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Ben Robinson

Socialist Party (England and Wales)

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Hitler, slaughterer of millions, is often portrayed as the embodiment of evil. But what historic conditions allowed him to come to power? How was one of the world's most powerful workers' movements defeated and a brutal dictatorship established? Is it possible today? Ben Robinson looks at these and other questions on the 75th anniversary of Hitler's rise to power.

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Revolutionary Germany

Towards the end of World War One, Germany was a country in ruins. Over one and a half million Germans had died. An economic blockade meant conditions for workers in the cities were deteriorating. Opposition to the war rapidly increased.

The party that had been built by workers, with close links to the trade unions and the electoral loyalty of millions, was the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Before the First World War it was regarded as the leading socialist party in the world. But in August 1914 the SPD leaders finally abandoned opposition to capitalism and voted to support the war and the imperialist ambitions of the ruling class.

The growth of anti-war sentiment, the huge number of casualties amongst those sent to the front, worsened exploitation and hardship for those in the factories; this was the situation for workers whichever side they were being sent to die for. In 1916 in Berlin 10,000 workers marched demanding 'down with war! Down with the government!' In Russia in 1917, these conditions spurred the workers and poor to revolution, and in October 1917 to the establishment of a socialist government.

The new Russian Soviet government's declarations for peace and the reality of the abolition of capitalism offered massive hope to workers across the world. Soon a series of revolutionary waves swept Europe. In November 1918, workers' councils were created throughout Germany and the Kaiser's Empire collapsed leaving the councils briefly effectively holding power in many cities and towns.

The German working class and large sections of the middle class wanted an end to the old system and looked to a socialist alternative. However there was no clarity on how concretely to achieve this and no

party with an experienced leadership, capable of assessing the situation and putting forward a strategy to achieve socialism. The young Communist Party (KPD), inspired by the example of the Russian Bolsheviks, contained many committed socialists, but at that time was relatively small.

The SPD leaders played a treacherous role. Still seen by many as a party for the workers, the SPD leadership was able to maintain the rule of the capitalist class by a mixture of concessions and repressions. Initially it formed a government with a name very similar to that of the revolutionary one in Russia, but unlike the Bolsheviks in Russia, the SPD leaders worked to save capitalism. In putting down the revolutionary movement, the SPD leaders went to the lengths of utilising the Freikorps, violent, nationalist paramilitaries, many of whom would go on to play roles in Hitler's Nazi party and its various armed wings. Their many victims included Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, two courageous revolutionary leaders.

This led to the SPD quickly suffering a huge loss in support, in 1919 it won 11.5 million votes, but at the next election 18 months later this fell to 5.6 million. Initially many of those breaking with the SPD supported the left wing "Independent SPD" (USPD) but soon a majority of the USPD joined the young Communist Party, giving it a mass base.

Stalin's rise

However a number of key opportunities were missed by the KPD. In 1923, while then having majority support within the working class, they missed an opportunity to overthrow capitalism in Germany. This was followed, in the mid-1920s, by a brief period of stability for the German capitalism. Struggles for higher wages and better conditions increased, but the imme-

diacy of the need to abolish capitalism subsided in the minds of the masses.

Internationally, the post-war revolutionary period had ended. Soviet Russia was isolated in a sea of hostile capitalist states, with no immediate prospect of the situation changing. The defeat of the various struggles of the international working class made an impact on the Russian masses, many of whom were disheartened and weakened by hardship and the loss of a large layer of the best Bolsheviks in the war. The backwardness of Russian industry, inherited from Tsarism, meant that the needs of the population were far from being met. All of these factors led to the rise of a bureaucracy under Stalin. This rise was fought initially by the real leaders of the Russian Revolution; Lenin before his death, and continued by Leon Trotsky, who was exiled from Russia and eventually murdered.

These changes did not only affect Russia. The Communist International (Comintern) came under the leadership of Stalin and his cohorts, who steadily abandoned most of the ideas of the Russian revolution and committed a number of mistakes. Later this became outright treachery and betrayal, putting their own privileged interests before those of the international working class as when, for example, after 1939 they handed over to Hitler many anti-Nazi German exiles living in Russia.

Increasingly the German KPD leaders came under the direct control of the ruling clique around Stalin in Moscow.

In the eyes of the mass of the workers, however, the changes in the KPD did not erase the association with the party of the Russian revolution, with its history of militant struggle against capitalism or the memories of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. The KPD retained its position as the revolutionary party of Germany, with hundreds of thousands of excellent workers and youth loyal to the party.

Social Democracy

However, the SPD still had mass support amongst the working class and poor, winning the 1928 Reichstag elections, with over 9 million votes while the KPD received 3.2 million. This SPD vote reflected aspirations for improvements in living standards, and a belief amongst some sections of the population that the SPD would solve their problems. However, once again the coalition government the SPD formed with bourgeois parties enacted the capitalist class's wishes. The SPD played the dual role of holding back struggle by manipulating its support amongst the population, whilst carrying through attacks. A similar role to the SPD was being played by social democratic parties in many European countries.

This role was recognised by the KPD, and the Stalinist Comintern. However, their reaction to this situation was a massive error, and one that would help prevent united workers' action against fascism.

They labelled the SPD 'social fascists', the main enemy of the working class, and directed the bulk of their campaigning against the SPD. With many KPD members tremendously bitter at the SPD leadership's bloody role in suppressing the revolution between 1918 and 1920 they found it easy not to make a distinction between the SPD leadership and the continuing mass support the SPD enjoyed, especially amongst many older, trade unionists and activists.

But it was not just the SPD that Stalin and the KPD leaders labelled "fascist", they did the same to practically every party, including denouncing the "Trotsky-fascists". Not only did this policy confuse the workers and youth supporting the KPD, it also underestimated the real threat of the Nazis. In the Stalin's logic if every other party was "fascist" there would be no difference if the Nazis came to power. This led the KPD leaders to believe Hitler coming to office would be the last capitalist government, opening the way to the KPD taking power. They could not see the fatal effects that the Nazis consolidating power would mean and this gigantic mistake was to play a major role in holding back struggle against the Nazis.

Wall Street Crash

1929 saw an end to the boom in the economy, and serious economic crisis once again engulfed Germany. Registered unemployment rocketed from 1.39 million in 1928 to over 5.5 million in 1932 as employment fell from 19 million in 1929 to about 11.5 million in early 1933. This situation created huge anger and desperation amongst the working and middle classes, who saw their conditions decimated by over 40% unemployment and wage cuts. Already the SPD led coalition government had collapsed in early 1930 as, corroded by their policies, hopes that it would solve the problems were dashed amongst all sections of the population.

The German capitalist class feared the potential for radicalisation and revolutionary movements developing that would challenge their system. The bosses desired not only to head off workers' movements and prepare for confrontations, but also to reverse the concessions that had been made in previous revolutionary upsurges. After the SPD led coalition fell its successor governments increasingly used "emergency", semi-dictatorial powers to rule. But as these governments collapsed more and more sections of the ruling class came to believe that the Nazi party was the tool for this task.

Fascism

Fascism, especially in Germany and Italy, came to prominence in the post World War One period. In many countries alienated groups of army officers banded together in reactionary armed groups and attacked the revolutionary movements, with the backing of the state. In Italy Mussolini, coining the name "fascism", combined these paramilitaries with a mainly middle class mass movement, built with populist slogans. Continuing social turmoil and the threat of socialist revolution led to a section of the Italian ruling class backing Mussolini as the best way out of the crisis. In 1922, after the so-called "March on Rome", Mussolini was asked to form a government and began to establish a totalitarian dictatorship. Inspired by the Italian fascists' victory Hitler and others tried to repeat their successes in Germany and attempted a coup in 1923. However, having already defeated the socialist 'threat', Hitler's coup attempt did not receive the backing of big business or the military and the leaders were rounded up and given light prison sentences. Not for them the death sentence that many revolutionaries received!

The relative calm in social relations from 1924 set back the Nazis. During this period they had very little support.

The mass disillusionment and radicalisation in 1929 changed this situation completely for Hitler and they suddenly gathered mass support. The Nazis started to receive large sums of money from big businessmen and other sections of the German ruling class.

In a period of relative stability, parliamentary democracy is the easiest way for the capitalist class to maintain its rule. Their huge resources enable them to exert a large degree of control over political parties, and ensure their wishes are carried out while supposedly allowing the population to decide who is in control. But the situation in Germany at the start of the thirties had gone beyond this situation. There was widespread opposition to, not only the capitalist parties, but also to the general social and economic situation. Special measures were needed to maintain the capitalist system.

Hitler and the Nazis played on the widespread opposition, often describing their ideas as 'anti-capitalist'. The name Nazi itself is an abbreviation of National Socialist, even though fascism and the ideas of socialism are complete opposites. In fact from their beginnings the Nazis' armed wings had broken up socialist and communist meetings, trade union meetings and picket lines, as much as they felt able to.

Social base of fascism

The German military had been defeated in World War

One. Forced to pay huge amounts of compensation to France, Britain, Belgium and other countries, the German economy was crippled. Crises in the German and world economy at the beginning and end of the 1920s affected the whole population. The rich could afford to shed a few Marks, and even used the crises to their advantage in some cases. Sections of the working class had powerful unions that were able to ease the severity of the effects of the crises. Those who suffered the biggest change in their living standards were the middle classes along with unorganised and unemployed workers.

These middle class sections included professors, small business people, people who were on a fixed income, as well as small-scale farmers and others. Unlike factory workers they were unorganised and, as such, unable to defend their interests. Having enjoyed a relatively decent, stable lifestyle, whole layers were thrown into poverty and homelessness.

When this happened in 1922-23, the workers' movement was on the offensive. Many of those ruined by capitalist crisis came towards the workers' movement and joined in the fight for socialism. However, this movement failed to overthrow capitalism and solve the problems faced by the mass of the population.

This failure was not forgotten. In 1929-30 the main social democratic workers' organisations did not take a lead, while although the KPD's support was rising its ultra-left policies limited its appeal to many older and still employed workers. Fascism, posing as an alternative to this crisis-ridden system, was able to develop into a mass movement, primarily based on the middle classes, but drawing in parts of the most oppressed layers of society as well.

This movement violently attacked workers' meetings, prominent activists, and attempted to destroy the socialist movement. In doing so it revealed its true nature - of acting in the interests of the capitalists. The Nazis' anti-Semitism played on long-standing historic prejudices to mobilise support, attack socialist ideas on the grounds that Marx was of Jewish origin and attack Jewish and foreign capitalists to deflect anger away from the majority of the German ruling class.

The middle classes lack the economic power, common interest and organisation to decisively act as a class. In heightened periods of class struggle, they gravitate towards either the capitalists or to the working class as has been seen time and time again.

However, the fact that there was a basis in society for the Nazis' reactionary ideas and actions did not mean that the situation was lost. There was anger against capitalism, and a powerful workers' movement. The right strategy for this movement would have undermined Hitler, and transformed the situation into one with enormous potential for socialism.

The United Front

Behind the banners of the SPD and the KPD were millions of workers. Beyond their membership, they had massive support. In free elections, socialist and communist votes always, apart from July 1932, out-pollied Hitler. Not only that, but as the fascist threat grew, they organised defence squads which could have put up a serious military challenge to the Nazi thugs.

Starting when the Nazis first posed a threat, Trotsky advocated agreements between different workers' organisations, parties, trade unions and other bodies, for a united front against the Nazis. This could have meant joint campaigning to expose the Nazis for what they were, and also a united defence of any workers meetings or activists who were under physical attack by the Nazi military organisations, the SA or the SS, or other gangs.

This united front would not mean, however, its different components giving up the right to put forward alternative analysis and programme.

But most of the SPD and trade union leaders were not prepared to seriously fight the Nazis outside parliamentary debates and newspaper columns. They were not even prepared to defend themselves when a presidential coup in 1932 removed the SPD government running Prussia, then Germany's largest federal state. Despite widespread expectations that the SPD would call a general strike to defend their Prussian government they did nothing. The reality was that the SPD leadership were out and out capitalist politicians, successors of those who had helped put down the revolution between 1918 and 1920, and who in March 1933 did not protest when Hitler suppressed the KPD and would not let its MPs attend the parliament. The SPD leaders determination to stay within the capitalist system led to them refusing to lead any struggles against the Nazis that could, in their eyes, 'get out of hand' and challenge capitalism itself.

However, in spite of this treacherous leadership, the SPD still retained the loyalty of millions of workers. Only through uniting with these workers, and proving themselves the best fighters against fascism and capitalism, could the KPD have been instrumental in defeating Hitler and opened up the possibility of establishing a socialist society in Germany.

False Policies

Instead the KPD criminally continued their policy of 'social fascism', holding that the SPD leadership, and not the growing Nazi party, was now the main enemy of the working class.

This even led sometimes the KPD effectively working

alongside the Nazis to attack the SPD. In mid-1931, the Nazis invoked a referendum on whether the SPD-led regional government in Prussia should be replaced. During this same period, votes for the Nazis were increasing hugely. If the SPD state government would then have been removed, it was clear that the Nazis would have been the main victors. However, the KPD, following orders from Moscow, renamed the referendum 'the red referendum' and campaigned for a 'yes' vote. This provoked widespread disgust, and the referendum was narrowly defeated.

Despite the rottenness of the leadership, the determination of workers and youth to oppose Hitler still existed. In many areas desperate battles took place. Within the SPD there was increasing opposition to their leadership's passivity and support for capitalism, while amongst KPD members growing numbers realised the urgency of a united front action against the Nazis.

Germany was incredibly polarised, but by the end of 1932 some said that the Nazis were past their peak. However following the sharp fall in the Nazi vote in November 1932 the capitalist parties decided to back Hitler as Chancellor (prime minister) out of fear that the KPD's record vote of just under 6 million (16.9%) reflected the start of a sharp turn to the left. The other right wing parties hoped to use Hitler and then discard the Nazis, but their plan did not work out. On January 30, 1933 a parliamentary coup installed Hitler as Chancellor leading a right wing coalition. Even at this late stage a workers' uprising could have succeeded in removing him, the KPD and SPD had mass support, getting more votes than the Nazis, and their armed defence organisations were still intact. But the SPD and trade union leaders did nothing nationally and the KPD frantic last minute calls for united resistance were fatally handicapped by their previous policies. So while local strikes and battles took place there was no generalised offensive against the Nazis and, within weeks, Hitler was able to consolidate power claiming, with some exaggeration, that this was "without even smashing a windowpane". But Hitler did not simply act in isolation. It should never be forgotten that in March 1933 all the centre and right wing parties in parliament backed giving Hitler emergency powers and even the SPD leaders voted in favour of his first foreign policy statement. Hitler outmanoeuvred the right wing parties, playing on their fear that if they now removed the Nazis they would open the way to the overthrow of capitalism by the then not completely crushed working class.

Immediately the Nazis began to suppress the KPD, including mass arrests and preventing its MPs attending parliament. Then as soon as Hitler felt able too, he moved to smash the trade unions and SPD, and "persuade" the capitalist parties that had initially backed his rule to dissolve themselves. Early in July

Hitler signed a treaty, the Concordat, with the Vatican. The following year, in the 'night of the long knives', Hitler dispatched those elements within his own party who had been taken in with the anti-capitalist propaganda, and were demanding further measures.

The terror that Hitler unleashed on the workers, dissidents, gypsies, LGBT people, and most horrifically the Jewish population is well known. Fascism waged a civil war on the population. Across Europe and elsewhere in the world, World War Two led to new excesses of carnage.

Lessons of the KPD's defeat

The potential that existed was not capitalised on by the KPD. This was entirely the fault of the leadership, who tragically had a completely false policy. This provoked opposition within the KPD, and different groupings were expelled for criticising the leadership, and the policies of the Comintern. They were not allowed to put forward their ideas within the KPD, whose leadership became accountable almost exclusively to Stalin's clique in Moscow. Supporters of Trotsky's analysis and strategy of the united front, a strategy that could have stopped Hitler coming to power, were hounded out and especially vilified by the Stalinist press.

Without a party that is organised and committed to socialist ideas, it is impossible to overthrow capitalism successfully. But a revolutionary party also needs to have an accountable leadership, and a membership that is thinking and learning the lessons of past struggles. A discussion within the party on current events and the best way forwards, a chance for members to put forward and discuss ideas and carry through the best of these is the only way that the party will have a correct conception and can face up to the current challenges.

Fascism today?

Fascism was able to come to power in a number of countries in the 1920s and 1930s because of certain aspects of the situation. The Nazis eventually commanded the support of the ruling class because of fear of workers' revolution. The turbulent economy had an effect and crucially the failure of the workers' parties to organise mass resistance to fascism and to offer a socialist alternative to a capitalist society in deep crisis.

But fascism was not a panacea for the capitalist classes. The fascist dictators acted outside their direct control, leading eventually to the German ruling class losing vast areas of territory and suffering vast devastation in the Second World War.

The ruling class had its fingers burnt, and would not be keen to resort to exactly the same measures again, but certainly they do not rule out repression. Recently we have been reminded of this by the revelation that in 1976 the then Labour government in Britain discussed the pros and cons of supporting a military coup in Italy. The post-9/11 CIA "renditions" and secret prisons show how ruling classes can push democratic rights aside when they feel threatened. The South American military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s leaned on neo-fascist groups for support, something that Putin is also doing in a more limited way.

The traditional middle classes, which formed the mass base of fascism as a movement, have also changed, shrinking since the 1930s. Other groups that would previously have firmly identified with that class, such as teachers, most civil servants, and others are now a key part of the labour movement. But if millions of lives were devastated by a very severe recession or depression then there would be a renewed danger of reaction if the workers' movement as not able to offer a serious socialist alternative.

Studying the important events of Germany, the strategy of the united front, the significance of a revolutionary party and other key lessons will ensure that when the time comes, the socialist movement will not be found wanting.