Controlling Urban Space: Political Violence in Leipzig 1929–1933

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The paper I am going to present is part of my dissertation project, which is why I will very briefly outline what the dissertation as a whole is about and where the paper fits in. My dissertation is a comparative analysis of political violence and working-class solidarity in Leipzig (1929-1933) and Lyon (1934-1936). It begins with an observation about the strength and weakness of the respective working-class movements in Germany and France at large. Compared to the German organized (left-wing) working-class movement, which was at the time considered to be the strongest in Europe, the French one seemed weak and fragmented. Yet, when facing the political and economic crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the two movements reacted entirely different. While the (strong) German left utterly failed to face the threat from the right, and arguably even failed to seriously try to do so, the French left united in the Front Populaire and succeeded in 1936, most remarkably with a huge strike movement. My dissertation's aim is to understand this different reaction to a crisis and threat. For this purpose, I argue, it is necessary to look at micro-structures in local contexts, which is why my dissertation will be a comparative history of everyday politics. The first issue in this regard is to understand the nature of the political and economic crisis, and how the leftwing parties reacted to it. Most crucially, political violence was part and parcel of the crisis (in addition to the economic crisis, which I will not address here). The paper I will present now offers a very brief and partial analysis of this crisis. It will try to offer a way, or at least some starting points, how we can conceptualize the political violence in the streets of late Weimar Leipzig. Due to restrictions of time and space, I will focus on one particularly well documented and particularly telling example, that may serve as a starting point for further interpretations.

On 15 August 1931 two young Social Democrats went out to distribute leaflets, for which they had the necessary permission from the police.[1] They had chosen the so-called "Epa Ecke", Merseburger and Lützener Straße, in Leipzig Lindenau for their propaganda. The place was well known to be a gathering point for Communists. One could expect trouble. Indeed, it took not for long and a crowd of young Communists began molesting the two Social Democrats. According to Social Democratic witnesses, particularly women yelled at them and encouraged the Communist men to attack the Social Democrats. One Communist,

[1] See Staatsarchiv Leipzig, PP-St 98, also for the following quotations. In addition, see the reports in the Social Democratic newspaper Leipziger Volkszeitung (LVZ), 17.8.1931, and the following days.

Felix Lerch,[2] told the Social Democrats to run off. “The red Epa Ecke, that’s ours! We’ll chase you away, even if one of you remains here on the ground”, he said. First, the Social Democrats tried to avoid confrontations and retreated. But the Communists followed them. One Communist shouted that this was a Communist area and tried to snatch the leaflets away. “This is not a place where Social Democratic leaflets are to be distributed!” Soon first punches were exchanged. Communists attacked with brass knuckles and other weapons, while the two Social Democrats tried to defend themselves. The Social Democrat Bornemann tried to call the Reichsbanner, the Social Democratic paramilitary organization, with his whistle. However, it was too late. The Communist Max Kramer had stabbed his Comrade Moritz Waldmann, 20 years of age, in the lungs. Waldmann died soon thereafter. Social Democrats, with the help of the Reichsbanner, tried to capture Kramer, but Communist supporters intervened. Some Communists, in particular women, denunciated Social Democrats to the police and having them arrested, thus trying to confuse the police, the Social Democratic Leipziger Volkszeitung claimed. Still, the police was soon able to arrest Kramer, who received a harsh prison term for this murder.

The case is interesting in many respects. First, it is worthwhile to draw the attention to the fact that one of the few political murders in Leipzig during that period (in total, four people, one Communist, one Social Democrat, Waldmann, and two Nazis, were killed; in addition, several people were killed by the police) was a Social Democrat murdered by a Communist. This is in-itself indicative for the hatred that reigned between at least some Communists and Social Democrats.

For the conceptualization of political violence in Leipzig, two other issues are more relevant. First, I want to suggest, following the studies of Eve Rosenhaft[3] and Pamela Swett,[4] that the political violence can be understood as a battle for controlling urban territory. The issue here is not that Communists did actually control the street, or even that a street was mainly inhabited by Communists and thus formed a coherent Communist territory.[5] Rather, the issue is that Communists *claimed* the street was theirs, and used this claim as a legitimization for violence against rival Social Democrats. For Communists, this battle for the

[2] I have changed all names in the paper.
[3] Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? : the German Communists and political violence, 1929-1933* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York, 1983).
[4] Pamela E. Swett, *Neighbors and enemies : the culture of radicalism in Berlin, 1929-1933* (Cambridge, UK ; New York, 2004).
[5] See Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik : Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung* (Darmstadt, 1996)., who suggests that Rosenhaft makes such an argument, of which he is rather dismissive.

streets was an essential part of political life. In a similar way, Communists perceived street battles against Nazi demonstrations. These were labelled as "invasions" into working-class neighbourhoods, which "workers" had to defend. On the other side, it was a crucial part of Nazi tactics to "conquer" working-class districts, both through demonstrations and probably even more effectively through "storm pubs", that is Nazi bars or SA homes in the midst of "enemy territory" – streets usually claimed to be Communist.[6] This "conquering streets" could happen physically, as in the example I gave, but had also a symbolic dimension, when Communist (and, though to a lesser degree, Social Democrats) decorated houses and windows with red flags and posters, particularly during election campaigns. In May 1931, for example, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* (SAZ) reported about the Volkmarsdorfer Markt in eastern Leipzig, which had served as a gathering point for Social Democratic demonstrations over several years. In 1931, however, the Social Democrats chose to meet elsewhere, since, the SAZ claimed, that last year there had been so many Communist emblems that the SPD preferred to avoid the "proletarian agitation". Thus, a street was symbolically "conquered."[7]

Pamela Swett argued in her 2004 book *Neighbors and Enemies*, which took Berlin as a case study, at stake were not so much party politics, but rather local autonomy of working-class districts, which workers tried to defend when the state was about to break down and could no longer provide security and stability. Finding her argument that violence was about the control of streets stimulating, I disagree on her point about local autonomy. As the attack on the Social Democrats indicates, the struggle for controlling streets was deeply politicized. Neither the state nor "outside" enemies such as Nazis were the victims, but workers from the neighbourhood who belonged to an opposing party. At stake was thus which party could *politically* occupy streets.

For Communists, the street violence was an essential part of political practises, and the militant rhetoric of its newspaper, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* (SAZ), indicates that it was indeed part of official politics. For Social Democrats, things looked differently. When one reads the LVZ, one wonders how naïve the Social Democrats must have been to distribute leaflets in such a Communist area. Could they seriously believe that this would not be regarded as a massive provocation, that it would not cause trouble? The *Leipziger*

[6] See Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde : Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen SA*, Industrielle Welt Bd. 63 (Köln, 2002)., and Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann, *Nationalsozialismus und Arbeitermilieus : der nationalsozialistische Angriff auf die proletarischen Wohnquartiere und die Reaktion in den sozialistischen Vereinen*, Reihe Politik- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte Bd. 47 (Bonn, 1998)., on this issue.
[7] SAZ, 27.5.1931.

Volkszeitung (LVZ) gives the impression that the two young activists wanted to perform an entirely normal and, as the LVZ emphasized, legal political practise. There is no indication that the Social Democrats had reflected about the specificity of the location. The territorial aspects only come into play once the Communists enter the stage. They declared, as the LVZ paraphrased them, that they would defend their "beat" [*Revier*], a term usually referring to the territory which an animal regards as his ground. Officially, Social Democrats could not take the battle for the streets as serious politics. Calling Communist leaders "chiefs" [*Häuptinge*], they indicated that they regarded the violent confrontations between Nazis and "Kozis" as childish games. Often, it was mere "*Rowdytum*". It mattered indeed little, who acted violently. Under the image of a smashed window, the LVZ wrote: "You can't see whether this window was smashed by a Nazi or a Communist." Thus, Social Democrats both equated Nazis and Communists, and disregarded their actions as childish but not as political. For them, politics happened in the city council or other parliaments.[8]

Yet, it would be naïve for the historian to think that Social Democrats were not aware of the location of their propaganda. Indeed, a police officer had warned them to avoid the area. Foreseeing troubles, the two leaflet distributes were protected by thirty members of the Reichsbanner from the very beginning, who could, however, not prevent the murder – a fact that becomes clear only from the police files. Thus, even though Social Democrats officially wished to stay absent from the violence raging in Leipzig's streets, they unwillingly participated in the battle for controlling them. From a Communist perspective, the Social Democrats making propaganda in "their" territory was indeed comparable to a Nazi demonstration through a working-class district. Of course, the Social Democratic "invasion" was much less aggressive, as a Nazi march in colons protected by the police would have been. In fact, it might have been this passivity for which Waldmann had to pay with his life. Compared with Nazi invasions, there is another important difference. When Nazis entered working-class neighbourhoods with a strong Communist presence, they clearly entered enemy territory, and usually had to face stiff Communist resistance. It was much less clear with regard to the Social Democrats, who agitated among the working-class and thus among their traditional constituency. For them, the violent confrontation must have been much more of a shock than for Nazis. Thus, the fragmentation of the left made working-class territory and the neighbourhoods, indeed one's immediate vicinity, not only an embattled territory, but a territory whose very status was often unclear. This uncertainty about the "political colour" (Social Democratic Black Red Gold, or the Communist Red Star) of an area, which could

[8] Communists, in turn, used the city council merely for propaganda reasons. For them, politics happened in the streets.

easily result in violence, shattered the working-class community perhaps more profoundly than attacks from the outside, such as from the Nazis, against whom both Social Democrats and Communists at time collaborated (though without consent from the party leaderships).

Yet, the Social Democratic propaganda was not only challenging the political order of the Epa Corner. At the same time, it was a manifestation of two contradicting ways perceiving and doing politics. While they *de facto* challenged Communists' control over territory, they still attempted to conduct politics on a different level that focused on information and propaganda rather than on (violent) street politics. They questioned the very idea of the fight for the street and tried to resist it; Max Kramer, however, proved that this was impossible. Thus, the fragmentation of the left resulted not only a politically embattled working-class neighbourhoods, but in an uncertainty about the very form of politics itself.

By way of conclusion, I wish to summarize some of the issues raised in this paper. First, I wand to suggest that political violence can be understood as a battle for controlling urban territory. Although I have mostly focused on an example that concerned Social Democrats and Communists, most confrontations occurred between Nazis, Communists and the police. It is crucial to stress that this was a deeply politicized battle. For those involved in the violence, mostly young men from KPD and, to a lesser degree, the SPD, violence could easily become an everyday experience. What is more crucial is, however, the relation between SPD and KPD. As I have argued, both took a significantly different position on street politics. Social Democrats got, however, trapped, as they disregarded street violence as mere hooliganism [Rowdytum], and yet had to take it into account. Thus, they were participating in the struggle for controlling urban territory, and at the same time fighting this very struggle. For an understanding of the left's failure to mobilize against the Nazis, which is at the core of my dissertation, this doubled conflict between the two parties of the left – first about controlling the streets, then about the form of politics itself – is most crucial. Occasional collaborations against the Nazis could hardly overcome these conflicts.