Theorodor Bergmann and Mario Kessler

The Resistance of Small Socialist Groups against German Fascism

The German Communist Party, the KPD, like many of the sections of the Communist International (Comintern), was wracked by factionalism throughout the 1920s. When after 1925 the party was headed by Ernst Thälmann (a transport worker from Hamburg), the Swiss Comintern functionary Jules Humbert-Droz described him as “a leader made in Moscow” and an “ideal executor of Russian policy in Germany.”1 By the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928 three currents were left within the party. The majority in the Central Committee, led by Thälmann, was aligned with Stalin in his struggle against Bukharin. The strongest opposition to Stalin was called the “Rightist” faction, led by Heinrich Brandler and August Thalheimer, and became the KPD-Opposition. Between the Thälmann and rightist factions were the so-called Versöhnler (Conciliators), led by Arthur Ewert and Gerhart Eisler, brother of the composer Hanns Eisler and the former KPD leader Ruth Fischer. Both the ‘Conciliators’ and, more expressly, the ‘Rightists’ rejected the Stalinist notion that a ‘new revolutionary wave’ was underway both in Germany and throughout the world. They also opposed the designation of Social Democracy as Sozialfaschisten (Social Fascists).2

The Fratricide of the German Labor Movement Before 1933

This new theory of ‘Social Fascism’ fell on fertile ground, particularly because of the enormous amount of suffering that virtually every social stratum was subjected to by the Great Depression of the early 1930s. This created widespread desperation and a readiness for violent solutions of social problems. The political atmosphere with its deep, growing despair and wild revolutionary illusions also provided a suitable climate for the growth of fascist mass movements all over the world.3

The German government, led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) until March 1930, pursued a vigorous ‘law and order’ policy, the most notorious example of which occurred on Labor Day (May 1) of 1929. It had been customary in Berlin, on 1 May, to gather workers together in one big demonstration under the auspices of the trade unions. That year, however, the head of the Berlin police (an SPD member) had forbidden the demonstration, though the KPD ignored the restriction. The demonstrators and the police clashed head-on. The police

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fired on the workers killing thirty-two and wounding several dozen. The SPD defended the hard line and did not reprimand the chief of the police.4

The repercussions were very serious. Up to this point the KPD had always attempted to draw a line between SPD leaders and rank-and-file members trying to convince the members that they were being betrayed by their leaders. Now the KPD declared that the SPD members’ views more or less agreed with the policy of the leadership, resulting in the new theory that every member of the Social Democratic Party and every member of the SPD-dominated trade unions were active enemies of the cause of the proletariat and the socialist revolution. Open conflict with these ‘elements’ (the majority of workers and socialist intellectuals) became the first duty of every true revolutionary. The idea was raised that a fascist policy could be conducted by a social democratic party. The careers of the ex-socialists Benito Mussolini and Jozef Pilsudski seemed to illustrate the truth of that contention. After May Day of 1929 the KPD concluded that the German government (formed by the SPD and the moderate bourgeois parties of the so-called ‘Weimar Coalition’) was essentially a fascist government under socialist leadership – Social Fascists. Bourgeois democracy and fascism were now equated with one another. The KPD identified the ingenious concept of ‘Social Fascism,’ declaring that the social-democrats in factories and the fascists were twins (hence the main enemies of communist workers), and as such they had to be defeated first – before defeating fascism proper. The KPD claimed that any fascist rule would last only weeks and would be succeeded by the dictatorship of the proletariat, establishing a Soviet Germany.

The Social-Democrats were hardly wiser. They saw communists as “red-varnished fascists,” and believed that the bourgeois democracy would fight against Hitler, thus protecting the social and political achievements of the working class.5

The SPD tolerated the minority coalition under conservative Heinrich Brüning, whose government introduced measures openly detrimental to the conditions of workers and the growing unemployed masses.

In July 1930 the German coalition government broke down and the Reichstag, the German parliament, was dissolved. The new elections in September were a surprising triumph for Hitler. His party won 18.3 per cent of the votes and brought 107 Nazi deputies into the Reichstag. The Communists also made an advance, getting 13.1 per cent. The SPD, which was still the largest party, fell from 29.8 to 24.5 per cent.

“Yesterday was Herr Hitler’s ‘great day,’” the KPD daily Rote Fahne jubilantly declared, “but the so-called electoral victory of the Nazis is only the beginning of their end.” A few weeks later, the same newspaper stated that “the 14th of September was the high watershed of the National Socialist movement in Germany – what follows now can only ebb and decline.”6 The Chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, whose government was largely tolerated by the SPD, was supposed to be fascist. The KPD slogan of Volksrevolution (People’s Revolution) was

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5 For the SPD policy see Heinrich August Winkler, Der Weg in die Katastrophe: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1930-1933 (Bonn, 1987). More critical is Bernd Rabehl’s, “Auf dem Wege in die nationalsozialistische Diktatur: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie zwischen ‘Großer Koalition’ und der legalen ‘Machtübernahme’ Hitlers,” Manfred Scharrer (ed.), Kampflose Kapitulation: Arbeiterbewegung 1933 (Reinbek, 1984), pp. 18-72. At this time Rabehl was a leftist who later sympathized with the extreme right.

advanced as the chief strategic slogan of the party – an attempt to outdo the Nazis in nationalist demagoguery.

When, in the summer of 1931, the Nazi party promoted a referendum to dismiss the social democratic government of Prussia, the largest German state, the KPD supported the move, calling it the Roter Volksentscheid (Red Referendum) and did its best (unsuccessfully as it turned out) to destroy the government in circumstances where the only alternative was a right-wing government including the Nazi party.

In March 1932 the SPD felt obliged to support Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the reactionary military leader and loser of World War I, in the election for President. The party justified this measure as the supposed last protecting trench against Hitler. Only eight months later, the same Hindenburg made Hitler the chancellor of the German Reich in a formally legal coup d’état.

In November 1932, on the eve of the Nazi’s seizure of power, the KPD found itself in a bloc with the Nazis in support of an unofficial transport worker’s strike in Berlin. In some districts, communists and Nazis were standing arm in arm collecting money for the RGO (Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition or the communist trade organization) and the NSBO (Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation or the trade union organization of the Nazis). The strike quickly collapsed, and the KPD was even more politically isolated. In fact, the KPD policy had strengthened the position of the SPD leadership among the working masses. While the KPD had short-term growth in membership, they did not grow in political influence or social prestige. Most of the newcomers were no longer steeped in the internationalist and radical democratic tradition of the pre-war labor movement but were, rather, politically radicalized desperados, the likes of Erich Mielke, who later became the head of East Germany’s secret police service, the Staatssicherheitsdienst or Stasi.

It is no surprise that the KPD also underestimated the danger of Nazi ideology, especially its anti-Semitic dimension. The KPD had always opposed any kind of anti-Semitism, despite some anti-Semitic feelings among its rank-and-file, and the KPD was sharply critical of Nazi anti-Semitism. However, in 1930, KPD leader Hermann Remmele wrote a booklet entitled Sowjetstern oder Hakenkreuz? (Soviet Star or Swastika?), in which he wrongly asserted that Nazi anti-Semitism was not genuine and that Hitler and his accomplices would make a great show of anti-Semitism but in the long run would amend agreements with Jewish and non-Jewish capitalists alike. While a number of press reports supported this interpretation, this view did not stop the KPD (mainly through the German section of International Red Aid) from helping victims of anti-Semitism, who were mostly Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

On a few occasions, however, the KPD included anti-Semitic slogans among its appeals to nationalistic radicals. The SPD paper Vorwärts reported that Communist delegates on Berlin’s City Council had joined with Nazis in shouting “Out with the Jews!” to prevent members of the bourgeois parties from being heard.

7 See the impressive biography by Wilfriede Otto, Erich Mielke – Biographie: Aufstieg und Fall eines Tschekisten (Berlin, 2000), pp. 16-17.
printed a denunciation of “Jewish stock-market jobbers,” the SPD accused it of competing with Hitler in the anti-Jewish fervor. The next day the KPD organ expressed regret for what was called a misprint: instead of “Jobber Juden,” it should have read “Jobber, Juden” (stock-market jobbers and Jews) — asserting its commitment to fight anti-Semitism uncompromisingly.

1933 saw the destruction of Communist illusions regarding the scope and impact of the Nazis’ seizure of power. Among German refugees in France, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere, new groups had been formed that were close to the platforms of Trotsky and of Brandler-Thalheimer. The groups were small, but their influence could not be ignored. In the international arena they had briefly forced Stalinism onto the ideological defensive. However, in the Soviet Union the German political catastrophe strengthened Stalin’s hand. The establishment of Nazi rule gave new impetus to the Stalinist trend, and the Communist International remained loyal and obedient. More than ever, the overwhelming majority of the communists saw in Stalin’s rule a guarantee against Hitler’s bid for world dominance.

As on the international scene, there were in Germany not only the well-known and large labor movement organizations (the SPD, KPD, and ADGB/General Trade Union’s Association) but also several small leftist groups like the KPD-Opposition (KPDO), SAP (Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei; Socialist Worker’s Party), LO (Linke Opposition; Left Opposition), and the ISK (Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund / International Socialist Fight’s Union). To fully understand the importance and impact of the small leftist groups’ active resistance to German fascism, one has to look at the early stages of fascism’s rising wave in the late 1920s.

August Thalheimer’s Analysis of Fascism

The first full Marxist analysis of German fascism was written by August Thalheimer in 1928. He saw in fascism a qualitatively new form of bourgeois rule. Already in 1929, four years before Hitler’s ascent to power, he wrote that “Hitler is no longer a desperado who operates beyond the boundaries of bourgeois reaction; the National Socialists are now the vanguard of a capitalism which is concentrating on the basis of fascism.” In other words, the Nazi party would grow out of bourgeois-parliamentary democracy, but would destroy the same democracy when in power. In the same year, when the Nazi party was but a tiny group in the Reichstag, Thalheimer clearly described the objectives of fascism to include the

[...] abolition of bourgeois democracy. This includes closing down the parliament or its transformation into a fake parliament, abolition of freedom of assembling, of coalition, of the press, of strikes, abolition of all parliamentary parties, [and] the abolition of mass organizations of the proletariat, particularly of the independent trade unions. [...] The armed services of the state are supplemented by terror gangs.

Regarding the objectives of fascist foreign policy, Thalheimer asked whether the new German imperialism reach its goals in “peaceful ways” and answered his own question very clearly:

To begin with, German imperialism uses means of peaceful diplomacy [and] advocates general disarmament in order to obtain equality in rearmament for itself. But it can realize full imperialist rearmament and participation in a new distribution of the [colonial] world only as a consequence of a new imperialist war. German imperialism prepares for a new imperialist war.16

Thalheimer also analyzed the dual social character of the fascist movement: its mass base consisted of the declassed parts of the middle and working classes, or the Lumpenproletariat, while its leaders pushed for the long-term aims of German imperialism. This combination of interests was achievable only via extensive use of social demagoguery.

Similar Marxist analyses were made somewhat later by Fritz Sternberg and Leon Trotsky.17 Trotsky interpreted the gigantic growth of Nazism as a consequence and response to two central factors: “a deep social crisis, throwing the petty bourgeois masses off balance, and the lack of a revolutionary party that would today be regarded by the popular masses as the acknowledged revolutionary leader.”18 Already in 1929 Thalheimer had warned against the rising wave of fascism and proposed a strategy of unified struggle for all working class organizations, which would attract the insecure, wavering, and intermediate social layers. Since the KPD leaders instead took the “easy road of making propaganda against the SPD, and since the Right wing Socialist leaders mistrusted the power of the proletariat and preferred the ‘lesser evil,’ no such united Socialist fighting front came into existence,” wrote the Marxist historian Arthur Rosenberg. “Although the working class comprised three-quarters of the entire nation, they were unable to unite either upon their political ideals or their political tactics.”19

The Surrender of 1933

The dominant German labor organizations were in total disarray, having produced political illusions and ignored the real threat. Both the large workers’ parties fought a bitter internecine struggle for the ideological and organizational dominance of the working class. They had rejected all calls by the smaller leftist groups and known leftist individuals to organize a united front. The workers were waiting, in their usual discipline, for the call from leadership to begin the fight against fascism. Labor’s surrender, almost without resistance, led to confusion, paralysis, disappointment, and in some cases desertion of one’s class to the ranks of the victorious enemy. Such incidents could be observed even among some leading functionaries. The surrender of 1933 had long-standing demoralizing effects on the legitimacy of leftist opposition movements.

16 Ibid., p. 19.
17 The best collections of Sternberg’s and Trotsky’s writings on Fascism are: Fritz Sternberg, Für die Zukunft des Socialismus, ed. Helga Grebing et al. (Bonn, 1982); Leo Trotzki, Schriften über Deutschland, ed. Helmut Dahmer et al., 2 vols. (Frankfurt-Main, 1971); partial English translation: Leon Trotsky, The Struggle against Fascism in Germany (London, 1975).
18 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
Some social democratic leaders nurtured the illusion of a possible co-existence with the fascist regime, by adapting themselves somewhat to the new rulers. Thus when Hitler declared Labor Day a national holiday, Trade Union leaders called upon their members (on April 19) to join the official Labor Day demonstrations as a formal duty. However the morning after, all Union houses and offices were stormed and occupied by fascist storm-troopers and all leading Unionists were arrested and transferred to concentration camps, where they met their fellow communist workers, against whom they had fought. Many of the leaders were tortured, and quite a number died under this torture.

The SPD leadership was split. Some of the leading functionaries emigrated immediately and established a party leadership while in exile in Prague. Others remained and voted for Hitler’s “peace plan” in parliament on April 17, 1933. Their illusions were soon blown in pieces by fascist brutality and the establishment of a wholesale dictatorship, where no rival party was permitted. Naturally, the SPD was banned.

The Unions were also abolished, and a Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Working Front) was proclaimed under Nazi leadership. Employers were installed as leaders of the Betriebsgemeinschaft (enterprise community), and the workers were the Gefolgschaft (Followers); this was in fact a compulsory organization with zero democratic influence by the workers. Any negotiations about wages and working conditions ceased.

This defeat, after so much boasting, paralyzed the big labor organizations for quite a while. Only the small groups had understood the real dangers of fascism, had prepared their organizations for the foreseeable terror, and espoused the necessity of underground activity. They began immediately to reorganize into smaller groups of three to five, publishing illegal periodicals and leaflets and informing workers about the political objectives of the Nazis, i.e. describing the fast adaptation to armaments production and the significance of this change: preparation for a new war. These groups also clearly articulated that there was no chance for the workers to influence the Nazi German Working Front. Thus, they began to organize illegal, class-conscious Trade Unions, uniting workers of all leftist parties and groups.

One development illustrates the full confusion of the KPD. From 1928 to 1933, the KPD had tried to establish its own Red Unions, compelling their members to leave the free Trade Unions, arguing that the reformist Union leaders were traitors and that rank-and-file members had no chance of democratic influence. After the formation of the Deutsche Arbeitsfront, however, the KPD called its members to join this entirely undemocratic organization, which had openly and explicitly declared its hierarchical structure. KPD members were asked by the party to work inside the Deutsche Arbeitsfront and try to conquer leading positions.

The Nazi Regime erected immense daily hurdles against the underground struggle. The control of all public life, via spying and organized terror, was intensified daily. Immediately after the semi-legal coup d’état of January 30, 1933, concentration camps were established all over Germany, and Hitler’s storm-troopers became auxiliary policemen. It was difficult to purchase large quantities of paper, stamps, or typewriters – spying and reporting were everywhere, and every house had a reporting caretaker. Railway passage was also controlled.

The small leftist groups established their own network of information and communication between exiled leaders and the underground at home. Trusted members settled in adjacent countries and transmitted political information from the borders via publications and letters.

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20 Most valuable materials on these developments can be found in Timothy W. Mason, *Nazism, Fascism, and the Working Class*, ed. by Jane Caplan (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1995).
Some international organizations supported the underground work, particularly the International Transport Workers’ Federation under secretary Edo Fimmen. However when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands in 1940, they arrested Fimmen and executed him.

The left-wing groups maintained their political program which included the revolutionary overthrow of fascism, the expropriation of the capitalist class (which was labeled responsible for the rise and establishment of fascism and co-operation with the fascists), and speaking out in favor of a socialist society. In the case of war, they would work toward defeating their ‘own’ government – whose demise would open the way for revolutionary change.

The Resistance Begins

Soon after Hitler came to power, a minority of communist resistance fighters cooperated with non-communist workers. The most notable outcome of these efforts was the clandestine organization Neu Beginnen (New Beginning), comprised of KPD members, the SPD, and small leftist groups. Neu Beginnen stated that

the collapse of German Social Democracy dates not from its passivity in the final crisis of 1933, but from the opportunity it missed in 1918. It bitterly paid for the illusion, to which it had clung to the bitter end, that a working class may securely enjoy the fruits of political democracy, while the reality of power remains in the hands of the possessing class.  

Among the Neu Beginnen activists were the political scientist Robert Jungk, and the historian Francis L. Carsten (then Franz Ludwig Carstens). Some communist resistance groups included social democrats and independent Marxists, like those led by Walter Markov in Bonn and by Ernst Engelberg in Berlin. Markov and Engelberg, who became famous historians after 1945, were both sentenced and arrested.

Under the influence of the new, post-1934 line of Soviet diplomacy, the Comintern changed its tactics a year later. Hitherto it had aimed for a Sowjetdeutschland (Soviet Germany) – a somewhat unusual and unpopular slogan. However in 1935, they decided to establish a popular front together with all non-fascist social forces in and outside of Germany. The German bourgeoisie was said to include a non-fascist section that should become a partner in this popular front. All revolutionary goals were explicitly discarded: a parliamentary bourgeois democracy became the KPD’s official aim. Nevertheless, these progressive and democratic capitalists could not be found, neither in Germany or abroad. The German Popular Front Committee, established in Paris, soon dissolved in a quarrel, since some leftists wished to invite Trotsky’s followers, while the KPD labeled them the agents of fascism.


23 On Markov see his Revolution im Zeugenstand, ed. Thomas Grimm, ([East] Berlin and Weimar, 1989); see also his Wie Viele Leben lebt der Mensch: Eine Autobiographie aus dem Nachlass (Leipzig, 2009), and Sven Heitkamp, Walter Markov: Ein DDR-Historiker zwischen Parteidoktrin und Profession (Leipzig, 2003); on Engelberg see Mario Kessler, Exilerfahrung in Wissenschaft und Politik: Remigrierte Historiker in der frühen DDR (Cologne etc., 2001), chapter 8.
The KPDO, under its exiled leadership of Heinrich Brandler and August Thalheimer, criticized the Moscow show trials of 1936-1938, during which the whole Bolshevik old guard was liquidated. The KPDO also protested against the Stalin-Hitler-Treaty of August 1939, explaining it as Stalin’s attempt to stay away from the coming war between the Western alliance and the fascist axis of Hitler and Mussolini. The Soviet Union was finally isolated in 1939. When with the German aggression against Poland the war broke out on 1 September, 1939, the KPDO and the Trotskyites were in favor of defending the Soviet Union as the only ‘worker’s state,’ while at the same time criticizing its international political strategy.

The KPD and the communist parties of Western Europe were, once again, entirely confused after the German-Soviet treaty of eternal friendship of September 30, 1939. Now, by order of Moscow, they had to contradict their own earlier anti-fascist propaganda. Hitler now became a promoter of peace, Britain and France became the war-mongers, and there was no more mention of a Popular Front against fascist Germany. German antifascists, including volunteers from the Spanish Civil War, were advised to return to Germany, where they would not be in any danger. But all who returned were jailed by the Nazis, and some German communists, who had found asylum in the USSR, were handed over to the Gestapo by Soviet authorities.24

The leftist groups were convinced that the ‘eternal’ friendship between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union would not last long, and the first Soviet military moves confirmed this judgment. Stalin’s armies occupied the borderlands to Rumania, the eastern part of Poland, and the three Baltic States. These occupations and the Winter War against Finland were clearly strategic preparations for the final confrontation between Hitler’s Wehrmacht and the Red Army.

Leftist resistance and underground work was guided by a Marxist political analysis and strategy with revolutionary objectives. But their technological means and methods could not match and compete with the growing intensity, wealth of resources, technical sophistication, and growing brutality of Nazi control and persecution. Thus more and more underground activists were discovered, arrested, and brought to trial. Countless years of imprisonment were meted out, and many of the prisoners were not released when their jail terms expired. A large number were directly transferred to concentration camps, where many of them remained until liberated in the spring of 1945 by the advancing allied armies. Members of the KPD, the SPD, and of the small groups were, after their jail terms, relegated to special divisions, set up for politically unreliable and criminal soldiers, who were then sent to the most dangerous places in the war.25 Some of them tried to desert, going over to Yugoslav and Greek partisans.

Underground propagandists had to battle the Nazi ideologues, which had disposed of the monopoly of legal media, and thus claimed some temporary and superficial success. Nazi propaganda influenced the mood of those who had no access to alternative sources and critical analyses. Thus after the early surprising victories of the “invincible” German Wehrmacht, some reveled, believing in a lasting victory, but were sobered in the wake of crushing defeats in northern Africa (1942) and Stalingrad (1942-1943). After these military setbacks, workers’ acts of resistance intensified – not at least inspired and conducted by activists from the small groups. There were at least three trials in which KPDO members were sentenced for the second time. However, when the military situation changed, they resumed their clandestine

25 Such units were the Division Dirlewanger and Division 999.
antifascist work. In all three trials, some of the accused communists were condemned to death and executed some as late as 1945.\textsuperscript{26} The murder machine worked until the last day of the Nazi dictatorship.

The KPD remained officially legal until March 1933. The party’s Central Committee issued on January 30, 1933 (the day of Hitler’s nomination as Chancellor), an appeal to the SPD and Trade Unions, calling for a united response in the form of “strikes, mass strikes, general strike!”\textsuperscript{27} The KPD recognized that its inability to quickly mobilize resistance to Hitler’s regime was a major defeat, revealing the failure of the ultra-left line of the years prior to 1933. But this appeal was issued too late and convinced neither the non-communist workers nor anti-fascist intellectuals.

After the Reichstag Fire of 27 February 1933, full-scale persecution started. On the night of the fire and in the following days some 10,000 communists were arrested.\textsuperscript{28} Among them were many middle-ranking functionaries. The leadership, with the exception of Ernst Thälmann, managed to escape.

The Nazis were confident that the German labor movement could never recover. But the last free election to the Reichstag, of 5 March 1933, produced surprising results: the KPD obtained not fewer than 4.8 million votes (12.3 per cent of the electorate), while the SPD gleaned 18.3 per cent of the vote. Soon afterwards, the KPD was officially banned, as was the SPD two months later.

The building of an illegal network involved decentralization, for which the KPD was not prepared. Therefore, political actions, particularly by anti-fascist propagandists, started quite late, in effect by the summer of 1933. The KPD established a foreign directorate (\textit{Auslandsleitung}) in Paris and a domestic directorate (\textit{Inlandsleitung}) that illegally operated in Berlin. Two years later, the majority of the leadership moved to Moscow. Wilhelm Pieck, the acting chairman of the KPD, reported at the Seventh Comintern Congress that, in 1935, of 422 leading cadres 219 were in German imprisonment, 125 had been forced into exile, 41 had left the party, and 24 had been murdered.\textsuperscript{29}

As mentioned, the KPD had changed its political line in 1935, suddenly promoting cooperation with what was depicted as a democratic bourgeoisie, and in 1939 stopped working almost altogether, resuming again in June 1941, when Hitler suddenly ended his alliance with Stalin.

The SPD had been more passive. Those who did not capitulate and desert socialism tried to maintain friendly contacts and save themselves for a post-Hitler era. In a detailed letter from

\textsuperscript{26} For details see Bergmann, „Gegen den Strom“, passim.
\textsuperscript{29} See Beatrix Herlemann, “Communist Resistance Between Comintern Directives and Nazi Terror,” \textit{Between Reform and Revolution}, p. 362.
mid-May 1933, the party functionary Fritz Blümel informed the SPD executive of the then prevalent mood in Berlin:

In the eyes of the workers the party has suffered such a tremendous loss of confidence in every respect that in all likelihood it will be impossible to rescue it. Let us take care to ensure the survival of the [social democratic] idea in new organizational forms, and let us see to it that the idea will regain respect through struggle.\(^{30}\)

In a report dated July 1934, Waldemar von Knoeringen, one of the leaders of the social democratic underground struggle, noted a profound sentiment in favor of unifying the various brands of the workers’ movement:

These groups want a unified socialist class party of the proletariat. The comrades gave me examples of how workers reject communist leaflets as soon as they start up their older insults of the SPD. They do not want the continuation of the old tone, and they believe that the new era has created entirely different preconditions for class struggle. The divisions of yesteryear are cleared away; the methods of struggle have become uniform; [and] the terrain is prepared for a united workers’ movement.\(^{31}\)

The local presence of small leftist groups may, in the words of the historian Gerd-Rainer Horn, “have eased the road to unity or prepared the ideological terrain for unity sentiments to gain ground.”\(^{32}\) According to a May 1935 Gestapo report, pro-unity agitation on the part of SAP members was in part responsible for the emergence of a viable united front in the Central German industrial town of Zeitz, several towns in Thuringia, and in Cologne, Germany’s fourth largest city. In Hanover, a united front encompassed all Marxist parties: the KPD, SPD, KPDO, as well as the SAP.\(^{33}\)

It was the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union, the Moscow show trials, and the persecution of independent socialists by Stalin’s secret police (during the Spanish civil war) that ended united front activities both in exile as well as in Germany. Since 1939, the Soviet policy of reconciliation with Hitler ran parallel with intensifying Nazi terror in the wake of the war, and by 1940, the clandestine social democratic network was destroyed by the Gestapo.

**Underground Work during the War**

Some of the leading SPD politicians became more active in 1943; as the breakdown of the Nazi regime came closer, they joined with the emerging bourgeois resistance. This resistance groups only appeared shortly before the end of the war. After many hesitations, they made their first attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944.\(^{34}\) It failed, and most of the participants of the military and bourgeois conspiracy were executed. Not a few of them were conservative, anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, influenced by Nazi ideology, and some had even

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\(^{31}\) Quoted in: Ibid., p. 344.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 348-49.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 349.

been earlier supporters of Hitler.\textsuperscript{35} By the end of 1943, they had begun to fear that the old social order in Germany might be destroyed after the looming military defeat. In spite of this late awakening, some historians have set the date of the beginning of resistance to July 1944, ignoring the workers’ resistance that began much earlier and had, from the start, anti-fascist and anti-war objectives. For a long time, for example, the courageous attempt of the worker Georg Elser to assassinate Hitler in the fall of 1938 also remained untold.\textsuperscript{36}

The record clearly indicates that, both in their political programs and the underground work against Nazism, the small leftist groups proved to be an important alternative to the ineffective large organizations of the German labor movement, with their extensive political machinery. The latter had misled German workers into waiting in vain for orders that were never given to fight against Hitler and his accomplices. After the war, the SPD and KPD were reconstructed with the strong support of the four allied powers. Both parties, but particularly the KPD and the East German SED, ignored the sustained, consequential and heroic underground work of the small groups, despite the fact that their political achievement had been in excess of their size.\textsuperscript{37} If a political cost-benefit analysis could be assessed, one would see the efficiency of the small groups and, conversely, the damage done to the labor movement by the large organizations’ sense of superiority and neglect of clear warnings. The small groups proved the usefulness of non-dogmatic Marxist analysis and offered socialist alternatives. One could even say that they saved the German labor movement’s “soul,” refuting the arguments of Lord Robert Vansittart and Henry Morgenthau who claimed, during and after World War II, that all Germans supported Nazism in one or another way.

Slightly updated version of the essay that was published under the same name in: Mario Kessler, \textit{On Anti-Semitism and Socialism: Selected Essays} (Berlin: trafo verlag, 2005), pp. 117-34 (Reihe Hochschulschriften, Vol. 9).

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\textsuperscript{35} On the ideology of the conspirators against Hitler see the convincing study of Theodore S. Hamerow, \textit{On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair: German Resistance to Hitler} (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1997).

\textsuperscript{36} The West German historian Gerhard Ritter, himself an opponent to Hitler and imprisoned in 1944, bluntly declared Communists to have no place in the history of German resistance. See his book: \textit{Carl Goerdeler und die deutsche Widerstandsbewegung} (Munich, 1964), p. 109, 1\textsuperscript{st} ed. 1954, English translation: \textit{The German Resistance: Carl Goerdeler’s Struggle against Tyranny} (London, 1958). More moderate in his attitude towards communists was Hans Rothfels, the other doyen of West German historical scholarship after World War II. See his \textit{Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler} (Frankfurt-Main, 1969), revised edition of \textit{The German Opposition to Hitler} (Hinsdale, Illinois, 1948).