

Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany

Karl Korsch

I

The counterrevolutionary character of political developments in Germany since November 9, 1918 is most clearly demonstrated by the history of the political workers councils. Of those revolutionary councils of workers and soldiers which in November 1918 were generally recognized as platforms of sovereignty, and which exercised the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Reich, the state governments, the municipalities and the army, all that remained in November 1919 was a meager handful of "local workers councils", deprived of power and the means to exercise it, which were still tolerated—that is the word—as burdensome remains of a revolutionary era already viewed as the "past", but which in certain regions are still conceded some respect. In this miserable sort of existence the local workers councils survived, and occasionally they still fulfill a certain function in some small towns, whenever a conflict breaks out between the municipality's administrative organs and the local proletariat. But there have been no authentic political councils among us in the revolutionary sense of the term. It is true that the legal "Enterprise Councils" and those examples that still remain of the institutions formed for various purposes and organized according to the Council principle (Shop Stewards and factory delegates, Council Associations and Federations, Councils of the Unemployed, Councils of Housewives, etc.) still incidentally exercise a political function, just like the trade unions; in their innermost essence, however, they are only economic councils and sometimes they are not even councils. And as for the revolutionary "Soldiers Councils", it is true that, as was verified in a recent court case, to everyone's surprise, they have not yet been formally abolished or declared illegal. In practice, however, it has naturally been a long time since soldiers' councils existed.

Thus, a history of the political workers councils as authentic institutions in Germany ends in late 1919. From then on one can only trace the development of the problem of the political workers councils in the form of the various positions on the question of the political workers councils taken by the diverse political orientations over the course of time, and their vicissitudes.

If we look back on the general development of the political councils in Germany, we can state that, in the chapter on the causes of the rapid decline and disintegration of the Council institutions, together with the well-known main causes, which are naturally found in the domain of general economic and political developments, other concomitant causes of an ideological kind must be mentioned as having played a role: in the brief period of time when the real preconditions for laying the foundations for and building a solid proletarian dictatorship existed in Germany, the opportunity was necessarily wasted due to the fact that, among broad swaths of the revolutionary proletariat, even in its own functioning "Councils", there was an almost total lack of real understanding concerning the organizational bases of a revolutionary Council System and the essential tasks which it must perform.

1. The most important organizational failing consisted in the fact that, in most cases, the political Councils were not elected by the proletarians themselves organized by

factories and trades, as they should have been, but by the socialist parties; and simultaneously, almost on the same day, a "Workers Council" was formed in every town and city in Germany (even the smallest peasant communities of a totally non-proletarian character elected their "Workers Councils" through a kind of political mimicry . . . in order to protect their local interests against the interference of the neighboring urban "Workers Councils"). Nevertheless, if afterwards the will to create authentic councils were to have been clearly asserted and seriously invigorated, this shortcoming could very well have been rectified over the following months. But this happened practically nowhere. It is true that some discredited members were "deposed" and that others, deceived romantics of the revolution, withdrew on their own initiative; the great majority of the members of the political workers Councils, however, "stuck" to their posts until, more or less by the force of circumstances, the whole splendor of the Councils fell to earth.

2. The extremely grave consequence which resulted from this ignorance of the tasks of the political councils consisted in the fact that the "sovereign" Councils were in many if not most cases content with a very ineffective "control", when in reality they should have demanded full powers in the legislative, executive and judicial fields. Due to this self-limitation, not only was the preparation of the later repression and elimination of the Councils by the new organs of the democratically-constituted State power made possible, but, from the very beginning, a good part of the pre-revolutionary powers and laws were left completely intact. In this way, after a brief waiting period, the pre-revolutionary tribunals and the old bureaucracy as well as even a good number of legislative organs of the pre-revolutionary period were able to conduct their old activities without too much interference. Only the "Executive Committee" of the Greater Berlin region (Berlin and its environs) tried, as long as it was capable of doing so, to make a clean break with the old powers; it demanded full legislative and regulatory powers, and allowed only the six "Peoples Delegates" nominated by the workers and soldiers committees of Greater Berlin to form the "Executive".

On the other hand, most of the urban and rural local communal councils limited themselves to the exercise of mere control functions, even with regard to State and municipal "legislative" bodies. Thus, not only were the organs of the local legislative branch (elected in Prussia, and elsewhere as well, in accordance with the Three Estates voting law!) and the legislative organs of the Reich and all the larger states and most (but not all!) of the smaller ones not abolished, but they were even granted legal recognition; precisely the same thing had previously taken place with respect to the executive organs of the Reich, the states and the municipalities (regional Councils, presidents, etc.), with only purely sporadic dismissals taking place and the prevailing attitude being restricted to a certain "control" of their activities, becoming less effective with each passing day; and, in precisely the same way, a complete distrust towards "independent jurisdiction" was manifest, and the controlling organs only declared they were satisfied when, during the first period, this jurisdiction gave no signs of life. Together with this great lack of clarity with respect to Council power on the part of the Councils' own local representatives, a great deal of the fault with regard to these sins of omission lies with the "Council of Peoples Commissars", which was hostile to the Councils; and even the "Executive Committee" of Greater Berlin, later so revolutionary, was not totally blameless either, since on November 11, 1918 it promulgated an appeal whose first sentence reads: "All the communal authorities of the various *Länder*, of the entire Reich, and of the army are to continue in their activities." Such was the lack of clarity which, during the first period immediately following the November events, prevailed with respect

to the essential tasks of the Council dictatorship, even among the most renowned defenders of the revolutionary idea of the Councils in Germany.

3. Another point where understanding was lacking regarding the tasks of the political Councils and which also had fatal consequences in the subsequent period, consisted in the fact that no one knew how to distinguish the tasks of the political Councils from those of the economic Councils, a distinction which is totally necessary in the period of transition from a capitalist order to a socialist order of society. Many months after November the greatest lack of clarity continued to persist concerning this distinction, which enabled the government, the bourgeoisie, the SPD, the trade unions and other open or disguised enemies of the Council System to manipulate the Workers Councils by successively confronting them with their economic and political tasks (thus, for example, for a certain period at the beginning of 1919, some leading right wing members of the socialist party demanded that the Councils be restricted to "economic" tasks, while on the other hand the leaders of the right wing socialist trade unions sought to restrict the Councils to "political" tasks). This entire trend culminated in Article 165 of the new Reich Constitution, which, together with the workers councils restricted to purely economic tasks (enterprise councils, territorial workers councils, Reich workers councils), also envisioned the creation of various economic councils (territorial economic Councils, Economic Council of the Reich) which would authorize and promote "far-reaching socio-political legislative proposals" and which would also be granted certain "jurisdictions of administration and control". As a result, in these provisions of the Reich Constitution not only did the whole economic system of the councils find written expression, but so too did the whole political system of the Councils which, in post-revolutionary Germany, became a legal institution.

II

If we now follow the vicissitudes of political power in particular, we can distinguish: 1) the period of the Councils properly speaking, from November 1918 until the First Congress of the Councils on December 16, 1918. This period of provisional Council rule was followed, after the elections for the National Assembly on January 18, 1919 and for the executive of the National Assembly on February 6, 1919 in Weimar, by 2) the period of struggle between the democratic principle and the Council principle. This period came to a conclusion with the definitive government challenge to the economic system of the Councils, under the pressure of the great general strike in the Rhineland, Westphalia, central Germany and Greater Berlin at the end of February and the beginning of March 1919. Then came 3) the period of the extinction of the remains of the political institutions of the Councils, a period which lasted until the end of 1919 (the Second Congress of the Councils was held on April 8, 1919!); and 4) the survival of the political idea of the Councils, in other forms, to the present.

These four stages of the political evolution of the Councils can be more fully characterized as follows:

During the first period, both the extreme right as well as the center, the SPD and the USPD right wing, pressed fervently and anxiously for the National Assembly. But at the same time the idea of the Councils was surging: extensive circles reaching even to the

highest layers of the intelligentsia and wealth, spoke, wrote and dreamed of the Council principle as a supreme organic principle, in opposition to the mechanical procedure of democracy, with its slip-of-paper voting. This went so far as to lead to the founding of "Humanist Workers Councils" and things of that sort. The sovereignty of the Councils was then universally recognized as a provisional condition that would last until the constitution of a National Assembly.

In terms of institutions, during this period there were: a) the Council of People's Commissars, elected by the Workers and Soldiers Councils of Greater Berlin, which comprised the Executive, and later also exercised the Legislative power; b) the Executive Committee of Greater Berlin as a municipal Workers Council; c) territorial Executive Workers Councils in all the population centers of each state; d) local Workers Councils; and e) rural and property-owners councils, in all rural and urban communities.

In addition to the above: aa) "Workers Councils" in every large factory or industrial complex; in the big cities these met in plenary assemblies that elected their Executive Committees and imposed upon the latter strict mandates and resolutions; bb) "Soldiers Councils" in every military detachment, organized and coordinated by company, battalion, etc. These were represented at the First Congress of Councils, where they passionately demanded the National Assembly and where they won recognition of the so-called "Hamburg Seven Points" concerning military command.* Later, at the beginning of March 1919, they also held their own "General Reich Congress of Soldiers Councils" in Berlin. Shortly thereafter they quickly disappeared almost without a trace, in step with the dissolution of the remains of the old army.

The First Congress of Councils in 1918 (which Däumig called a "suicide club") almost completely relinquished political power. It voted for elections to a National Assembly slated for January 19, 1919; until that date it handed over Executive and Legislative powers to the Council of People's Commissars, and elected a "Central Council" whose powers were limited to minor jurisdictions with nearly non-existent powers of control, after the fashion of the old central German Councils, and in which neither the communists nor the independents were represented (which consequently also led to the resignation of the three USPD people's commissars). This Central Council (composed of members of the SPD, with Cohen-Reuss as its president) was dragging out its colorless and insipid existence—as we immediately expected—until the end of 1919 and the beginning of 1920. It only yielded its powers over the Reich to the National Assembly which met at the beginning of February, and handed over its powers in Prussia to the National Assembly of Prussia which convened in mid-March, but it continued to exist; it still convoked the Second Congress of Councils, but retreated whenever the least insinuation of government power was brought up, and proceeded on its own initiative to enact a restriction of the Councils, limiting their tasks to purely economic affairs through the creation of community-labor "chambers of labor" (which were later rejected by the general assembly of the SPD and by the National Assembly of Weimar and which today, however, have undergone something of a resurrection in the current government proposals concerning the constitution of higher economic Councils, territorial economic Councils and a Reich economic Council). Along with this Central Council, the revolutionary "Executive Committee" of Greater Berlin still existed (composed of members of the SPD, the USPD, the KPD and the democratic parties; and later also the USP and KPD with Däumig, Müller, etc., as presidents) more or less illegally, based on the plenary assembly of the Workers and Soldiers Councils of Greater Berlin, until it was violently expelled by Noske's troops on November 6, 1919 from the offices it had

originally been assigned in a government building; then it moved, following a brief period of complete illegality, to Münzstrasse, where it continued to conduct business as a “Council Central”, and today is the “VKPD Trade Union Central”.

III

On January 11, 1919, Noske entered Berlin. The 19th, elections for the National Assembly! A bourgeois majority! Nonetheless, the great general strike movements of February and March came to have great political significance for both the socialization question as well as the Councils. Throughout this period the political newspapers were filled with the most violent polemics concerning possible points of agreement between “the Council System and the parliamentary-democratic system”. Some elements (the majority of the USPD, some members of the SPD and some democrats) wanted to “find a place for the Councils in the constitution”, that is, to introduce, alongside the democratic parliament (as a chamber of consumers), a chamber of producers in accordance with the Council principle (a chamber of labor); others, individually (the Hamburg communist Dr. Laufenberg, for example), wanted to do the opposite, to find a place for parliament, as representative of bourgeois interests, in the Council System; and there were also other diverse positions between these two outlooks (some of which are still making the rounds today among numerous people, disappearing and reappearing when the time is ripe). The only consistent supporters of the political system of the Councils as a form of the rule of the dictatorship of the proletariat were the recently created KPD and the sections of the USPD grouped around Däumig and his journal *Der Arbeiterrat* (The Workers Council). But even the supporters of the revolutionary vocation of the Councils ended up making many concessions in practice, for the purpose of staying alive as communal Workers Councils and to continue to receive public subsidies. Such communal Workers Councils had nothing to do with the revolutionary idea of the Councils, and instead served to discredit it. These “Political Workers Councils” no longer carried out any “illegal” planned projects on a large scale; in short, they passed from their first stage as spokesmen of revolutionary demands, when the momentary political situation seemed favorable, to sink below the surface again as the revolutionary barometer fell. With respect to the revolution, their practical activity was futile enough; they usually played the role of intermediary between the authorities and the public, and organized the supply of food, coal, housing and expropriations and even the formation of civil guards, as auxiliary organs. The warnings of the leaders of the Council Centrals, calling for an end to this fruitless “positive” work for the revolution, and for a strict focus on revolutionary agitation and the preparation of revolutionary actions, for most part had no significant impact of any kind.

The Second Council Congress, held on April 8, 1919, could not affect the course of this development, and in fact did not try to do so, given that the revisionist, majority-socialist element, which was basically hostile to the Councils, now openly supported other arrangements. It is true that the Central Council, which had already in January tried to declare the communal Workers Councils extinct after the introduction of universal suffrage, was made responsible for fighting to preserve the communal Workers Councils as control offices by a Congress resolution. But these last remains of political Councils lost their miserable prerogatives almost everywhere during the course of the year; in most cases their end was imposed by the fact that they lost their public subsidies. And on this reef of the financial question the feeble attempt by the Central Council, in October 1919, to convoke elections for a Third Council Congress also came to

grief.

From that moment on, the political movement of the Councils was totally transformed into an economic movement of the Councils, above all in the struggle over the Enterprise Councils. At the same time, the supporters of the "pure council movement" (the USPD left) continued to attempt to oppose the isolated system of enterprise councils created by legislation, with a "revolutionary Council organization" (that is, a unity organically articulated by industrial sectors and economic regions, of Councils and regional offices which, regardless of party or trade union affiliation, were to be conceived solely in their role as revolutionary Councils), and to transfigure this Council organization so that it should be the bearer of not just the economic idea but also the political idea of the Councils. They were supposed to become the specific organization of the class of the revolutionary proletariat, at both the economic and the political levels. But this attempt, in which the communist party quickly ceased to participate, only had a temporary practical impact in certain industrial centers (Greater Berlin, central Germany, Rhineland-Westphalia), and can today be judged as a failure. Other attempts occasionally undertaken in situations judged to be opportune by the KPD and groups further to the left, for the purpose of getting the working class, "over the heads of the party and trade union leaders", to demand new elections to revolutionary political Workers Councils, also failed. In Germany today there is no longer an "independent Council movement". The political Councils have completely disappeared, the economic Councils exist only as legal representative bodies of the workers (Enterprise Councils), which are under the influence of the trade unions, are usually elected along party lines, and often also congeal into fractions based on party membership. Parliamentarism, the party and the trade union system have thus obtained, externally, a total victory over the revolutionary "Council System", and it is only underground where, in the consciousness of the suffering masses, the embers of the idea of the revolutionary Council System continue to smolder, together with the idea of the revolution, in an insoluble unity. On the day of revolutionary action this idea will re-arise like the Phoenix from the ashes.

Published in *Neue Zeitung für Mittelhüringen*, Vol. 3, March 1921.

Note

- * The "Hamburg Points" stipulated that the power of command over the army and the navy be transferred to the Council of People's Commissars under the control of the Central Council; that the symbols of rank be abolished; that the carrying of arms off-duty be prohibited; that the responsibility for the troops' loyalty be transferred to the Soldiers Council; that military commanders be elected; that the existing army be abolished; and that a people's militia be formed as soon as possible. The Congress ratified these points. (Author's note).