includes no documents on their positions.

In chapter 10 the documents Fowkes submits are the two parties' official programs at the start of the Weimar

Republic and the modifications the parties made to them later. His introduction explains the problems faced by the parties that led to the articulation and revisions of these programs, with the communists moving in a national populist direction and the socialists abandoning their time-honored moniker as a working-class party in favor of a "people's party," even as prominent Marxists in the party resisted this move. Fowkes sees the SPD's continued coupling of Marxist rhetoric with reformist practice as a major contradiction that it was unable to overcome. He also comments on each party's agrarian program, which he includes in the chapter.

Chapter 11 presents documents regarding each party's internal structure and the socioeconomic and geographic bases of its support. While both parties were urban and proletarian, the KPD was more urban and proletarian than the SPD and had more frequent leadership turnover. In his commentary, Fowkes engages the hot issue of working-class "milieu": what it was, how strong it was, and to what extent the parties shared it. The documents offered in this chapter are party membership figures, organizational statutes of the parties, their auxiliaries, cultural (milieu) organizations, national election returns, and articles on worker education.

The final chapter in the book documents the factional divisions within the whole Weimar Left. The first texts are from the first and largest splinter party, the USPD (founded in 1916), which saw itself as the upholder of the proletarian values of the prewar SPD and as the defender of the council system. Both it and the Socialist Workers' Party (SAP, founded in 1931) left the SPD (which a small section of the USPD rejoined in 1922). While Fowkes discusses other socialist dissident groups, the remaining documents concern communist splinter groups like

the leftist Communist Workers' Party (KAPD), founded in 1920; the rightist Communist Working Group (KAG), founded in 1921; ultraleftist groups around Karl Korsch and Ruth Fischer (1926); and the rightist KPD Opposition (KPO), founded in 1930. Fowkes argues that while this dissident Left was numerically small, it had influence beyond its numbers, especially at the end of the Weimar Republic.

This book has great value to historians and students of Weimar Germany, early twentieth-century socialism, and the Weimar Left not only for its wide selection of documents but also for the key debates among historians that Fowkes explains in his commentaries and footnotes. In addition, the book has a wide range and offers a rich picture of the Weimar Left. It includes documents that represent different viewpoints in the SPD and KPD on a whole range of issues and it engages high politics, social issues, long-term political objectives, the sociology and milieu of the parties, and dissident splinter groups.

Fowkes provides an outstanding bibliography of the primary sources he consulted as well as recent and classic works by historians on the Weimar Left. While space is always a consideration, one wishes he had included documents that extended as far as his commentary in some of the chapters. Also, some secondary works cited in the footnotes with only the name of the author and the date of publication (e.g., Sperber 1998 and Stibbe 2010) are not in the bibliography. This oversight is easily corrected with a full bibliographic entry. Nevertheless, this book will serve as a standard work on the German Left in English that historians of socialism or working-class movements who do not read German and students in upper-division history courses on the Weimar Republic or early twentieth-century socialism can consult with confidence.

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