

Alex WEIPERT: *Die zweite Revolution. Rätebewegung in Berlin 1919/1920*, Berlin, be.bra Wissenschaft Verlag, 2015. 476 pp., ISBN: 9783954100620.

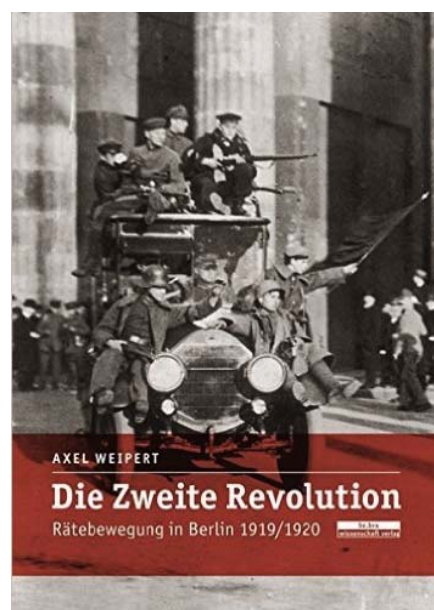
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Striving for a second revolution.

Different from the intensely debated November Revolution and Spartacist Uprising, there has been until now a clear lack of research focused on the later developments of the German Councils Movement, thus creating both a scientific gap and – more problematic – a distortion of the historical understanding of the Councils' second period due to its unquestioned identification with the first one.

Axel Weipert, whose researches already developed inter alia into a monograph on the Berliner Labour Movement,¹ proposes an innovative perspective with the publication of his PhD thesis: the book combines the already mentioned new chronological interest in the Councils during the years 1919-1920 with a specific spatial horizon of the Berlin metropolitan region, institutionally established in 1920 as Greater Berlin. The resulting object of study, the Berliner Council Movement in 1919/1920, allows therefore for a well balanced compromise between a micro and a macro perspective and is for the tracing of potential sources advantageous as well.

Introduction and conclusion aside, the book can be divided into two parts. In the first one, the three most important events the Berliner Councils Movement took active part to are reconstructed: the General Strike in March 1919, the violently repressed rally before the Reichstag on January 13, 1920 and the resistance against the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch in March 1920. In the second part the chapters emphasise on the other hand peculiar and until now very little researched structures and organisations related to the movement. Both a history of events and an organisation-oriented approach serve therefore for a punctual empirical depiction of the Councils' structures, ideologies and practices. The author often corrects the commonly accepted reconstruction of the facts through critically argued analyses on the basis of a widely researched



¹ Axel WEIPERT: *Das rote Berlin. Eine Geschichte der Berliner Arbeiterbewegung 1830-1934*, Berlin, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2013.

range of sources, and in this regard an empirically noteworthy reconstruction of the disorders during the Reichstag demonstration emerges as best example (pp. 164-171).

The recognition of the later Councils Movement as a proper historical actor has to be seen as the most remarkable achievement of the book, since it challenges the previous literature and proposes a new definition of the matter. The Councils are here depicted as an extremely heterogeneous and dynamic social mass movement capable of high mobilisation despite its internal divisions (p. 29 ff.). Its heterogeneity, starting from the overlapping of memberships and defined as a symbiotic relationship (p. 435) between movement, unions (Allgemeiner deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, Deutscher Metallarbeiter-Verband, Arbeitsgemeinschaft freier Angestelltenverbände) and parties (SPD, USPD, KPD and KAPD) involved every aspect of its political life.

The primacy accorded to action rather than to doctrine and the diverse political souls within the Movement produced a form of common goal-oriented political thought, which Weipert describes as having the Councils at the same time not only as mean, but also as both short- and long-term aim of the activities, depending on the different positions of its right or left wing about the central question of the «socialisation». This main debate involved among other things an hypothetical integration of the Councils within the liberal-democratic system of the Weimar Republic, and in this sense the realisation of a complete Second Revolution should have been reached by an ever stronger implementation and recognition of the Councils.

Moreover, according to Weipert, the mass character of the Movement presents a peculiar bottom-up nature founded on a democratic and fully participative principle. In this way, through the direct election of Council Members for the next deliberative level, the basis could directly influence the politics of the leadership – which the author argues has been the case during the General Strike in March 1919 (pp. 79 ff.) and the anti-putschist resistance (pp. 200 ff.) – so that the peculiar bottom-up principle of the Councils would thus have optimally adapted through this structure to actions like strikes, demonstrations, rallies and occupations, which represented the main practices within the Councils' political struggle.

Beside those questions, the monograph also tries to identify the structural weaknesses of the Councils, in order to explain their steady and rather evident decline between the General Strike, which marked the turning point from a dynamic activism to a more cautious attitude, and the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, that confirmed a transition to a defensive position the Councils never recovered from, ceasing to exist as mass Movement as a matter of fact.

The reduced capability of the Councils to completely integrate its most idiosyncratic structures in its own fluid heterogeneity is seen as a first critical point which could have weakened its action after the great strength demonstration of the General Strike. Many of the organisations and social groups analysed in the second part of the book demonstrated in fact incompatible and were not included in the Movement, as in the cases of school students, women, intellectuals and unemployed. A second inherent weakness of the Councils is seen in their failure to overcome their strictly regional projection, which the Berliner Movement tried to resolve

without success by virtue of its national coordination effort (p. 238). Many actions of the Berlin Councils – especially the General Strike (p. 53) and the basis' reaction against the putsch (pp. 201) – should be viewed as part of a broader over-regional mobilisation, which however failed to reach a proper coordination because of the local circumstances and bad means of communications. A third critical point is identified in the extremely reduced communication effectiveness due to the lack of a structure actively involved into media, that made the Berlin Councils de facto dependent from other party-bounded sources, not capable to spread its own message and becoming ever more exposed to outer and inner confrontations (pp. 133-134).

In conclusion, the study proposes an empirical well founded political history centred on the analysis of practices and organisational structures of the Berliner Councils Movement in its later phase, the mass character of which represents a firm point in analysis through the whole disquisition. The restricted chronological and spatial perspective fulfils the aim to cover a historiographical shortcoming and to ensure a focus close to the facts and to their sources. Nevertheless, every treated question finds entanglements on an over regional projection with others focal points of the movement (mainly central Germany and the Ruhr Area). In this sense the scope of the study partially expands over its spatial limits, offering not only an exhaustive view on the Berlin, but also a synthetic representation on the German Councils Movement in its later years.