

Petrograd workers began to wane and in December they failed to follow their Moscow colleagues into an armed uprising. The strength provided by shop-floor leadership in the early months became a weakness when things began to go badly.

Professor Surh's book is impressive in its scholarship and level of presentation. It advances our knowledge in important areas, in particular in his detailed account of the independent nature of the workers' movement, its relationship with the revolutionaries and liberals, and the interaction between factory and occupational loyalties. He examines the complexities of the concept of spontaneity even more deeply than Professor Ascher. This is a long book, and does intersperse its original analysis with passages of well-known material. This may annoy the specialist reader, but will be helpful to others in providing the background and context. Perhaps the greatest virtue of the book is its honesty. At many points, Professor Surh takes pains to stress the limitations of his knowledge of what was going on in particular plants. There is still a great deal to be found out about the workers' movement in 1905.

John Morison

KURZ, THOMAS. "Blutmai". Sozialdemokraten und Kommunisten im Brennpunkt der Berliner Ereignisse von 1929. Mit einem Geleitwort von Heinrich August Winkler. Verlag J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., Berlin [etc.] 1988. 177 pp. Ill. Maps. DM 24.00.

May Day, Berlin, 1929. In order to curb the political violence between Nazis and Communists, the social democratic police chief Zörgiebel has banned all demonstrations, including the traditional May Day celebrations of the left-wing parties. The communist party, the KPD, attempts to defy the ban, and its efforts start several days of riots; the police use armoured cars and machine gun fire in working-class areas of the city. The final result: 33 dead, 198 wounded, 1,288 arrests. The police suffer no serious casualties.

Blutmai, as the fighting came to be called, came at a crucial time. The relative stability of the middle years of the Weimar Republic was ending, the slide into mass unemployment was just beginning. The KPD had followed the Comintern's behest and adopted its strategy of "class against class": the SPD was now enemy rather than reluctant ally. *Blutmai* both symbolized and furthered the mutual hostility of KPD and SPD at the end of the Weimar Republic. And the conflict between the two left-wing parties is usually seen as one major reason why they were unable to hinder the growth of Nazism before 1933.

Yet for all this, the events of the first week of May 1929 in Berlin have not been studied in their own right, nor has their broader political context been dissected. Kurz's book attempts both these objectives – the first more successfully than the second.

According to Kurz, the immediate blame for the events of May 1929 must be taken by the Berlin police. On April 30 groups of KPD members had attacked traffic police on point duty, on the morning of May 1st groups of demonstrators had cut tram cables and tried to block traffic in the middle of the city. At the same time however, KPD functionaries at party meetings before May Day had also routinely

called for caution and restraint in confrontations with the police. The KPD's revolutionary rhetoric was hot air – there was no plan for a putsch, nor even for an armed demonstration. Given their political intelligence system, the police would have known if such plans had existed. For this reason – and not because they lacked provocation – the police response was an over-reaction.

The police had been ordered to ensure that the authority of the state was upheld: no illegal gathering whatsoever was to be tolerated. Using largely newspaper and police reports, Kurz graphically describes how the police carried out these instructions. In the working-class area of Wedding, the streets were cleared by police charges. When inhabitants responded by throwing bottles and stones from the houses they were ordered to shut their windows – and the police opened fire when the order was not obeyed. The first victim was, ironically enough, a member of the SPD-oriented Reichsbanner, shot when he tried to reason with the police. Only after this was the first barricade built – a few paving stones piled across a street, a “barricade” less than a meter high.

The building of this imitation barricade triggered what can only be called a police riot. At least some of the police were now firing indiscriminately into the houses, an armoured car was brought in and its machine gun used. From that night until May 3rd in Wedding and also in Neuköln small groups of inhabitants threw barricades across streets, while the police responded with massive and casual use of their firearms. On May 3rd the two areas were cordoned off by the police. For two days dwellings were searched, houses fired on with machine guns, the streets lit up at night with searchlights. As the liberal press reported, the police appeared to believe they were at war – with the entire local population.

Kurz's straightforward account restores some historical reality to a mythologized event. It appears that the rioters were not usually members of the KPD or its supporting organizations. Even though – or perhaps actually because – they were largely young local “rowdies”, they had at least the tacit support of most of the inhabitants. Yet this is only a deduction from the narrative accounts and the bare statistics of the final arrests. Social historians such as Eve Rosenhaft have focused on the microcosm of social life, the pub and the street, to recreate the working-class milieu and its politics, and so deepen our understanding of the processes of political mobilization. While Kurz cites such works generously, his own analysis – although informative – remains methodologically naive. His account of the riots is vivid, but we are left not much wiser about the social processes involved.

Furthermore, the study makes little serious attempt to place the riots in their social structural context. It makes no use of the growing social history of Weimar Berlin. Kurz follows those writers (such as this reviewer) who have argued that during the Weimar Republic the working class underwent a process of social and spatial differentiation. Objectively, the long-term unemployed and the less skilled workers became more concentrated in areas such as Wedding; “subjectively” these areas became increasingly scapegoated and stereotyped as dens of social decay. While this is plausible enough, it is simply stated that this was happening during Weimar: there is no investigation of whether and how such processes actually affected Wedding and Neuköln.

The rest of the book examines the relationship between *Blutmai* and the two main parties of the left. As far as the SPD is concerned, Kurz concentrates on its role in

creating the riots. The immediate cause of the riot was the police themselves: their negative stereotypes of the areas, their use of inexperienced recruits, the right-wing views of many officers. However, this is not enough – after all leading positions were held by social democratic appointees, and the May Day celebrations were banned by a decision taken by leading SPD politicians. The Weimar SPD had developed a fatal combination of an obsession with state power and a hysterical anti-communism. Unlike the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the SPD *Vorwärts* described the riots as part of an attempted putsch directly organized by the KPD on instructions from Moscow. Furthermore, the paper was only too willing to characterize all the KPD's supporters – and even the entire population of Wedding and Neuköln – as “lumpenproletariat”, to be clearly distinguished from “organized and class conscious workers”.

When it was first promulgated, the KPD's claim that social democrats were “social fascists” had little credibility for many KPD members. *Blutmai* changed that in two ways. Firstly, it “proved” that social democrats would not only let the police loose on working-class areas, but would then justify this afterwards. Secondly, it marked a structural change in the party's support. Citing the historian Rosenberg, Kurz identifies two strands within the German Revolutionary tradition: the committed Marxists and the utopian anarcho-syndicalists. The former tended to be based in industries such as engineering with a long left-wing and trade-union tradition, the latter derived from social groups outside the formal institutions of the labour movement – the casual workers, the long-term unemployed. In the crisis after 1929 the second group grew in numbers and also became more central to the KPD's strategy. And this second group were anyway more predisposed to violent political action.

All of this is eminently sensible and carefully argued. However, it remains largely an analysis of formal politics and of publicly stated positions. While Kurz is clear that the parties contained tensions and conflicts, this understanding does not shape his actual analysis. Certainly, analysis of local level decision making and the role of ordinary members of political parties in Weimar Germany is hardly easy, but local studies of both the social democrats and the communists have examined conflicts within the parties at local level. Despite this, Kurz treats *Vorwärts* as representing the SPD, when in fact its editorial policy was on the right of the party press as a whole.

Equally, Kurz can perceptively comment that *Blutmai* was a media event in its own right. Far more so than the more serious street battles in Berlin ten years before, this was an event journalists reported as it was happening; their published accounts are part of the historical record. As we have seen, part of the importance of *Blutmai* was the differing public perceptions of it, and Kurz is aware of this. But again, this awareness remains undeveloped. Some accounts are accepted as true and quoted at length, others are mentioned but treated as mere stereotypes: there is no analysis of the different images and how they were created and distributed.

All in all this is a worthy but disappointing book. It provides a readable and reliable account of a crucial event of Weimar history. Unfortunately, it is no more than that.

James Wickham