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How Ideological Conflict Shaped the Socio-Political Landscape in Interwar Germany

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ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of Marx and his revolutionary political thought, Germany became a center of leftist thought, particularly from the turn of the 20th century to the beginning of World War II. Countless German leftist thinkers expanded on or even opposed Marxist thought, leading to a natural division in ideologies. Through a literature review on two scholarly texts that focus on Germany's Interwar history as well as analysis on primary sources and German leftists' works, this paper argues that the internal discourse of the German Left and their split ideologies eventually led to their downfall and accelerated the rise of the far right in Germany during the period leading up to World War II. As the main opposition group in an increasingly politically divided Germany, this ideological split allowed further fascist growth, ultimately causing division within the working class base and the leadership. Despite the many other factors that preceded the Nazi Party's rise to power, the German Left was overall a weaker and less organized group, making them a crucial component in Germany's political strife and eventually the beginning of a fascist Germany.

INTRODUCTION

At noon on January 9, 1918, the German people received the news of Kaiser Wilhelm II's decision to abdicate. Germany's disastrous defeat in the Great War had forced his hand, and Germany was now left in complete disarray, on the verge of collapse. Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), was given Chancellorship, and proclaimed the creation of a new Republic from the window of the Reichstag. Quick to take advantage of the precarious situation, Karl Liebknecht, leader of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), declared a "Free Socialist Republic " soon after.[1] While Ebert wanted to hang on to the old ways and forged ties with old power brokers of the German Empire, Liebknecht wanted to create a system of councils similar to the Soviet Union. This split in ideals and goals in the

[1] German Bundestag, Administration, Research Section WD 1, *The November Revolution, 1918/1919* (Berlin: German Bundestag, March 2006), pg. 1, https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/189772/8b9e17bd8d64e64c8e3a95fc2305e132/november_revolution-data.pdf

Communist movement would hinder any sort of progress that the German Left achieved for the next few decades.

The fragile link that held these two organizations broke on December 28 when the Social Democrats took power in the German parliament. The divide between the Social Democratic and Communist party was solidified at the start of the Spartacist Uprising Soon on January 5, 1919. That morning, hundreds had taken to the streets of Berlin in open revolt. Yet, by the time the demonstrators made their way to the center square in Berlin, the crowd came to a halt. The revolt had come to a standstill due to leadership's indecision. Should the protesters start negotiations with Ebert or continue the armed revolt? With time to respond to this new threat, SPD leaders enlisted the help of the Friekorps, a paramilitary group consisting of unemployed WWI veterans. With brutal and merciless force, Freikorps soldiers killed hundreds of protesters, causing many others to surrender, and collapsing the Spartacist revolt. Less than a week later, a squadron of Freikorps soldiers found prominent leftist intellectual Rosa Luxemburg in a house where she was in hiding, struck her with the butt of a rifle, and shot her in the head. Her body was then dumped into the Landwehr Canal. A Freikorps soldier remarked, "The old slut is swimming now." Luxemburg's associate and collaborator Karl Leibneckt was found, tortured, and killed a day later.[2] Within a short period, the SPD-led government had brought an end to the Sparticist revolt and killed off the leaders of the largest opposition they had. German leftists killing German leftists.

This paper examines the extent to which fragmentation in thought and action shaped the foundation of German Communism in the early 20th century. By reviewing primary sources from the two prominent sides of the German Left, it is clear that infighting was a major hindrance to the movement, and this resulted in the loss of influence of German Communism and the rise of Fascism in Germany.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper used an analytical historical approach which featured a literature review for context on the time period, primary source selection for important works by German Leftist leaders, and a close reading analysis while also referencing historical events in the same time period.

Each primary source was selected to get the most out of the ideas of different Leftist thinkers while also highlighting the main ideological divide. Eduard Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism* is one of his premiere works, and outlines essentially a completely new and revolutionary way to think about Marxist tenets. He flips the script from revolution to slow but steady adaptation in a capitalist society which could possibly bring about a better world for the working class. On the other hand, Rosa Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution* is a direct counterargument to Bernstein's theories and stands with the traditional Marxist tenet of social revolution. These works are foundational to understanding the schism within the German Left at this time. Friedrich Ebert's "New German Government" speech was foundational in setting the

[2] Richard Cavendish, "The Spartacist Uprising in Berlin," *History Today* 59, no. 1 (January 2009), para. 6-7, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/spartacist-uprising-berlin.

path of the Weimar Republic at the end of WWI. Even more important was how Ebert's ideas within the speech show both a strong influence from Bernstein and a clear ideological division with the Social Democratic Party which Ebert leads, and the Communist Party. While Karl Korsch provides his own new insights in his 1923 work, *Marxism and Philosophy*, he aligns himself with Luxemburg and is a key contemporary Leftist figure during the Interwar Period. So while Bernstein's and Luxemburg's works were chosen to introduce the reform vs. revolution argument, Ebert and Korsch's texts were used as a method to reveal how this argument evolved during the Interwar Period.

A close reading of these sources revealed the overall argument and reasons causing the divide within the German Left, highlighting clear ideological differences. For example, reading Luxemburg's views on social revolution while also referencing her participation in the Spartacist Uprising demonstrated her commitment to the proletariat overthrowing the bourgeoisie. While these specific works cannot be claimed to have directly caused or factored into the rise of Nazism in Germany, it is clear that these thinkers influenced the two main Leftist parties at this time (SPD and KPD), which facilitated the lack of cooperation and conflict in the face of a rising Nazi thread,

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two recent scholarly texts that have examined German Communism are political scientist Kurt Weyland's 2021 book, *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism During the Interwar Years,* and historian Eric Weitz's 1997 book, *Creating German Communism*, *1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State*. Weyland examines the fall of German Communism in the greater context of a rise in radical groups during the Interwar period, while Weitz examines the state of German Communism and its progression from 1890 to 1990.

Weyland's main argument is that the magnitude of the Communist threat caused governments to shift from liberal democracies to totalitarianism, paving an easy path to power for fascists across Europe during the Interwar Period. The background to this turbulent Interwar Period started after the successful Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia. Lenin's shocking victory for communists sent major shockwaves across the world, leading to reactions from all sides of the political spectrum.[3] First, Weyland points out that many Communist cells across Europe and the world saw the Bolshevik victory as a sign that a Communist revolution could be feasible in their own countries.[4]
Lenin's flawless example of taking control of the Russian capital and removing the authoritarian leaders in power was a major inspiration for Communists hoping to topple powerful regimes. This effort was most pronounced in Germany as well as other European countries like Romania.[5] The newly invigorated Communist effort created a certain fear in many conservative elites and right-wing politicians that

[3] Kurt Weyland, *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism During the Interwar Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 7.

[4] Weyland, *Assault on Democracy*, 75.

[5] Weyland, *Assault on Democracy*, 76.

Communism was soon to spread in their countries and all across the world. This fear caused defenders of the status quo to brutally punish any Communist movement in the following years using "disproportionate force".[6] Weyland describes this overreaction to the leftist threat as an example of "asymmetrical loss aversion", a well studied phenomenon in which humans overestimate losses in comparison to gains. Weyland applies loss aversion to the thinking of status quo defenders at the time. Their fears of a communist takeover were overblown because the fear of losing power and control created an intense desire to stop the Communist threat at all costs.[7] Weyland lists several examples of the repression in Bavaria, Bremen, Munich, and during the Spartacist Uprising, with brutal violence being used upon the Communist actors. In Bremen, Communist forces declared their own council republic. The German government immediately sent soldiers to surround and essentially lay siege to the city. When no agreement could be made, the national forces took Bremen by force with seventy people dying in "unnecessary bloody clashes".[8] Even worse, during the struggle for Munich, 600 people died, including government forces, in intense street fighting. Even after Munich was secured from the Communists, there were mass executions of Communist leadership, and supporters were put on trial.[9] Weyland paints a grim picture of Germany during this time, with chaos ruling the streets. By showing the lack of a central power in Germany following the First World War, it is easy to comprehend why Germany and so many other countries turned to authoritarian leaders and parties.

In addition, Eric Weitz focuses on the effects of this chaos on German Communism during this time. *Creating German Communism* examines three forms of activism in the streets during the Weimar Republic: the unemployed, the Communist-right wing clashes, and the Lenin-Liebknecht-Luxemburg commemorations. These aspects are vital to understand the situation that German Communists were left in during the Interwar Period.

Weitz uses this information to argue how German Communism was shaped uniquely by the cultural climate in Germany during this time. He believes that unlike Leninism or traditional Marxism, German Communism took its own path of development simply due to the massive cultural turmoil in the country at this time.

To show this, Weitz first delves into the demonstrations of the unemployed during the time of the Weimar Republic, using the example of Essen. During the early 1920s, unemployment in the Weimar Republic was on the rise and thousands faced food and supply shortages as large crowds of the unemployed took to the streets to demonstrate. By 1923, these protests became almost daily and amassed up to eight thousand people, frequently becoming violent. Weitz emphasizes that by this time, unemployed workers had started to cause major havoc and created an anarchic environment in the country. The newly founded Communist Party of Germany (KPD), formed by USPD leaders Leibknecht and Luxemburg before the Spartacist Uprising and other left-wing parties, saw this outrage as a sign that Germany was on the verge of a

[6] Weyland, *Assault on Democracy*, 77.

[7] Weyland, *Assault on Democracy*, 13.

[8] Weyland, *Assault on Democracy*, 110.

[9] Weyland, *Assault on Democracy*, 111.

revolution.[10] The KPD soon tried to institutionalize these acts of violence by creating unemployed councils and committees to represent these unemployed workers, trying to obtain better benefits and standards of living, but these efforts were rarely successful. Another effect of these attacks on merchants was a growing dislike for the KPD by the middle class, and German citizens started to identify Communism with anarchy and criminality throughout the 1920s.[11] Weitz uses the strategy of the KPD to argue that Communism in Germany was forged in accordance with the German culture at the time. The protests and rioting from this large mass of unemployed workers gave the KPD the opportunity they needed to recruit more to their cause. Weitz demonstrates this adaptation, saying that KPD leadership began to consider the unemployed to be the "agents of revolution" despite Communism's inherent emphasis on workplace organization.[12]

Weitz explains how, as 1924 began, in multiple cities, quasi-gang wars emerged between fascists and Communists in multiple cities. Rival factions would ambush each other's taverns, or engage in brawls in the middle of the streets. Even though the violence had reached a boiling point, the KPD still condoned it as they believed it would bring more party members out onto the streets to help gain more influence. At this time, Weitz explains that the KPD viewed the unemployed in Germany as more crucial in the revolutionary struggle than "social democratic-infected".[13] workers, showing a real shift in the beliefs of the German Communists as they tried to adapt to the changing situation in Germany. This support only lasted so long, as by 1931, the Central Committee of the KPD denounced proponents of street violence, wanting to focus more on the traditional struggles in the workplace. Even with this sentiment, many KPD members across all ranks still believed that street violence was the best method to gain power for the party, so they kept engaging in street clashes, especially with the increasing influence of the Nazi Party. The continued street violence further contributed to the fragmentation of the working class and a decrease in the KPD's base of support, as the working class was essentially fighting among itself.[14] The consequences of this divide later down the line meant split votes in parliament and a complete lack of unity against the growing fascist movement. Weitz also emphasizes the scale of the clashes between the right and left wings, using demonstrations in Eilenburg and Halle, two major industrial centers. These demonstrations served two purposes: They were meant to show the strength of the party and the proletariat, while also getting party supporters used to conflict, as it was such a large part of the party strategy described earlier.[15] Despite the grand plans of these demonstrations, the lack of discipline and the disorganization of the members in some demonstrations made it hard to achieve the goals that were sought after by the party. One thing these demonstrations did lead to was the formation of the KPD

[10] Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 164.

[11] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 166.

[12] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 167.

[13] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 168.

[14] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 168.

[15] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 177.

paramilitary unit, the RFB (Roter Frontkämpferbund), and the increasing militarization of Communist culture in Germany.[16]

Towards the end of the chapter, Weitz explains the importance of the Lenin-Luxemburg-Liebknecht Festival to the Communist culture in Germany. The Lenin-Luxemburg-Liebknecht Festivals served to memorialize the founders of the party and further legitimize the militaristic strategy of the party. These marches and demonstrations took from a longstanding tradition of the working class to memorialize their leaders or for political parties to gain power and influence. The KPD turned this occasion into a party specific festival, and later added Vladimir Lenin to the list of leaders being memorialized.[17] Weitz uses this festival to demonstrate how impactful German culture was to German Communism, but also how impactful German Communism was to German culture. Using the activities of the Communist unemployed, the political street clashes, and the Lenin-Luxemburg-Liebknecht festivals, Weitz pieces together how a chaotic Interwar Germany shaped the German left.

SOURCES REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

Both Weitz and Weyland emphasize the chaos and disunity within Interwar Germany. Weitz argues that this disarray was crucial in shaping the German Left, while Weyland argues that this chaos created a need for a strong authoritarian government. Either way, these authors make it clear that the German Left played a pivotal role in the Interwar period and the events leading up to World War II. Because the German Left was so important during this time, it is important to examine the foundations and leaders of the movement in order to better understand why it lost out to Adolf Hitler's Nazism.

One work that was extremely influential to the German left was *Evolutionary Socialism (1899)* by Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein was an unorthodox socialist thinker in the sense that he generally opposed many of the base tenets of Marxist thought, which he perceived as revolutionary and inaccurate. *Evolutionary Socialism* outlines his critiques of Marxist thoughts and new methods to achieve socialist goals. Bernstein first critiques the economic side of Marxist thought, then moves on to the political aspect.

Although Bernstein makes it clear that he holds both Marx and Engels in high regard, he critiques the key Marxist sentiment that the working class is one uniform mass. Bernstein realizes that in his time, there is not just one "homogenous mass" but many different groups of "modern wage-earners" that have separate needs and wants, and who cannot be treated simply as a single class.[18] This evaluation sets up Bernstein's next point regarding economics, which is his support and encouragement of cooperative associations.

Cooperative associations were not an aspect of early Marxist thought, and were not supported by early socialists. Nevertheless, Bernstein's positive view of cooperative associations came from the fact that the

[16] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 178.
[17] Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 179.
[18] Eduard Bernstein, "The Tasks and Possibilities of Social Democracy," in *Evolutionary Socialism*, ed. Einde O'Callaghan, trans. Edith C. Harvey, chap. 3, subsection "(a) The political and economic preliminary conditions of socialism," paras. 14–15, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bernstein/works/1899/evsoc/.

cooperative organizations of his time were far more developed than they were in Marx's time.[19] Bernstein gives his support for the use of cooperative associations, explaining that they, "utilise all the advantages of the modern large enterprise and all co-operative and mutual arrangements are to be adopted for the business needs, etc., of the members."[20] Essentially, Bernstein believes that cooperative associations are the best way to socialize production within the current bounds of modern society, as they give more workers control over their own labor. This line of thinking was a fundamental shift from orthodox Marxist thought, which is why this piece was so influential during its time.

Bernstein then criticizes the political aspect of Marxist thought. Bernstein first outlines the doctrine of Marxist thought on democracy and the road to socialism, which is that the capitalist society and its democracy will inevitably fall, dividing the bourgeoisie and proletariat, so the workers must take matters into their own hands and start a revolution that leads to the creation of a socialist utopia. This tenet of revolution was a central component of Marxist thought, and was demonstrated by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Despite this, Bernstein rejects this idea and offers his own opinions on social revolution. Bernstein observes that not only are the inevitable social movements that Marx predicted are not developing, but the proletariat isn't looking like the mass movement that will lead to the social revolution. They have different needs and wants, and cannot be expected to make the revolutionary leap that Marx preached.[21]

Bernstein believes that especially at this point in time, democracies and societies are so highly developed that a social revolution could happen within the bounds of a capitalist society without any violence or bloodshed, merely through reforms. He states that a democracy, and its goal of a government by the people, can be a perfect canvas for social reforms.[22] Bernstein believes that this is the more "civilized" way of going about a social revolution and that it is more feasible than ever in contemporary Germany. He supports this point by comparing feudalism to modern democracies. According to Bernstein, in earlier times, the only way to make a change in a feudalist system was to overthrow the government, but in modern times, democracies and societies are more flexible and bound to change. "They [the liberal organisations of modern society] do not need to be destroyed, but only to be further developed," he says.[23] Bernstein then cites socialist thinker Pablo Iglesias and social democratic newspaper *Vorwarts* to further support his claim of reform over revolution. He ends by saying, "Everywhere there is action for reform, action for social progress, action for the victory of democracy."[24]

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[19] Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, chap. 3, subsection "(b) The Economic Capacities of Co-operative Associations," para. 6.

[20] Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, chap. 3, subsection "(b), " para. 33.

[21] Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, chap. 2, subsection "(a) On The Meaning Of The Marxist Theory Of Value," para. 17.

[22] Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, chap. 2, subsection "(c) The Classes of Establishments in the Production and Distribution of Social Wealth," para. 10.

[23] Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, chap. 3, subsection "(c)," para. 36.

[24] Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, chap. 3, subsection "(d) The Most Pressing Problems of Social Democracy," para. 50.

Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism* provides a completely new point of view that separates itself from traditional Marxist thought, showing how many different views of socialism there were during this time. Bernstein reverses many of the core tenets of Marxism, instead supporting cooperative organizations and social reforms as a way to achieve a greater socialist society.

Another major influence on the German left was Rosa Luxemburg, a renowned Communist thinker and a strong advocate for social revolution.[25] *Reform or Revolution (1900)* was one of the most influential pieces of writing by Luxemburg in the beginning of the 20th century, and it criticized the work of fellow philosopher, Eduard Bernstein. In *Reform or Revolution*, she first evaluates the economic aspect of Bernstein's writing and then the political aspect. Her work shows firsthand how contradictory the views of German socialists were at this time.

In the beginning of *Reform or Revolution*, Luxemburg establishes that social reform is merely a means to achieve a final goal, the social revolution, mirroring traditional Marxist sentiment. The "social revolution" is in the final stage of society according to Marx, when the capitalist society inevitably collapses and the proletariat takes over. She then reveals how Eduard Bernstein and others like him believe that social reforms are the aim, saying, "The Final goal, no matter what it is, is nothing; the movement is everything."[26] This sentiment directly contradicts Luxemburg's and many Marxists' views of the process of social revolution. She implies that Bernstein is using the socialist movement as a way to gain support for his own agenda, which is different from traditional Marxism. Luxemburg then establishes that a tenet of Marxist thinking is that capitalism is inherently unstable and will inevitably collapse on itself due to its multiple contradictions. After establishing this point, Luxemburg argues that Bernstein believes the exact opposite and that he believes capitalism can survive. In summary, Bernstein believed that the socialist utopia could be achieved within the bounds of a capitalist society, which Luxemburg believes is inherently wrong. She first relays Bernstein's belief, which is that capitalism will not collapse on itself due to several "means of adaptation" which will solve the flaws in capitalism.[27] Luxemburg refutes this by saying, in Marxist thinking, capitalism is a phase that humanity must go through to reach the socialist utopia. The whole point of socialism is to be built upon the ashes of capitalist ruin, so if you believe that capitalism will survive, it is impossible to also believe in a socialist utopia because both cannot coexist.[28] Luxemburg stays strong in her beliefs of traditional Marxist thought, and uses it to essentially show why Bernstein's line of thinking is false.

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[25] Lea Ypi, "Rosa Luxemburg," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, first published April 13, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/luxemburg/.
[26] Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Introduction, para. 1, Militant Publications, 1986, https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/introduction.html.

[27] Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Part One, chap. 2, "The Adaptation of Capitalism," para. 13.

[28] Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Part One, chap. 2, paras. 18-19.

Luxemburg then refutes Bernstein's support of social reforms instead of a social revolution. She strongly emphasizes the idea of a socialist revolution as the only way to change the current system in Germany and believes that Bernstein is contradicting socialism itself. Luxemburg believes that Bernstein's method of reform is completely false because once you make social reforms the final goal and not the means to an end, "then such activity not only does not lead to the final goal of socialism but moves in a precisely opposite direction."[29] Luxemburg is saying that revisionist socialism simply tries to deny the contradictions of capitalism in order to make itself work, which not only goes against Marxist belief, but completely invalidates revisionism as a method to a socialist utopia. In other words, Bernstein's revisionist socialism hangs on to a capitalist system, as it needs the system to survive in order to create trade unions and a setting for socialist reforms to be enacted. This is impossible because the whole point of Marxism is to point out the inherent flaws of the capitalist system which will inevitably collapse, leading the proletariat to revolution and then to a socialist utopia. Luxemburg then attacks Bernstein, saying, "Revisionism is nothing else than a theoretic generalization made from the angle of the isolated capitalist."[30]

Luxemburg's views represented the views of many traditional Marxist thinkers at the time and caused many to distance themselves from Bernstein's ideas, creating more divide in the German Communist movement. This started the "Reform or Revolution" debate that transformed German Communism.

While this debate began at the turn of the 20th century, it continued on in the work of Friedrich Ebert, the Democratic-socialist president of Germany directly after WWI, and Karl Korsch, a prominent leftist intellectual and communist revolutionary.

Friedrich Ebert was a disciple of the Bernstein philosophy, as he strongly believed in using gradual social reforms to create change rather than violent revolution. Ebert was a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, and was elected its leader in 1913. He became Germany's first Chancellor after the German Revolution of 1918-1919 and sought to suppress ultra-leftist forces with the help of the right.
He delivered his "New German Government" speech during a crucial period in German history, as Germany was transitioning from the German Empire to the Weimar Republic in 1919. He emphasizes two main ideas: support of a stable democratic government and the importance of social reforms as a way to change the lives of ordinary Germans for the better. In his speech, Ebert repeatedly celebrates Germany's new democratic government. His support of a democratic government comes from the sentiment social democrats had, which would be to use the reforms of a socialist society in a "civilized" manner instead of a bloody revolution. Ebert begins his speech saying that Germany has gotten rid of "the old kings and princes by the grace of God."[31] This follows the communist ideas of removing the bourgeoisie from power, and installing a government for the people, which is what Ebert believes the SPD has done. With no more dictatorship and a new National Assembly, Ebert believes that Germany can advance in the world and provide better lives for all its people.

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[29] Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Part One, chap. 5, "The Consequences of Social Reformism and General Nature of Reformism," para. 7.

[30] Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Part One, chap. 5, para. 28.

[31] Charles F. Horne and Walter F. Austin, eds., *Source Records of the Great War*, vol. 7 (National Alumni, 1923), 88.

Ebert also heavily emphasizes his support for social reforms, which is a pillar of Bernstein's thinking. Ebert makes it clear what he thinks socialism should be, saying, "Socialism means organization, order, and solidarity, not high-handedness, perversity, or destruction."[32] This shows Ebert's lack of support for revolutionary socialism, as he clearly is opposed to misbehavior and destructive habits. Ebert ends his speech saying he wants, "To maintain the right of the German people, to anchor firmly in Germany a strong democracy and to fill it with true social spirit and Socialist character."[33] This means that Ebert wants to create a socialist state through means of the government such as laws and reforms, instead of the Marxist method of violent revolution.

Just like Bernstein before him, Ebert's ideas caused a massive division within German Communists and fragmented the group. The question of reform or revolution split the party for years to come. This made the German Left appear weaker to voters and further allowed Nazis to push their own agenda. Ebert probably thought that because he had the power of the state, Bernstein's social reformation could be enacted much more easily, and therefore was the better option. Besides that, Ebert makes it clear that as the president of the new Weimar Republic, he would move to change the lives of ordinary Germans through reform.

Opposite Ebert, Karl Korsch was an innovative Marxist thinker during this period, with his views aligning much more closely with Rosa Luxemburg. Korsch was also critical of orthodox Marxism and presented his own views on the foundation of Marxism. In his most famous piece, *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), Korsch essentially critiques a widespread sentiment that Marxism contains no philosophy in it. Korsch goes on to prove his assertion that philosophy was a crucial part in the creation of Marxism, while also giving a different angle to revolutionary Marxism.

Korsch's main purpose in this piece is to assert that both Bourgeois and Marxist thinkers believe there is an absence of philosophy from Marxist thought, so he attempts to refute it by saying how important philosophical thought is to Marxism. Korsch uses Hegelian philosophy as his main example of "philosophy," as it was the basis of bourgeois philosophy and Marxism.[34] The Hegelian system was a philosophical form of thought formed in the 19th century, and was extremely influential German idealism. Korsch claims that because neither Bourgeois or Marxist thinkers truly understood Hegelian philosophy, they could not comprehend the fact that Marxism is intricately connected to it. Korsch points out that Hegel regarded a "revolution in the form of thought" as a key part of the process of social revolution[35] in order to demonstrate how even a "bourgeois" thinker believed that in order to achieve revolution, you need a revolution in both theory and in practice. Korsh's argument here is that philosophy is inherently part of Marxism, as it is part of the entire Marxist process.

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[32] Horne and Austin, *Source Records*, 92.

[33] Horne and Austin, *Source Records*, 93.

[34] Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* [1923], trans. Andy Blunden, ed. Chris Clayton (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), para. 1, https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm.

[35] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, para. 10.

After establishing the point that Marxism and philosophy are connected, Korsch moves on to the practical use of philosophy when thinking about revolutionary socialism. Korsch believes that philosophy should be used as a tool in Marxism to observe and change societal conditions, or to help develop revolutionary ideas. He asserts that Marxism needs to use philosophy to guide the proletariat towards revolutionary action.[36] In addition to this, Korsch considers that with dialectical materialism taking over socialist thought, Marxism lost its true revolutionary value. In other words, more and more socialists began to emphasize the material parts of Marxism and not the theoretical parts, which Korsch argues are just as important.[37] Korsch also argues that philosophy is ingrained in revolutionary thought, as he relates the Marxist system of revolution to German idealism. This point is made to prove that philosophy is essential to Marxist thought and must be regarded higher. But this sentiment also reveals Korsh's strong revolutionary support and belief.

Although Korsch's ideas diverge from Rosa Luxemburg's main points, it only goes to show the evolution and advancement of Marxist thinking throughout this period. Both Luxemburg and Korsch believe, despite their differences, that the proletariat are the agents of revolution, and that the definitive way to reach a socialist utopia is through revolution.

The early 20th century brought two schools of thought that emerged from the unique social setting of the country. Social democrats like Eduard Bernstein and Friedrich Ebert believed that it was possible to leave the German capitalist system in place and bend it to create better conditions for workers through reforms and unions. Others who leaned towards orthodox Marxism like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Korsch believed that social reform was an inherently invalid method, and that the only way to achieve a socialist utopia was through revolutionary means. This fundamental divide between reformists and revolutionaries was a massive detriment to the movement, as it caused disunity and a lack of identity for German Communists. This caused voters and conservatives to turn to more authoritarian options and eventually Nazism.

CONSEQUENCES IN WEIMAR GERMANY

As the previous section has demonstrated, there was a clear ideological divide between German Leftist leaders and their theoretical successors. The implications of the question of reform or revolution were massive as they outlined two completely incompatible goals and methods for the Left. The reform vs. revolution debate was the fundamental root in this divide and its consequences ultimately paved the way for a fascist, Nazi Germany.

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[36] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, para. 8.

[37] Paul Mattick, "Karl Korsch: His Contribution to Revolutionary Marxism", in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), para. 8, https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1962/korsch.htm.

The consequences of this debate were clear from the beginning of the Interwar Period and shown throughout this paper. Right after the end of WWI, the Spartacist revolution saw Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknetcht–the ideological founders of the KPD–murdered by the SPD-supported paramilitary group that was supposed to be on their side. Furthermore, this meant KPD and SPD forces were being wasted fighting each other instead of responding to the rising Nazi threat. Unable to find any common ground due to their differentiating ideologies, these parties operated as their own worst enemies.

Table 1: Divided Left Vote Shares vs. Nazi Vote Shares, 1919-1933 (Key Reichstag elections)

Election	**SPD %**	**KPD %**	**Combined Left %**	**NSDAP %**
Jan 1919	37.9	7.6*	45.5	0
May 1928	29.8	10.6	40.4	2.6
Sep 1930	24.5	13.1	37.6	18.3
Jul 1932	21.6	14.6	36.2	37.4
Nov 1932	20.4	16.9	37.3	33.1

*USPD, precursor to KPD

Source: German Bundestag, "Elections in the Weimar Republic," PDF (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag); Gonschior, "Wahlen in der Weimarer Republik: Reichstagswahlen," https://www.gonschior.de/weimar/Deutschland/NV.html.

Even though the Leftist parties did see some vote share decline towards the end of the Interwar Period, the fact that they were completely hostile to each other prevented any hope of possibly forming a coalition and preventing Nazi political expansion. Even at their peak, the NSDAP never had more than a 50% vote share, which would mean they could claim the chancellorship and pass laws with zero opposition. A possible coalition being formed with the Leftist parties (37.3%) and another party with about a 15% vote share would mean completely blocking out the Nazi party, as well appointing their own chancellor and cabinet members. Of course, this is where the reform vs. revolution debate reared its ugly head. The hatred and mistrust between these two parties completely prevented this coalition from ever forming and allowed the full ascent of the Nazi Party. Of course, Hitler was appointed to the Chancellorship by then-president Hindenburg due to support from conservative elites and behind-the-scenes deals,[38] but an earlier push for power by the Left could have put someone else in as Chancellor altogether.

Hitler's rise to Chancellorship also represented what Weyland and Weitz argued in their own works: the perceived threat of the Left by conservative forces. As written in the Literature Review, conservative elites were already scared of what Lenin had done in Russia, and had cracked down hard on Communism

[38] "Germany 1933: From Democracy to Dictatorship," Anne Frank House, accessed February 18, 2026, https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/germany-1933-democracy-dictatorship/.

across Europe, including Germany. These conservatives still had a considerable presence in the Weimar Republic, and if anything they were even more concerned about Leftist forces seeing the constant protests, street violence, and chaos Weitz describes the KPD involving themselves in. Additionally, this fragmented Left probably appeared weak to the German middle class, who according to Weitz, were already associated with chaos and criminality, which pushed them more towards the other side of the political spectrum in an effort to restore order to Germany.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the fundamental ideological split between the parties of the German Left and their infighting was a major factor that indirectly allowed the rise of the Nazism and fascism in Germany during the Interwar Period. The overtly militaristic nature of the KPD, the European conservative red scare, the KPD-SPD violence against each other, and the lasting legacy of the reform vs. revolution debate caused a massive shift within Germany which saw the middle class and conservatives alike shift towards the right and prevented coalitions that could have had the power to stop Hitler's ascension in the Weimar government.

This argument is built upon the previous research and work done by both Weitz and Weyland, as they lay the foundation for the research detailed in this essay. Weyland first developed the intensity of the threat that Leftist groups had to European elites, indirectly revealing how the German Left was a factor in the rise of Nazism. Additionally, Weitz provided a key cultural and historical background for German Leftism. His work shows how Leftist parties–specifically the KPD–turned to militarism and violence which skewed from traditional Marxist revolutionary ideas and eventually brought about the already tense feelings toward Communists in both the middle-class and elites. Both texts were extremely important in tracing the argument of how the German Left impacted the rise of Nazism throughout the primary sources as well.

As this paper has emphasized, if you strip everything else away, the root cause of all this division within the German Left was the original ideological split originating from Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg. One believed in non-violent, social reforms while the other stuck with the Marxist idea of proletariat revolution. Both Friedrich Ebert and Karl Korsch inherited this essential argument and added some of their own ideas to each side as well. In the end, the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Germany were the institutions that embodied the ideas of these key Leftist thinkers in the Weimar government. If Rosa Luxemburg's death at the hands of SPD forces was a sign of anything, it foreshadowed the future clash between these two German parties which eventually led to their enemy, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, who gained complete and utter victory in 1933.

Historical arguments about the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Adolf Hitler typically point to the failures at Versailles, government structural instability, and the rise of nationalism across Europe. While this paper accepts these views as key factors, it also seeks to highlight the importance of how the German Left's division and infighting gave no resistance to the growing Nazi movement. By tracing key historiographical elements of Interwar Germany as well as analyzing the foundational Leftist debate at

this time, the factor of the Leftist split seems to become more relevant to this discussion than previously thought. Finally, this research also speaks to efforts trying to connect Leftist fragmentation and the rise of authoritarianism in other historical settings both in Europe and beyond.

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