

FISCHER, CONAN. *The German Communists and the Rise of Nazism*. Macmillan, Basingstoke [etc.] 1991. xiv, 285 pp. £ 40.00.

Conan Fischer is a man with a mission. In this book, as in his previous study of the SA, he is determined to prove that many German workers supported Nazism. Surely this is tilting at windmills? Surely it's obvious that at least some Nazis were workers, and furthermore, how could anybody ever have believed otherwise?

Oddly enough, they did. From the first studies of voting in the Weimar Republic onwards it has been a consistent finding that the NSDAP vote came disproportionately from the lower middle class. From this starting point, a combination of simplistic Marxist categories and bad percentage arithmetic has allowed Nazism to be described as a "lower middle class movement" *without any significant working class support*. Political parties become isomorphic with social classes.

Such an argument is fallacious. Even if the lower middle class were disproportionately represented within the NSDAP, that still leaves a lot of Nazi workers around. Indeed, as Fischer points out, it is quite conceivable that by early 1933 the NSDAP had, in absolute terms, more working class members than had the German communist party (KPD). Despite a minor mistake in his own arithmetic calculations (pointed out by Carsten's recent review in the "Times Higher Educational Supplement"), Fischer's summary of recent research makes this simple point well.

Confronted by such overall statistics, one way to rescue the Nazism-as-lower-middle-class-movement thesis is to argue that the working class NSDAP supporters were different, perhaps not even "real workers" after all. Fischer's approach is precisely the opposite. He starts from the assumption that the NSDAP and the KPD were partly recruiting from the same constituency. Furthermore, so he argues, the KPD itself believed this.

It is here that the book does have some claim to originality. Fischer's sources are hardly novel: the standard police reports and those KPD internal documents which rapidly found their way into the police files. However, Fischer reads these as rational accounts of the situation as seen by the KPD, showing how the party attempted to deal with its perceived need to gain support from those who currently supported the right wing of German politics.

Early chapters of the book examine the early history of the KPD in Weimar Germany. Fischer's particular slant within this frequently told tale is that from the beginning the KPD attempted to recruit support from those who opposed the Republic from the right. In 1923 the French occupied the Ruhr; popular nationalist resistance grew; at a Comintern meeting Karl Radek made his famous "Schlageter speech" praising an ex-Freikorps member executed by the French for sabotage. Far from being simply an example of the Comintern imposing a national revolutionary line on an unwilling KPD, Fischer argues that to some extent this attempted rapprochement with the radical right coincided with a growing sentiment within the KPD's own ranks. Above all it connected to the party's desire to win over nationalists to its side. Such national bolshevist ideas were hardly novel, for Fischer is able to document they had existed within and around the party from 1918 onwards.

These early chapters of the book rely almost entirely on existing literature. Their purpose is to argue that the opening to the right had always been part of the KPD's political repertoire. While Fischer certainly has a point here, the mutual interest of

left and right epitomised by “national bolshevism” has been documented at least since Schuddekopf’s *Linke Leute von rechts* of over thirty years ago. The reader is therefore entitled to a rather more sophisticated argument than merely a cry of horror that KPD leaders could on occasion produce anti-Semitic slogans (even if they were Jewish themselves). Instead, chapters are remarkable for the extent to which they do not begin to seriously analyse the interweaving of nationalist and socialist ideologies and politics in the early years of Weimar. They cheerfully conflate as examples of “nationalism” such diverse phenomena as the occasional fraternisation between Freikorps members with the workers’ militia they were fighting in the Ruhr rising and the working class support for resistance against the Poles in Silesia. Any serious analysis of working class nationalism would surely have to tackle such issues as ethnic stratification in areas like Silesia, the legacy of the war for ordinary soldiers, etc.

At another level, it is worth considering not the similarities but the differences between the crises of 1918 to 1923 and of the final years of the Weimar Republic. Rather than focusing on political ideas and slogans per se, one should look at the organisations articulating them and the context in which they did so. Up until 1923 there was still some internal democracy within the KPD, so that inside the party different ideas were articulated by distinct groups of people. Simultaneously, the radical right was not one clearly defined political party, but a series of shifting groups and organisations. Given the overall geopolitical situation of Germany in the period, it is hardly surprising to find some convergence and mutual interest between such apparently opposed tendencies as nationalist revolutionaries and international socialists. Yet the very fluidity of the situation means that such incidents cannot be treated as a unitary political position which was itself a direct precursor of what Fischer claims to find in the final years of the Republic.

From 1929 onwards the situation changed. Faced with the rise of the NSDAP the KPD continued to attempt to win over those Nazi supporters whom it regarded as part of its natural constituency. It is here that Fischer does make good use of his sources. He shows how the notorious physical violence between the two parties was accompanied by continual attempts to persuade Nazi supporters that their true home was the KPD. This meant that the KPD could often use the language of “national liberation” to portray itself as the genuine nationalist party; it meant that the KPD and the NSDAP competed in the neighbourhoods for the support of the unemployed, it meant that the KPD and the NSDAP competed in the workplaces for the support of employees who were outside the “free” (i.e. pro-SPD) trade unions.

The key tactic here was the “United Front From Below”. The term was initially used by the KPD to describe its relationship to supporters of the SPD and the “reformist” trades unions. The KPD attempted to develop common actions with these workers, while refusing to have any relationship with their leaders – the whole point of the tactic was to “expose” them and mobilise their supporters against them. Since the KPD believed that the NSDAP had considerable working class support, it logically attempted to use the same tactic against the Nazis. Individual Nazis were to be won over by common action which would expose Nazi leadership as not truly radical, not truly nationalist.

According to Fischer, this was playing with fire. It meant competing with the

Nazis in their own terms on grounds on which they were stronger. With no baggage of proletarian internationalism, the Nazis could always be more nationalist than the Communists. The NSDAP was stronger in less obvious ways too. For example, the KPD's attempt to win over the unemployed through a mixture of agitation and radical social work (soup kitchens etc.) could not match the well funded similar activities of the NSDAP. The United Front From Below created "a witches' brew" that would soon destroy the KPD itself.

This argument is important. However, the very method used to arrive at it involves its own problems. It is all very well to read the KPD's own documents as rational accounts, but this ignores that they were produced in a party in which meaningful internal debate had ceased years before. Certainly, Fischer notes that even in the early 1930s there were tensions within the KPD. For example, many members apparently felt that proletarian internationalism was being dangerously diluted by attempting to win over Nazis instead of merely brawling with them. Nonetheless, he remains rather too content to take his sources as reflecting the view of "the KPD", without any examination of who in the KPD in fact produced them.

This leads to another point. By 1930 Bolshevisation had instrumentalised communist political language, so KPD propaganda served an often changing party "line". Given that it changed its views often, and could only express them through an increasingly tortuous Marxist vocabulary, the KPD must have appeared overtly manipulative to many of its potential supporters. Certainly one suspects that the arguments of the Nazis must have appeared consistent, logical and even honest in comparison.

Such issues are not addressed explicitly by Fischer. His contribution is not to show that some workers supported the NSDAP, for this is already well established. What he does do is to investigate how the KPD saw this situation, and hence he is able to produce a plausible account of the KPD's strategy towards the Nazis in the crucial final years of the Weimar Republic. To that extent, and despite some irritating minor errors, he has done more than tilt at windmills.

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