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Losing the Battle of the Streets, Reflections on the KPD, 1930-33

I have been reading a new book lately. It is called *The Coming of the Third Reich* by Richard J. Evans.

It's a very good introduction to this subject; though, like most bourgeois historians, it downplays the role of the highest circles in the German ruling class in bringing Hitler and the Nazis to power because the bourgeoisie basically agreed with the Nazi aims.

But the work contains some interesting information about the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands) -- the Communist Party of Germany -- in the years leading up to the Nazi "revolution". First, a bit of background. The KPD was the "crown jewel" of the Communist (3rd) International. It was the largest and most militant of all the communist parties then -- with a membership hovering around 350,000. Although most trade unions were allied with the German Social-Democratic Party, the KPD was very strong among industrial workers in Berlin and in the Ruhr, dockworkers in Hamburg and Bremen, coal miners in Saxony, etc.

It had a large parliamentary delegation that gained more seats with each election up through November of 1932. In that last "free election" of the Weimar Republic, the communists won exactly 100 seats...about 1/6th of the total of all the seats in the Reichstag.

And the KPD had its own group of paramilitaries -- the Red Front Fighters' League -- to contest the streets with the Nazi Sturmabteilung (SA) and the ultra-nationalist Stahlhelm. It's almost certain that most of the abundant street violence in the early 1930s consisted of battles between the SA and the Red Front.

But for all their bravery and combativeness, the Red Front lost the "battle for the streets".

I was curious as to why this happened and Professor Evans (indirectly) suggests some answers.

You understand, of course, that most of the SA (or "brownshirts") were not members of the Nazi party but rather loyal to the "idea" of Nazism and the personality of Hitler himself. Similarly, probably two-thirds of the Red Front were not members of the KPD but loyal to the idea of a communist revolution...and probably to some extent to the personality of Ernst Thälmann, the working class leader of the KPD.

On both sides, of course, there were a fair number who simply "liked a good punch-up" and were not above switching sides.

Both of these groups were composed mostly of young men who were unemployed...and, by 1930, had no hope of regular employment.

To be in a paramilitary group, therefore, was a kind of "job". You got a place to stay (sleeping space on the floor of a bar) and something to eat on a fairly regular basis (bread and soup, mostly, I expect).

I say "on the floor of a bar" because a local tavern was often the "headquarters" of a unit of the SA or the Red Front. There were "Nazi bars" and "Communist bars"...and a street battle would often begin when one group would raid the bar of the other group.

In theory, an SA or KPD fighter was supposed to pay for his own uniform, etc.,...but in practical terms, I doubt if that happened very often, especially after 1930.

So where did the money come from? Financing for the paramilitary groups came from their respective parties, of course.

But the KPD was at a serious disadvantage in this regard. Most people who were members of the Nazi party (1,200,000) were employed or had other resources and paid dues to the party; upwards of 95% of the KPD membership (350,000) were unemployed -- in fact, most of the demonstrations and large public events organized by the KPD after 1930 were on behalf of the unemployed.

The Nazis enjoyed a substantial income by charging people to hear Hitler speak in person...something many people paid from curiosity or out of fear of "Jewish-Bolshevik revolution".

The KPD had no such "attraction".

Then, of course, the Nazis enjoyed direct financial support from the ruling class...initially from a few ultra-conservative businessmen but from the class as a whole by mid-1932.

It's known now that the KPD was largely financed by "Moscow gold"...though we don't know how much.

So, up to 1932, the parties "paid" their respective paramilitary groups to fight each other...and the KPD's Red Front "held its own" against the brownshirts.

But there was a presidential election in 1932 (with a runoff) and two

parliamentary elections in the same year.

Those elections were a massive strain on the finances of the Nazi party (which was the first party in Germany to run "American-style" campaigns)...and simply overwhelmed the KPD. Resources diverted from the Red Front to those campaigns resulted in a "shrinking" of the Red Front. The tavern owners could no longer be paid to serve as gathering points for Red Front fighters -- the bars closed or were taken over by the SA.

And worse, the KPD could no longer feed its paramilitaries...some number of which undoubtedly defected to the SA.

Thus the SA began to win the battle of the streets...and people seeing this drew the "obvious" conclusion. The Nazis "were going to win".

Many Germans were shocked that the Red Front was nowhere to be seen on January 30, 1933 when Hitler came to power...or in the weeks and months that followed. Even the Nazis were puzzled and a little afraid...surmising that the KPD was hoarding its strength in preparation for a massive uprising.

Their fears were groundless; the Red Front didn't really exist anymore. In fact, the KPD itself was "withering away" under Nazi violence...though a hard core did remain in existence.

And the irony? The KPD's parliamentary delegation never accomplished anything throughout the history of the Weimar Republic. The resources diverted from the Red Front was "money down the toilet"!

The KPD won "a lot of votes" -- over six million at their peak -- but those votes never translated into any kind of revolutionary strength.

Does that mean that if the KPD had avoided the Reichstag like the plague and used all of its available resources to support active resistance to the capitalist order and its Nazi thugs that "things would have turned out differently"?

We'll never know, sad to say.

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