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Hoffrogge, Ralf. *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller and the Origins of the Council Movement*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. 256 pp. US\$94.47 (hardcover).

Partisan perspectives dominate the historiography of the German revolution. Writers with social democratic leanings argue that socialism was not on the agenda in the years following World War I. Therefore, representative democracy had to be defended against its enemies left and right. These histories are at great pains explaining the alliance that the right wing of social democracy and imperial Germany's old elites had entered in order to suppress the radical left. Understandably enough, communist histories see this alliance as betrayal, add the wavering of the Independent Social Democrats and even the revolutionary Spartacists, and conclude that only a Leninist party, if it had existed, could have led the revolution to socialism. Ironically, communist claims to be the only true representatives of the German revolution were adopted by conservative historians after the Cold War—as they offered the opportunity to wish everything remotely resembling revolution and socialism might soon follow Soviet communism into the dustbin of history.

Just the workers who, alongside soldiers recruited from various popular classes, made the revolution are largely absent from the above-mentioned histories. This is even true for social histories that cast a light on many facets of working class life, but by doing so reproduce images of workers' movements divided between nonproletarian leaders and proletarian foot soldiers. The latter leading their daily lives until the former call them into battle. Hoffrogge's biography of Richard Müller breaks out of this framework. Müller was a lathe operator and long-time activist in the metalworkers union who became a leading figure of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards who played a key role in building a mass movement against the war culminating in the revolution that ended the war. Regardless of other authors' perspectives, Hoffrogge's biography differs from those written about revolutionary icons like Liebknecht or Luxemburg for

very practical reasons. The latter were from middle-class backgrounds and used to writing letters and articles offering biographers insights into their political but also private lives. An ordinary worker like Müller did not leave comparable records. More precisely, comprehensive records only exist for the period during which Müller played a leading role in the German workers' movement. For a book that is not about Müller the great individual but about one worker as first among equals, this absence of detailed private records is actually quite apt. It reflects workers' subordinate position in capitalist societies.

What made these equals, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, so interesting is that they had a capacity to mobilize rank-and-file workers in large numbers because, unlike many of the Spartacists, they worked alongside them and knew when they were ready for action, but also when they were hesitant, anxious, or subdued. The stewards' ability to build a network of activists who were trusted by their coworkers and were able to mobilize workers from different firms was the basis on which Müller and some others, notably Müller's close friend Ernst Däumig, developed their ideas about workers' councils as a possible alternative to representative democracy. Unlike the anarcho-syndicalists who were quite influential in the newly founded Communist Party, at least for a while, the shop stewards were not opposed to party politics per se, they just were not willing to subordinate their own politics to party directives. This was so during the revolution, when the stewards were members of the Independent Social Democratic Party, and this was also the case later when Müller fought against his expulsion from the Communist Party that he and others had joined when Communists and a majority of Independent Social Democrats joined forces in 1920.

Under the leadership of Paul Levi, the Communists tried to build a mass basis by mobilizing around workers' most pressing day-to-day-issues. Müller supported this strategy, which was in line with his own experiences in the metalworkers union and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. But he was fiercely opposed to hastily organized uprisings. On the other hand, if supported by masses of workers and thoroughly organized, he would even support armed struggle. After all, he had played a key role in the November 1918 uprising, during which workers were prepared to use force against defendants of the old regime if they had shown any signs of resistance. His concern was that uprisings lacking the support of wide layers of workers were doomed to failure. The March 1921 uprising in the industrial districts of Central Germany could easily be squashed by the military as workers in other parts of the country neither joined in the armed uprising nor went out on strike. The isolated uprising in Hamburg in October 1923 also confirmed Müller's concern with building mass support before engaging in revolutionary struggle. Hyperinflation and economic collapse over the course of the year saw the Communists first wavering, then, yielding to Comintern pressure, hastily preparing for a revolutionary uprising but eventually undecided whether or not to engage in the final battle. The October debacle ended the revolutionary wave that had begun in 1918, and with it any hope to establish a socialist republic based on workers' councils.

The councils were of course Müller's preoccupation. Drawing on his experiences in the shop stewards before and during the revolution, he thought of councils as a means to organize rank-and-file struggles within capitalism, establish them as elements of dual power during the transition from capitalism to socialism, and eventually turn them into the institutional backbone of a socialist planned economy. Müller thought of such a socialist councils' republic as being radically democratic but also a dictatorship of the proletariat. Councils were to be elected within workplaces but also in neighborhoods so that a parallel structure of economic and political councils would develop. Delegates would have been open to recall at any time. On higher levels, they would be elected by delegates one level down.

However, after the revolutionary wave had ebbed away, ideas of workers' councils were transformed in such a way that they fit into the political system of the Weimar republic where unions and Social Democracy were equally committed to class collaboration. Under these conditions councils, now rebranded as works councils, became junior partners of human resource management with little room for building collective rank-and-file capacities and influencing investment decisions. They were an institutionalized extension of the bureaucratic unionism the shop stewards had broken free from when they began building an autonomous movement against the war and eventually for socialist revolution.

With the workers' council movement transformed beyond recognition and expelled from the Communist Party, Müller retreated more and more from politics. He was briefly engaged in a small union committed to independent Marxism but without ties to either the Social Democrats or the Communists. But its small size and isolation from the workers' mass organizations along with the syndicalist antipolitical stand did not really fit his convictions. The significance of his engagement with this union was less political but personal. As one of the owners and managers of a construction company that built houses for union members, Müller continued his transformation from rank-and-file activist to revolutionary leader to eventually becoming an entrepreneur. After severing ties with the syndicalist union but continuing the construction business, Müller became quite rich and even drawn into the corrupt networks of municipal politicians, bureaucrats, and developers that dominate the housing industry.

Yet, before this transformation had been complete, he wrote a three-volume history of the German revolution. Due to its comprehensiveness, these three volumes are widely used as a source for detailed information by latter-day historians. Yet its original approach of presenting actual workers as agents of change is usually buried under partisan narratives. Müller presents his focus on rank-and-file activism and its relations to party and government politics from 1914 to 1919 in a broad context. In his view, class struggles from late 1918 and into the spring of 1919 finished the bourgeois revolution that had failed in 1848. Yet these struggles, too, left unfinished business as attempts of establishing a socialist council republic failed. He is also clear about the role the war had played in triggering the revolution. Concern for workers' everyday problems does not mean that he does not understand big politics. In weaving the different currents

of war, class struggle, revolution, and counterrevolution together, Müller makes explicit references to Marx's writings on class struggles, war, and civil war in France.

While most historians neglect or disregard Müller's original account of the German revolution, his thinking about workers' councils left a mark on the history of the left. Hoffrogge reminds his readers that Karl Korsch, who would later be an important inspiration for New Left activists, drew heavily on Müller's ideas about workers' councils when developing his own ideas about alternatives to social democracy and Soviet-style communism. Yet, as Hoffrogge points out with reference to Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*, the lineage from Müller to Korsch and the New Left also marks the migration of Marxism from socialist workers' movements to universities and radical students. This, of course, is some kind of tragedy: While the efforts by Müller and his comrades to leverage a rank-and-file alternative to the top-down politics of the then existing worker' organizations failed, radical students were quite susceptible to such ideas, but their numbers were not anywhere near the number of workers active in whatever kind of socialist politics before and after the revolutionary struggles that shook not only Germany at the end of World War I.

Whether the same ideas can contribute to the remaking of working class politics after the collapse of Soviet communism and the neoliberal transformation of social democracy remains to be seen. Be this as it may, Hoffrogge's book is a first-rate invitation to think about a link between Richard Müller and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and today's still unfocused struggles against imperialist wars and capitalist exploitation.

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