Social Fascism: A Reconsideration

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Germany in the interwar period was a space for experimentation in all aspects of life.[1] The Weimar Republic, with its brief and bright lifespan, was aborted long before its rich culture could reach a different conclusion than dictatorship. From Dada to Expressionism, from the occult to the invention of the loudspeaker, Weimar Germany was an eclectic society that could have produced many different historical outcomes. The political world of the Weimar Republic was just as idiosyncratic, though more cutthroat than, its cultural one. One particularly absurd example is the bitter division between the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party of Germany, SPD) and the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (Communist Party of Germany, KPD). Nominally, both the SPD and KPD had socialism as their political goal, but the SPD sought to achieve it by reform where the KPD advocated revolutionary violence.[2] If method was their chief difference, it appears that they were splitting ideological hairs. Yet, the peak of these parties' division was so intense that the KPD, with the support of their affiliated international organization, the Communist International (Comintern), drafted a condemnation of the social democrats into theory as "social fascism."[3]

Outside of niche ideological debates between left political factions (i.e., Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, social democrats), there is scant historiographical discussion about this term.[4] Even these political debates often do not take the form of books, articles, or comprehensive works. Due to the lack of serious historical investigation, there are misconceptions about the term's creation that deserve to be reexamined. Was "social fascism" anything more than a political epithet? Or did it have a basis in reality? Research reveals that though both parties contributed to an atmosphere of resentment and explicit aggression, the KPD's theory of social fascism was ultimately rooted in the SPD's parliamentary and electoral practices.

Social fascism as an indictment of the SPD by the KPD could explain the bitter relations between the two parties. If, in an act of sectarianism (or Stalinism, by some assertions), the KPD severed ties with the SPD by labeling them "social fascists," then part of the failure of Weimar democracy could be laid at the feet of the Communists. Combined, the KPD and SPD would have

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[1]In this case, the period of analysis is in Germany, running from shortly before the end of the First World War to 1933 (the Nazi assumption of power). The beginning of the debates which led to allegations of social fascism started in intra-party discussions before 1917. After 1933, political plurality more or less ends, and so too does the debate being discussed here. Both the SPD and KPD more or less cease to exist until the end of the Second World War.

[2]Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1961).

[3]There is a lack of clarity and agreement on the exact definition of "social fascism" - suffice it to say that it is used to characterize left-leaning reformist groups or parties that allegedly, or actually, engage in the suppression of other, or more radical, left-wing factions. In this context, the communists are arguing that the social democrats have more in common with fascists than other groups on their shared end of the political spectrum.

[4]Joseph Redman and Brian Pearce, *From 'Social-Fascism' to 'People's Front'* (ca. 1937), *Marxist Internet Archive*, April 22, 2007, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/pearce/1957/09/sftopf.html (accessed December 19, 2018).

commanded a mobilized electorate numbering in the millions. This type of people power extended not just to the polls, but to unionizing, and all levels of the Weimar government. Where did this division originate? Did the KPD accuse the SPD of social fascism out of ideological purity? In reevaluating the chain of events which led to the conceptualization of social fascism, more light will be shed on why these two parties failed to preserve a nascent German democracy and the ideological nuance of the Social Democrats.

The German parliament was, itself, a stage for discord with its many parties and backroom dealings. The fact that there were several parties, including the KPD, that opposed the democratic government they were elected to speaks to the sense of confusion at the time.[5] It should be noted that, ideologically, the KPD was opposed to democracy as it existed in the Weimar Republic because of what they perceived as the Republic's bourgeois nature.[6] The KPD believed the post-war democracy was dominated by the bourgeoisie, both by those who held public office and by the focus of the Weimar government. By this logic, the state of the poor and working classes were lower priorities than those of the elite of society. The distinction between the motives for being anti-democratic is important because some factions sought to replace the Weimar Republic with a restored monarchy or a dictatorship. Despite having a presence in the Reichstag themselves, the KPD sought to replace the Weimar democracy with one dominated by the proletariat. This is the poorly named "dictatorship of the proletariat" they so often referred to. The KPD, in fact, managed to be a consistent electoral challenger; KPD Reichstag election results between 1920 and 1933 ranged from 2% to 17%, often placing it third overall.[7] While these numbers may seem small, the Reichstag pioneered proportional representation in a parliamentary-style government. This means that seats in Germany's federal legislative body were given to parties based on the portion of the votes they received; this would mean that they gained significant representation in the Reichstag's approximately 600 seats.[8] The SPD managed to capture anywhere from 18% to 30% of the electorate in the same time period.[9] The strength of the SPD's hold on the Weimar Reichstag is apparent here; by routinely securing at least a fifth of federal votes, the Social Democrats could always expect to be either part of the governing coalition or a significant force for opposition.

Yet, the SPD's position in the German government began with several major party splits. Eduard Bernstein, a chief theorist and public official in the SPD, left the party because of its support for the First World War (WWI). Bernstein, along with other important figures in the SPD, founded the *Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Independent Social

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[5]Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Fall of the Weimar Republic* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2018), 14-27.

[6]Karl Liebknecht et al., "Manifesto of the German Spartacists" (January 30th, 1919), *Marxist Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/call/1919/30.htm (accessed December 01, 2018).

[7]Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver, *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook* (Baden-Baden, R.F.A.: Nomos, 2010).

[8]The precise number of seats oscillated from 423 to 661 during the Weimar Republic, but generally remained around 600.

[9]Nohlen and Stöver, *Elections in Europe,* 762.

Democratic Party of Germany, USPD).[10] The SPD's support for the war ran counter to established Marxist orthodoxy, which has long held that the working class has more in common with its foreign equivalents than with the elite of their own country. The reasons for the SPD's commitment to the war effort are complex and still heavily debated, and as such, fall out of the scope of this paper. The importance of this split is that it happened, and that it remained unresolved due to the lack of compromise between both parties.

This commitment to the war effort ultimately benefited the SPD, as they found themselves in the ruling coalition at the end of the war. The elections in Prussia illustrate this point: the SPD won 20-36% of the vote (compared to the 1-15% earned by most other parties) from 1919-1932.[11] The catastrophic defeat Germany suffered in the First World War was coupled with the forced abdication of its monarch, Kaiser Wilhelm II. These political upheavals, which occurred alongside the Russian Revolution, triggered the first major test to the Weimar Republic's legitimacy. A faction of the SPD known as the Spartacists, led in part by socialist intellectuals Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, sought to establish a socialist republic in solidarity with their Russian comrades.[12] The Spartacists declared their intent to establish a socialist republic on the same night that a democratic republic was being declared in Berlin. The Spartacists helped lead the violent November Revolution in conjunction with other uprisings, such as the Kiel Mutiny. Those Social Democrats in office were now faced with a decision: either defend their newfound power, which they had struggled for since the party's founding in 1863, or support the revolution. However, to the decision-makers at the time, the revolution was an unthinkable and undesirable path. The fork in the road that the SPD government found itself at offered only one option they were truly interested in: defense of the new government.

Friedrich Ebert, a leading member of the SPD opposed to revolution, took office in 1918 as the first President of Germany. Ebert had formerly been a unionizer, and in the twilight of the First World War, found himself the first President of Germany. In this new position, the President lived in the affluent Presidential Palace, and in a position of some authority. Ebert's personal improvement in social stature mirrored that of the rest of the Social Democratic Party; after struggling for legal, democratic power since 1863, the Party was now at the helm of Germany's new government. To the Party leadership, the possibilities for a more egalitarian Germany would have been a sight to behold as much as the Presidential Palace. However, there remained the matter of the socialist revolutionaries.

With the aid of Gustav Noske, then *Reichswehrminister* (Minister of Defense), Ebert and the SPD government suppressed the November Revolution.[13] Noske coordinated the use of

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[10]Joseph A. Biesinger, *Germany: A Reference Guide from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2006), 755.

[11]Dietrich Orlow, *Weimar Prussia, 1918-1925: The Unlikely Rock of Democracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

[12]Karl Liebknecht et al., "Manifesto of the German Spartacists."

[13]Kate Evans, Paul Buhle, *Red Rosa: A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 2015).

German troops and helped organize paramilitary groups, early instances of what would come to be known as the *Freikorps* (Free Corps).[14] This is all in spite of a shared ideology: socialism. To the KPD, this cooperation with far-right groups would have been the worst betrayal had it not been surpassed by the fact that the SPD went to these lengths to suppress a socialist revolution. Even Eduard Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism*, the first articulation of modern social democracy, argues that one goal of reform is the development of the political and economic conditions for a revolution.[15] The actions taken by the SPD triggered a rift in the German left which eventually led to the formation of the KPD.

Members of the USPD either returned to the SPD, as Bernstein did, or joined the new KPD. The KPD's founding congress began in Berlin on the 30th December, 1918.[16] Ernst Thalmann and Clara Zetkin were among the SPD refugees to join the new German Communist Party. The ideological point at which the SPD and KPD diverged was in their preferred method of achieving socialism. The SPD's doctrine, drawing from the writings and research of Eduard Bernstein, was that reforms could eventually result in a socialist state.[17] By competing successfully in elections and legally acquiring power, the Social Democrats argued that socialism could be legislated into existence. The KPD, on the other hand, believed that violent revolution by the working class was the primary, if not the only, way to achieve socialism.

As late as 1931, the SPD leadership was opposed to cooperation with the KPD. In 1931, Otto Wels, then Party Chairman of the SPD, said that "[Bolshevism and fascism] are both founded on violence and dictatorship, regardless of how socialist or radical they may appear." This statement was made at the SPD's 1931 Party Convention in Leipzig.[18] This split continued in the face of the rising threat posed by the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP), or, as we know it today, the Nazi Party.

The influential state of Prussia was an important battleground in the twilight of the Weimar period. In Prussia's last free days, the SPD still had enough support to form a government, but it had to contend with half the Landtag positions being held by either the KPD or the Nazis. SPD politicians expected this deadlock to either solidify or result in their loss of power in Prussia. The KPD and the Nazis, predictably, refused to form a coalition government with other parties. As a result, the traditional SPD coalition, which also contained the Centre and German Democratic parties, remained in power. It is worth noting that, alone, the Nazis controlled 43% of the vote in Prussia.[19] However, the SPD's days in office were now numbered.

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[14]Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[15]Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 6.

[16]John Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg: Abridged Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 472.

[17]Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, xxix.

[18]Marcel Bois, *Kommunisten gegen Hitler und Stalin: Die linke Opposition der KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2015).

[19]Gordon Alexander Craig, *The End of Prussia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

The event that served as a prologue to the Nazi seizure of power, the *Preußenschlag* (Prussian Coup), occurred shortly after the 1932 Landtag election. Ostensibly, the Reich/federal German government blamed the deadlock of the Prussian Landtag and the violence of KPD-Nazi street fighting as their basis for dissolving the Prussian government. In reality, Chancellor Franz von Papen sought to establish a nationalist government via extralegal means. In response to this elaborate conspiracy and its anti-democratic result, the KPD called for a general strike in unison with the SPD.[20] However, the SPD urged moderation, intending to take the case to the German Supreme Court.[21] Joseph Goebbels, the prominent Nazi Party propagandist and the future Minister for Propaganda, noted the lack of response by the SPD, despite the readiness of the allied paramilitary Iron Front faction.[22]

Yet, in some cases, the SPD had in fact organized with the KPD. The chief limitation on cooperation had always been the national leadership of both parties. However, the KPD, and specifically its leader, Ernst Thalmann, was known to have periodically called for general strikes and united fronts *despite* the allegations of social fascism between 1928 and 1933. Additionally, local or regional KPD branches were known to have worked with the SPD on occasion. There are a handful of recorded instances in 1931 when the KPD and SPD ran on a combined ballot. This meant that the SPD and KPD would combine their lists of candidates into one, and seat appointments would be drawn from this KPD-SPD list. Cooperation was often among local groups whose members disagreed with national leadership on the direction of the party. Research by Joachim Petzold has revealed that the Reich Interior Ministry believed that the majority of the KPD's members wanted a united front with the SPD to combat the fascists.[23] There was support outside of the KPD and SPD as well. 33 public intellectuals signed an open letter declaring their desire to see a united front between communists and social democrats.[24] Among these figures was Albert Einstein, himself a socialist and admirer of Lenin.[25]

The Prussian Coup was not the only impetus for cooperation, either. In the same month, a local SPD chair proposed "Setting aside that which divides us is an appropriate demand given the

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[20]"Kommunistiche Partei Detuschlands: Aufruf, 30. Januar 1933," *321Ignition*, http://321ignition.free.fr/pag/de/lin/pag_007/1933_01_30_KPD_Aufruf.htm (accessed December 12, 2018).

[21]Marcel Bois, "Hitler Wasn't Inevitable," *Jacobin*, November 15, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/11/nuremberg-trials-hitler-goebbels-himmler-german-communist-social-democrats/ (accessed December 19, 2018).

[22]Joseph Goebbels, *My Part in Germany's Fight* (New York, NY: Fertig Howard, 1979), 110.

[23]Joachim Petzold, "SPD und KPD in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik: Unüberwindbare Hindernisse oder ungenutzte Möglichkeiten?," in *Die Deutsche Staatskrise 1930-1933. Handlungsspielräume und Alternativen*, ed. Heinrich Winkler (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1992), 94.

[24]"Das Volksbegehren der Arbeiterschaft für die Einheitsfront Läuft!" *Der Funke* (Berlin), June 25, 1932, 147th ed., sec. A.

[25]Albert Einstein, "Why Socialism?" *Monthly Review*, May 1949.

grave nature of our time," presumably referring to the Nazi threat.[26] In response to the appointment of Hitler, the KPD leadership called for a general strike, specifically in unison with the SPD.[27] However, the SPD's leadership had called for "joint struggle," but whatever was meant by this will never be known, as both the SPD and KPD were outlawed soon after (with much of the KPD forced into hiding or executed outright).

These calls for a united front against the Nazis by the KDP may have been frustrated by the events of the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in 1928. It was at this conference that arguments were made that the SPD, and other parties, were "social fascists." The KDP cited what they saw as the centrist attitudes of the SPD. Many Communists believed the SPD were committed to a defense of the status quo so stalwart that they would routinely betray would-be comrades.[28] In this resolution, the SPD were named enemies of the revolution on the basis that they had deliberately stood in the way of a socialist revolution.

Where does this sliver of history leave social fascism in the nebula of Marxist theory? Its position must be weighed in its historical context, and on the events which formed its basis. Cooperation and division can be shown as trends from the previously outlined situations. Social democrats (an identifier not limited to members of the SPD) had clearly lost interest in the potential gains to be made by way of revolution. This is most clearly shown in the unpopularity of the Spartacist Revolt and the November Revolution, as well as their mutual suppression by an SPD-led government. The split occurred specifically because of the decision by Friedrich Ebert to give General Wilhelm Groener permission to pursue socialist rebels who had taken some social democratic politicians hostage.[29] On the 4th of January, 1919, Karl Liebknecht called for an uprising against Ebert's government. It was at this point that Ebert and Noske called upon the new Freikorps and ignored or sanctioned the murder of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. This is the physical manifestation of the ideological difference between modern social democracy and communism. Prior to the First World War, social democracy and social democrats were committed to advancing the cause of socialism and had the revolution as its general aim. Today, most social democratic parties seek reform, and rarely advocate for changing the entire economic system. This decision by the post-war SPD government, and the tacit approval it received from most of the party, indicates that they preferred a continuation of liberal capitalism. So opposed were they to revolution that they allied with an uncertain monarchist and the most far-right organizations of the time. This fits moderately well with the assertion that social fascists "stand in the way of a dictatorship of the proletariat."[30] The preference by some members of both the SPD and KPD,

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[26]Bois, "Hitler Wasn't Inevitable."

[27]"Kommunistiche Partei Detuschlands: Aufruf, 30. Januar 1933."

[28]Klaus Hildebrand, *The Third Reich* (London, UK: Routledge, 1984), 106.

[29]Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 23.

[30]Dmitriĭ Zakharʹevich Manuilʹskiĭ, *Social Democracy, Stepping-stone to Fascism: Or, Otto Bauer's Latest Discovery: Address Delivered to Executive Committee of the Communist Youth International Dec. 1932* (New York, NY: Workers Library, 1934).

notably those not in national leadership, undermines the legitimacy of social fascism. Seen another way, it could be said that those seeking a united struggle against fascism are, therefore, not fascists. If an individual or group is opposed to fascism, they cannot be any kind of fascist. However, if these same people are equally opposed to revolution, then they cannot be social democrats as they were before 1914 (nor communists). Some other category, if one exists, would describe this section of the leftist population.

However, the version of social democracy that the leaders of the SPD (i.e., Friedrich Ebert) espoused fits the KPD's definition of social fascism. There is no official statement by the Social Democrat leadership, in the Interwar period or after it, where they explicitly abandon revolution. However, the actions of the SPD demonstrate their real migration on the political spectrum. The social democrats, like the fascists, sought a nation in which there were still distinct classes and hierarchies, but also established equal rights and privileges for all members, at all levels, of society.[31] The SPD does not seem to have ever officially embraced corporatism, but their legislative priorities and hostility to communism leaves no other appropriate description.[32]

Rather than being a baseless epithet, the label of social fascism holds some merit. Today, "fascist" has become less of a description of one's ideology, and more an insult against anyone that is allegedly authoritarian or power-hungry. In the 20s and 30s, fascism was a new ideology, unassociated with the unbridled horror it would soon unleash. Social fascism, as it was used by the KPD and the Comintern, was a theory grounded in observations of the behavior of social democratic parties, specifically the SPD. Perhaps it would never have come in to use, or had its tone tempered, if the leaders of the KPD and Comintern were more aware of the efforts by SPD members who were outside of the national leadership. The KPD itself did not simplify matters by oscillating between strategic reconciliation and apocalyptic condemnations of the German social democrats. However, the SPD's violent and energetic defense against the communists in the early 20s made their loyalties clear. Though the SPD may never have claimed to be the party of parliamentary democracy and liberal capitalism, the strategy they used to suppress the communists made it clear that when forced to make a choice, they would choose the established order. It is not unfair that for an ideology known for its never-ending analyses, it would rationalize the actions of a "socialist" party as a new political phenomenon, social fascism.

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[31]Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (London: Palgrave, 2003), 172.

[32]Sheri Berman, "Understanding Social Democracy," *The Minda De Gunzburg Center for European Studies*, http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~ces/conferences/left/left_papers/berman.pdf (accessed December 19, 2018), 13.

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