Richard Courant in the German Revolution

Colin McLarty

In May 1933 Richard Courant wrote two official accounts of his time in the German Revolution of 1918–1919. He told his Provost: "The allegation that during the debacle I was a revolutionary in the Soldier's Council, is perfectly laughable." He had joined the Workers' and Soldiers' Council to keep the peace. He told Hermann Weyl, director of the Mathematics Institute, that his visits to Berlin convinced him "the Social Democratic Party under men like Noske was the last remaining bulwark against Bolshevism, complete collapse of the Wehrmacht, and the dissolution of Germany." [1]

He wrote these words as the Nazis took control. The evidence shows, as common sense might suggest, that they were basically true but slanted to provide him some protection. His mention of Gustav Noske is the most controversial point. Though a Social Democrat, Noske in 1919 used the extreme rightist private armies called Freikorps to crush worker demonstrations, killing thousands of people.

As the Great War wound down Lieutenant Richard Courant was stationed in Ilsenburg, 75 km from Göttingen, training officers to use the earth telegraph he invented to signal between trenches. By spring 1917 he felt it was "almost too late." [4] General Ludendorff launched a desperate offensive in March 1918, broken by July. The Army High Command sought, and got, an Armistice proposal by October, always concealing from the public both the military situation and the role of the military in the Armistice.

Through all this Courant worked on mathematics and planned a book series with Springer. He wrote to David Hilbert on 12 October 1918 about the series and a book he would write for it with Hilbert on differential and integral equations. The series became Springer's Grundlehren and the book Methods of Mathematical Physics, or simply "Hilbert and Courant." He closed the letter with a political vision:

I cannot regret the turn things have taken in the world. It would have been much easier and less painful for us, if lazy, apathetic intellectuals and frivolous "leaders" had not let us stagger to the brink of the abyss. But I look hopefully to the future and think, with the end of the war before us, each party might say: the victims were not sacrificed in vain. Perhaps we still face a not quite painless inner purification to the highest levels. In any case, for the first time we have a truly free road for the things that make human life worthwhile. That this road be taken, and the hope now sprouting on all sides not dissolve, are tasks for us all who in the past only criticized. We must stand in the first ranks if Germany is to rebuild. I am very happy now, when I can take off "the King's coat," that I will not return to work in the Germany of Morsbach and Schröder [language professors at Göttingen, both nationalists], but of Hilbert and Einstein. (Courant to Hilbert 12.10.18)

The Kaiser and Crown Prince Max abdicated 9 November 1918 under pressure from the Entente to form a democratic government. Social Democrats Philipp Scheidemann and Friedrich Ebert, already in the Kaiser's government, declared a "German Republic." They soon called a 19 January election for a National Assembly to frame a constitution. Throughout November, Workers' and Soldiers' Councils arose to control many towns around Germany. The name imitated the Russian Soviets. Most took power peacefully, and their politics ranged from Bolshevism to simply wanting someone in charge where no one seemed to be. Social Democrats often led them, and Social Democrat Courant became Council President in Ilsenburg. Everyone agreed there was a Revolution. But would it end with a National Assembly? Or would the Councils take it farther?
Courant wrote to Hilbert on 23 November:

This evening, as I have nearly finished the business of dissolving my squad, I can complete my project of reporting to you all I saw and heard in Berlin. I went there last Monday because, in the general confusion, Berlin headquarters forgot we exist here in Ilsenburg. Something had to be done to get my men and me our discharge orders. Sadly, I cannot say the Soldiers’ Councils have much helped or clarified the situation. Even in little Ilsenburg, with me as President of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council, it is hard to make anything workable from the competing forces of dilettantism, hate, mistrust, good will, conceit, and idealism, and in general to prevent major disturbances and disruption.

Berlin has so many snags and friction points, it is truly miraculous how everything keeps going. No one knows who is in charge of our Inspection, the Soldiers’ Council in consultation with the commanding officer, or the commanding officer in consultation with the Soldiers’ Council. No one dares take responsibility for giving orders. The whole demobilization is stalled by uncertainty, and by uncertain instructions from the Executive Council [of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils].

I see no enthusiasm for the new order among most soldiers. They take it as an unalterable fact, just like the old command relations. The only thing the great mass of soldiers cares about is to get home as soon as possible and be spared any kind of war and unrest. Thus the soldiers’ natural moderating influence on politics grows less and less. The more radical active minority, which stays for strictly political business, can easily gain control at least for a time. Last Tuesday I went to a large meeting called by the New Fatherland League, including Einstein. The topic was: Proletarians and Intellectuals Unite! Eduard Bernstein was the main speaker. He gave a very temperate, reasoned speech. For him the “achievements of the Revolution” were merely to demolish the old system. He wants the rule of law returned as soon as possible. That means a National Assembly very soon, and until then no decisive socialist measures. The discussion featured reasoned insight alongside bloody dilettantism. So one very suitable representative of the “Revolutionary Students’ Council” proclaimed his program, whose most remarkable point was election of professors by students with universal, direct etc. suffrage. Such things are found in The Red Flag, the organ of the Spartacus Group, perhaps the most widely read paper in Berlin. For example, just to undercut the Social Democratic Party, they demand a six-hour work day right now, since the workers need more free time for politics. The Spartacists demand instant renunciation of the war loans, immediate socialization of all heavy industry, and so on. No syllable is said on the details of this economic transformation. Yet every detailed explanation in the Social Democratic press, which obviously must reach moderate conclusions, is dismissed with derision and abuse for lacking conviction. Spartacists, Independents, and Majority Socialists are enemy camps, but the last two are really divided mostly by tactics, temperament, personal conflicts, and their past. Anyway, the atmosphere in Berlin is very tense. An explosion in these conditions could be stronger and bloodier than the one on 9 November. Something decisive must happen soon, if we are to find any way to avoid disintegration of Germany into greater and lesser centers, paralysis of commerce and the last remains of economic life, and civil war. To conceive the situation in Berlin, in the administration and the Executive Council (where
also spoke with people), think of an airplane high in flight, its pilot dead of general debility. It can fly quite a while more, but will crash, unless a new pilot scrambles into the seat and gets the controls in hand. It is clearer every day that the Executive Council cannot be the pilot in Germany today.

I think we can expect much from a categorical declaration by the Entente that they will only deal with a truly democratic Germany. Their statements on this so far are not sufficiently definite or official. Meanwhile the Spartacists try to paralyze beforehand the effects of such a declaration. They denounce any such effects as made-to-order, and deliberately spread the idea that all unpleasant news about the food situation, or problems with demobilization, and so on, are administration maneuvers to make people afraid of radicalism.

Einstein, with whom I spoke at the close of the aforementioned meeting, is a wonderfully noble and pure personality. I introduced him to [educator] Kurt Hahn, since this may let Einstein contact authorities in the administration, and help mend our ties with Holland. Einstein will soon speak with [Minister for the Exterior, Wilhelm] Solf. I believe such people can accomplish much more for us now than polished members of the diplomatic guild.

This next thing will interest you directly. As in all things today, so in matters of higher education, people come from every side, official and unofficial, to suggest reforms and so on. I was there with some people from my division, about using army physical apparatus for instructional purposes. I saw what a flood of "suggestions" pours in on the Ministry of Education from the most peculiar people, and how unclear the jurisdictions are and the conduct of business. Herr Blankenburg, who I believe is Dean at Münster, is in charge of university matters. One cannot tell whether he works under, over, or alongside Becker. He is very agreeable and amiable. It seems to me very important that some random student or grumbler not be the first to take up university reform and influence it decisively. I believe that is in no way precluded in the present situation. On the other hand this is just the moment when serious reforms could easily be put through. Things you have so often brought up could actually get on the agenda. For example, department committees for deciding appointments. But it is impossible to make any university reforms now without considering social questions. An upsurge of elementary school students is inevitable and presumably it will not end there. I just want to raise this question now because I think it would be good if the administration got a clearer, firmer plan from Göttingen, and soon. As a commission to work out such a plan, I propose Hilbert, Klein, Nelson [philosopher Leonard Nelson [3]]. (Courant to Hilbert 23.11.18)

The "Independents" were the Independent Social Democratic Party, an anti-war offshoot of the "Majority" Social Democratic Party. Its most prominent founders were radical Karl Liebknecht and reformist Eduard Bernstein. Liebknecht was also co-founder, with Rosa Luxemburg, of the Spartacus Group as a faction of the Independents. By calling Independents and Spartacists enemies, Courant takes Bernstein's side against Liebknecht.

The Independents changed quickly when the Armistice made an anti-war party useless. Many rejoined the Majority. The Spartacists split to form the German Communist Party, calling for a dictatorship of the proletariat. By late 1919 the Independents echoed that call. That year Emmy Noether joined the Independents. [2, 6].

By December 1918 Courant was back in Göttingen as the most prominent Social Democrat in the University. On 5 January he spoke on "Social Democracy, Revolution, and the National Assembly" in the restaurant Bürgerpark, which held 500 people and hosted many political meetings. The Göttinger Zeitung summarized his talk [4]:

The 5 October ceasefire proposal was not Prince Max's work or his Ministers'. It was imposed over his strong objections by Ludendorff's side. It crippled the spirit of the German people and rapidly demoralized the Army. This was especially due to embitterment over the system of lies which kept the people in the dark up to the last minute. If you had asked people then which party could save them from catastrophe—an overwhelming majority would have favored the Social Democracy. That feelings today are not all so favorable to the Social Democracy, is mostly due to the short memory of the masses. Parties on the right use this for effective agitation against the Social Democracy.

The Social Democracy is blamed for three things: 1. the collapse and the Revolution; 2. the economic catastrophe; 3. the war-weariness of Germany as against the expansionist greed of her eastern and southeastern neighbors.

To the contrary:

1: If anything is to blame for the Revolution and collapse, it is the egoism and blindness of the ruling circles. Throughout the war, and especially last summer, the Social Democratic Party warned of revolution and, to prevent it, demanded energetic reforms in Germany and the conclusion of a reasonable peace. It also warned the masses over and over against any use of force. The Revolution was thus not made by the Social Democracy, and indeed not by anyone at all. It was not even made by the Independents and Spartacists, who overrate themselves boasting of it. It came as a kind of natural event. Yes, when the Revolution arrived the Social Democratic Party took the lead. This was less for the Party's sake than for the whole German people, to stave off an otherwise inevitable fall into chaos and civil war. If the National Assembly convenes so quickly, or at all, we must in the first
Gestoehlene
und unrechtmäßig erworbene
Bekleidungsstücke der Heeresverwaltung
schänden den Träger und den deutschen Namen
Reichsverwaltungsamt, Berlin W. 3, Friedrichstrasse 66.

Sozialdemokratische Versammlung.
In der Versammlung der Sozialdemokratischen Partei
am Donntag morgen im "Bürgerpark" ergriff nach den
einleitenden Worten des Herrn Käble Herr Professor
Courant das Wort zu einem Referat über „Sozialdemo-
kratie. Revolution und Nationalversammlung“. Wegen
Plärmangels sind wir leider gerühmt, uns mit einem kur-
zen Auszug aus dem an treffenden Bemerkungen so über-
reisigen Vortrage zu beginnen.

Das Waffenstillstandsangebot vom 8. Oktober war nicht
das Werk des Prinzen Max oder eines seiner Minister,
sondern es wurde ihm doch seines heiligen Strabends von
Seiten Ludendorffs ausgeruhtet. Die Folge dieses Waffen-
stillstandsangebotes war eine Dämpfung der Stimung im
deutschen Hause und Heere, die zu einer raschen Demokra-
tisierung des letzteren führte. Insbesondere trug hierzu bei
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tisierung des letzteren führte.

To correctly judge the administration's current position and performance one needs not only humane understanding of the bourgeoisie and the parties on the right, but also of the radical elements among the workers. The democracies of the world, in their overwhelming numbers, have thrown us to the ground. In the name of socialism the German spirit can lead the world.

Figure 2. Opening of summary of a talk given by Richard Courant at the Bürgerpark in Göttingen. (Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Göttingen.)

place thank the Social Democratic Party.

2: The Social Democrats are blamed for the wild strikes, senseless wage demands, and lesser willingness to work. Against that: From the start of the Revolution the Party leaders, in speeches, newspaper articles, and many pamphlets, have called the workers to reason and order and shown that only work can save us. Social Democratic leaders are blamed for the strikes in Upper Silesia and the Ruhr. At any rate, you cannot mine coal with machine guns and cannon, as the bourgeoisie means to.

3: The Social Democrats also regret our war-weariness. Hopefully the unity the administration now happily shows will change that. But on this question, remember how each soldier's natural desire to return home after four and a half years of war impedes maintenance of a great army. We point to the new regime's order to accept volunteers for a re-organized army.
economic life to raise production and thus the general standard of life and culture.

This amounts to Karl Marx's theory of surplus value, including that elimination of surplus value cannot fundamentally solve the social problem. Increased production is a second essential factor, which an entirely free market cannot accommodate under present capitalist conditions, but which requires planned organization of the whole economy.

His lecture closed asking academics to study and adopt the views of socialism with a thoroughly examined, serious will to truth, uninfluenced by inclinations and class interest. GZ 15.1.19

The other speaker was Iris Runge, soon to be Courant's sister-in-law. She said even non-socialists like Walther Rathenau, the Jewish industrialist and wartime economic planner, saw the need to organize production and the market. She complained, "A clever businessman with enough capital can, by the right advertising, make monstrous profits on some worthless product and reduce the meaningful part of the national workforce," taking mouthwash as her example.

Then came trouble from "national-minded students" who admired Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff. They believed Ludendorff, that Germany was never defeated on the battlefield but by socialists and "foreigners" (read Jews) at home.

Unfortunately, the plain bad manners of many student representatives nearly prevented any discussion on the reserved, objective, scientific level of the presenters. There were constant shouted interruptions. Some speakers were applauded with minutes-long ear-shattering turmoil. . . . Only after the worst disrupters were led out, after singing the song "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles" and raising a cheer for the German students (?), could the meeting resume some order.

Among others, . . . student Albert Mühlestein, . . . took an objective part in the discussion.

In his closing word Prof. Courant took a sharp stand against the unworthy behavior of part of the audience, who, despite claiming to be educated, put themselves on quite the same level as the Spartacus Group. (Ibid.)

The question mark on "German students (?)" may query whether these were students, but certainly questions their exclusive claim to "Germanness."

The Göttinger Tageblatt reported the German student (?) viewpoint:

From student circles we have this report:

On Saturday, academics overflowed the Kaiser Cafe and moved to the Bürgerpark to discuss social problems. Before describing the meeting I must take a moment for the flyer that invited us. A real parody, it insulted all academics without distinction as "political sucklings," "more dangerous than Spartacus," whose "favored newspapers" are collectively "dishonest." Using the familiar "Du!" throughout, it spoke of phrase mongering by certain "enemies." We national-minded academics protested this, through Herr Gerwin, and hereby protest it again most forcefully. Others who did nothing and objected to Herr Gerwin's proceedings, may have the servile pleasure of being called political sucklings and their press dishonest. We only thank them for finally admitting it!

Herr Ackermann opened the meeting and emphasized the goal of the Society of Freedom-minded Academics, to stand outside all parties. (Then, who are the "enemies" mentioned in the flyer? I can answer that: The enemies of German academics are the destructive influence of foreignism and the international ideas of pompous fools!) Herr Professor Courant spoke on social reform and socialism. He expounded Marx's theory of socialism without really adding anything. Later he set himself against Prof. Oppenheimer's theory. He left plenty of gaps, but made a respectable effort to bring the ideal world of socialism closer to his audience's comprehension. Yet like the second speaker, Frl. Iris Runge.

Figure 3. Announcement published in Göttinger Zeitung (1.11.1919, p. 4) of meeting at which Richard Courant, Iris Runge, and Walter Ackermann were to speak.
whose speech apparently drew less interest, he had to admit that worker’s protective legislation, which already existed long before the war, produced such far-reaching reforms that intensive efforts on these problems no longer seem pressing to many people. FrL Runge spoke mainly on the goals of socialism, based primarily on Rathenau’s works. Unfortunately her exposition, like the “gaily colored” mouthwash ads she talked about, was often lost in wearisome clichés. She, like Herr Courant, admitted that dividing employers’ profits among the workers would increase wages very little. Both speakers still owe us an account of the real blessings of socialism. One was left feeling these are quite ideal ideas, indeed mere theories. The first opposing speaker, Herr Clos- terhalben, quickly pushed them into the realm of actuality, where they sadly faded as beautiful shadows. Long bursts of applause thanked him, and disturbances broke out against him too. Speeches and counter-speeches grew stormier and some people took unseemly advantage of this, to charge that no one in the group had thought about social problems before, and again to call for removing the “political sucklings”! Herr Mühlestein further provoked the gathering by inflammatory outbursts. When he pointed out the unfortunate author of the flyer, the excitement rose so far that the unfortunate author of the flyer, as well as to Herr Mühlestein, proving their good will to assure a suitable proceeding to the affair. GZ 14.1.19

The Social Democrats got 38% of the vote on 19 January. They governed in coalition with the Democrats and the Center Party, which got 19% each. The National People’s Party which despised the Republic got 10%, and the Independents 8%.

On 18 March 1919 Courant and Ackermann spoke to a student meeting about their fact-finding trip to Berlin for the Society of Freedom-minded Academics. Conservative student Georg Schnath says these “known socialists” disturbed the meeting by getting on the agenda “explicitly against the will of the majority.” They reported that news of the situation in Berlin was wildly exaggerated in government lies, and warned against using troops to fight workers. They said, in Schnath’s words:

The rule of class justice, and especially the widely ridiculed way it is administered, are decisive failures of Noske’s gun-barrel politics, and greatly increase the membership of Spartacus, which, moreover, the speaker tried to distinguish strongly in every respect from Russian Bolshevism. The audience showed they were not the ones to hear such claims, with the speakers taking up word for word the Independents’ interests. [5]

Courant closed his part in the Revolution with two open letters to newly Communist Hans Mühlstein. Courant wrote on the front page of the Göttinger Zeitung:

Your public debut as a Communist agitator in Göttingen imposes a duty on those who have had political contact with you, to denounce you publicly. Since I could not reply in the meeting on Friday, let me do that here and now.

You know I never reproach anyone who adopts communist ideals out of pure motives. Many tender-minded [or “hot-tempered”, the irony is untranslatable] people let anger and alienation drive them to radicalism, some on the right, and some on the left. I do not deny even your good faith. What I find so upsetting and disgraceful about your debut, is the irresponsible demagogy. You misuse your gifts as a speaker to sow pointless new disorder, to add new fuel, and to provoke our tortured people already sick at the core, to civil war. . . .

On Friday you preached civil war. Certainly you tried to weaken the initial impact of your words by explaining you meant war with spiritual weapons. Now you can declare you never proclaimed a bloody war. But you immediately made the reservation that if armed war was “forced on you” the case would be different. . . . At the end of the meeting, among many other comments, when you read out the latest unfortunate Noske edict, to provoke the railway workers there to “action,” you seemed to me not quite clear on the manner or timing of your civil war. You left me really expecting you to give the signal within a few months.

. . .

If you, Herr Mühlestein, really mean well for the German people, if you are ready to commit yourself entirely, then go carry the torch of world revolution in the countries of the Entente. Leave politics here to others. GZ 3.7.19

This is very like what anti-socialists said to Social Democrats in 1918, and Mühlestein’s reply was very like Courant’s defense in January 1919: He did not urge civil war, but warned against it, and pressure from the government and the military will make the workers fight. Courant’s rejoinder does not point to any difference between
the cases nor to anything specific Mühlestein said. He treats these arguments exactly as anti-socialists treated Social Democratic arguments earlier. He ignores them. He and his friends will clarify what Mühlestein said. The editors closed the debate with Courant’s rejoinder on 31 July, which began:

First, I insist my representation of Herr Mühlestein’s performance, and especially the irresponsible provocative way he spoke of civil war, corresponds entirely to the facts. This has been confirmed to me, both before and after the letter was published, by the most varied and indisputable eye- and earwitnesses. I will happily believe Herr Mühlestein was unaware of what he said, and would otherwise have chosen different words. But the content and the effect of his speech were made so clear, not only in my letter but also and in the same way by others who are much closer to him, that his attempt to deny it now seems rather strange. It would seem more respectable to me, if Herr Mühlestein would quietly accept the fact that he cannot defend his performance and his speech. GZ 31.7.19

Courant said truly in 1933 that he acted throughout the Revolution to keep order and hold off radicalism and civil war. By late November 1918 he agreed with Eduard Bernstein that the Revolution should end with elections, and socialist measures be postponed until then. He never publicly mentioned any specific socialist measures, unless we count the call for new Army volunteers. By July 1919 he was deaf to the very defenses he had earlier given for Revolution. A brief stint on the Göttingen town council ended in spring 1920. After promoting the German vote in a 1921 plebiscite on whether Upper Silesia would be German or Polish, he took only private interest in politics. [4]

His 1933 report slanted a little. He dropped all mention of “Marxism,” as he probably had very quickly after 1919. He spoke of a “Bolshevik” menace, as the right had in 1919 but he had not. And he praised “the Social Democratic Party under men like Noske.” Noske was strong in the party in 1919, but Courant criticized him then. Like the reference to “Wehrmacht,” a rare term before the Freikorps popularized it, and one Courant did not use in 1919, all this merely skewed the cast list towards Nazi taste. The motives Courant claimed in 1933, he had shown in the Revolution.

REFERENCES