

The Political Odyssey of Arthur Rosenberg, Germany's Forgotten Marxist

Arthur Rosenberg was a leading figure in Germany's Communist movement and a brilliant Marxist historian. Rosenberg's penetrating analysis of far-right movements, produced in exile after the Nazis seized power, is as relevant as ever today.

The KPD's headquarters from 1926 to 1933. (Wikimedia Commons)
Arthur Rosenberg was one of the most remarkable Marxist historians of the twentieth century, yet he remains [largely unknown in the English-speaking world](#). Rosenberg began his intellectual career as a historian of the ancient world before he was radicalized by the experience of World War One and became an activist on Germany's radical left, joining the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and representing the party in the Reichstag.

After playing a significant role in the KPD leadership for much of the 1920s, Rosenberg left the party but retained his Marxist convictions, which he now brought to bear on his work as a historian. Rosenberg wrote important books on modern German history and composed a major analysis of fascism that still stands out for its prescience almost ninety years later. Although he died in relative obscurity as an impoverished exile from Nazism in the United States, Rosenberg left behind a [brilliant intellectual legacy](#) that can still inform the work of socialists today.

Rosenberg's Road to Socialism

Rosenberg was born in Berlin on December 19, 1889 to a middle-class Jewish family. In a retrospective that he wrote as part of his school-leaving exam, he described the “unforgettable impression” that Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome* had made on him as a young school pupil. Mommsen's scholarship was prodigious, he wrote in a

lively style, and he tackled Roman history in a modernist way. No doubt, Rosenberg's admiration for the great classical scholar stemmed from all of these features, not least the last of them, since his own work as an ancient historian was unashamedly modernist in its conception of antiquity, opposed to any notion that the societies of the ancient world knew neither capital nor capitalists. His respect for Mommsen may also have been influenced by another factor: in the 1880s, during what came to be called the *Antisemitismusstreit*, the historian actively opposed Heinrich von Treitschke's attempts to instill antisemitism even further into German academic life.

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During the First World War, Rosenberg was drafted into the public relations wing of the German military apparatus. As soon as that was dissolved in November 1918, he joined the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). The USPD had been founded in April 1917 as a left splinter from the mainstream, pro-war Social Democrats, and it included Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacus League as a current. It may have been Marx's biographer, the historian Franz Mehring, who introduced Rosenberg to Marxism; however, when the Spartacists, including Mehring, deserted the USPD to form the Communist Party at the end of 1918, Rosenberg stayed on in the former.

In the workers' and soldiers' councils that had emerged in their thousands throughout Germany, Rosenberg would have seen the organs of a *direct* democracy, a "real self-government of the masses." In his penultimate work, *A History of the German Republic* (1935), Rosenberg referred to the USPD leader Kurt Eisner, who briefly led a Bavarian republic after the war, as "the only statesman of any value to emerge from November 1918." He went on to describe Eisner as an active supporter of the "direct democracy founded on the councils." "The workers' councils will be the parliament of all those engaged in manual labor, and even of the intellectuals," Eisner told the Congress of Bavarian Workers' Councils in December 1918. In *A History of the German Republic*, written with the hindsight of a tragic and fast-moving decade, Rosenberg clarified the importance of these political

organs: “No single party in the German Revolution was capable of exercising a despotic dictatorship over the councils.”

A right-wing nationalist assassinated Eisner in February 1919. By the end of 1920, the majority of USPD delegates had voted to join the KPD at a convention in Halle, unifying in a mood of optimism with the hope of creating a mass organization of the revolutionary left. Yet no sooner had the new united party been formed than it was riven by internal conflict, due to radically differing assessments of whether German workers were in a mood for revolution.

The Hungarian Communist leader Béla Kun developed his theory of the revolutionary offensive (which was supposed to galvanize workers into action) in a desperate attempt to bridge the gap between a situation that was meant to be “objectively” revolutionary but “subjectively” less so. The Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) encouraged these delusions.

Failed KPD attempts to initiate general strikes throughout the country in March 1921 led the demoted party leader Paul Levi to state publicly: “The ECCI bears at least part of the blame for this catastrophe.” Rosenberg later wrote that the leftists in the party, who were especially strong in the Berlin-Brandenburg region, lacked the courage to blame the Comintern openly for the vacillations that dominated the party’s history throughout the fateful years of the 1920s. Rosenberg himself was an unwavering part of this ultra-left tendency from 1921 to his final departure from the KPD in 1927.

The German Communist Left

In the months following the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March 1921, it was at Rosenberg’s home that representatives of the Berlin left met with supporters of the Workers’ Opposition current, which had opposed the Bolshevik leadership with a call to empower the trade unions. All of those present would have known about worrying political developments in the Soviet Union from the reports conveyed by Alexander Shlyapnikov.

On domestic issues, the German ultra-lefts held positions that struck Bolsheviks like Leon Trotsky in 1921 as “unrestrained revolutionary subjectivism.” When nationalist ex-army officers murdered the German foreign minister Walther Rathenau in the middle of 1922, the

KPD made its first serious attempt to work together with other working-class parties, but Rosenberg described the ensuing Rathenau campaign as one encouraging “reformist illusions.” He also rejected the “workers’ government” slogan put forward by the Comintern as an ill-fated substitute for an actual workers’ revolution based, as he wanted it to be, on the factory councils.

In 1923, Rosenberg believed that Germany had “objectively” never been closer to a socialist revolution than it was in the summer of that year. He worried that unless the German Communists intervened decisively to win workers over, mass disillusionment with the policies of the postwar SPD-led governments would lead to a sharp swing to the right, toward forces like Adolf Hitler’s recently emerged Nazi Party. In June 1923, Rosenberg wrote that of the twelve million wage earners in Germany, only one million were with the SPD, and that it was incumbent on the Communists to “conquer” the remaining eleven million.

Throughout these years, Rosenberg ruled out any joint work between the Communists and the Social Democrats, describing the SPD as a “party of despair” and “politically dead.” His Italian biographer, [Lorenzo Riberi](#), writes that the council idea, synonymous with mass democracy, continued to be Rosenberg’s political ideal at this time. As for the KPD, he saw it as the only German party committed to a complete socialization of the economy.

In the elections of May 1924, the KPD polled 3.7 million votes, 12.6 percent of the total, making it the fourth-biggest party. But 1924 was also the year when the Comintern allowed the ultra-left faction to take control of the KPD, in exchange for what Rosenberg would later ruefully characterize as their “compromise” with the ECCI — namely, their refusal to publicly criticize either the Comintern or developments in the USSR itself, even though they were fully aware of the latter.

Rosenberg’s Break With the KPD

By the early part of 1926, the KPD’s left group had disintegrated. The election of Paul von Hindenburg, a conservative nationalist, as Germany’s president in April 1925, combined with KPD leader Ruth Fischer’s appeal to the Social Democrats for a “Red Front,” triggered

bitter divisions among the Communists that would lead eventually to Rosenberg's own resignation from the party.

By June 1925, Fischer had arranged for Rosenberg and others to be removed from the Berlin district leadership. At the party's congress in July that year, she openly accused them of plans to form an international platform of ultra-lefts opposed to the Comintern.

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The Soviet representative Grigory Zinoviev weighed in with his own attack, describing Rosenberg and his group, less accurately, as a “caricature of Bolshevism.” However, back in Moscow, Zinoviev blamed not only Rosenberg and his associates Karl Korsch and Werner Scholem for the declining influence of the KPD, but their factional opponents Fischer and Arkadi Maslow as well. By the end of 1925, the Comintern had replaced Fischer with Ernst Thälmann as party leader. Thälmann's appointment signified a tighter subordination of the party to Moscow.

A major purge led to a series of expulsions of prominent figures (Korsch, Maslow, Fischer, Scholem, and Hugo Urbahns) from the party. Rosenberg himself remained unscathed and refused to sign the “Letter of the 700” in September 1926, a declaration of solidarity with Zinoviev and the Leningrad Opposition against Stalin in the Bolshevik factional struggle, which also protested the state of siege inside the German party. However, by the winter of 1926–27, Rosenberg had become openly critical of Soviet interference in the affairs of the KPD.

At the KPD's Eleventh Congress in March 1927, he pointed out that the party was still weak in the factories and the unions, arguing that its “pseudoradical phraseology” was simply a hindrance to any sustained work. What worried Rosenberg most was the party's isolation and its failure to support workers in concrete ways against the massive pressures that were being inflicted on them by the ongoing rationalization of German industry.

Chiang Kai-shek's bloody coup of April 12, 1927 against his erstwhile Communist allies in China was the final straw — Stalin had

encouraged the Chinese Communists to maintain their pact with Chiang Kai-shek despite warning signs until it ended in disaster. For Rosenberg, this development impelled him to resign from the KPD as well as its parliamentary faction.

In a letter to the KPD's Central Committee, he explained that he now considered the further existence of the Comintern to be meaningless, and referred to the Comintern's "repeated tactical vacillations, mistakes and defeats," ruling out any prospect of serious reform of that organization. In the Reichstag, he now sat as a "socialist without a party."

Predictably, Rosenberg was attacked from all sides — not least by the KPD splinter group led by Hugo Urbahns, the Leninbund, which now included his close friend Werner Scholem as well as Ruth Fischer. His only defender was Carl von Ossietzky, the fearless critic of German militarism, who became editor of *Die Weltbühne*, a left-wing, anti-militarist magazine, around this time.

Into Exile

Rosenberg now found himself doubly ostracized, by a deeply conservative academic establishment and by the Communists. He went back to lecturing at Berlin University, teaching courses on historical materialism. Antisemitism was widespread in German academic circles, among both students and lecturers, and there was no way he was ever going to get a regular appointment — although the new Prussian minister of education, the SPD's Adolf Grimme, forced the faculty to make him an "extraordinary professor" in March 1930, having been impressed by the success of Rosenberg's book, *Imperial Germany: The Birth of the German Republic, 1871–1918*.

In the late 1920s, Rosenberg was part of an informal circle that met at Karl Korsch's house. They described themselves as "libertarian socialists," and included figures such as the novelist Alfred Döblin, Bertolt Brecht, Karl Liebknecht's older brother Theodor, as well as the Indian Marxist M. N. Roy and the photographer Jenö Friedmann — later better known as Robert Capa.

Rosenberg's two major works of this period (1927–33) were *The Birth of the German Republic, 1871–1918* (1928) and [*A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five-Year Plan*](#) (1932). The

political scientist Franz Neumann later observed that the final years of Weimar were a period of despair for many German intellectuals, which may explain why Rosenberg himself largely ceased to write articles and essays in those years.

When the Nazis took power, Rosenberg fled to Zurich at the end of March 1933 and then to Britain at the end of September. Between 1933 and 1936, translations of his history of Bolshevism appeared in Britain, Norway, and France, as well as Florence, Warsaw, and even the kibbutz of Merhavia in Palestine.

In London, Rosenberg tried to meet with the left-wing intellectuals Harold Laski and R. H. Tawney to see if a job could be found for him at the London School of Economics. He told the Academic Assistance Council in Britain that he was willing to teach anywhere in the British Empire. In February 1934, the University of Liverpool informed the council it could take him on for a year in its history department.

An Anatomy of Fascism

Rosenberg's first published work in exile, [*Fascism as a Mass-Movement*](#) (1934), was also the first comparative essay on fascism to have appeared until then. This remarkable essay addressed a demoralized left that had failed to establish any critical understanding of what it was up against. It started by rejecting a number of ideas that were probably widespread by the early 1930s — that fascism defied explanation; that it was essentially driven by, or an emanation of, the petty bourgeoisie, and so on.

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For his part, Rosenberg emphasized the congenital weakness of liberalism throughout Europe in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. A new kind of capitalism had emerged at that time, based on giant concentrated enterprises that abandoned English notions of free trade in favor of protectionism, a strong state that would buttress the interests of big business, and what Rosenberg called a “new authoritarian conservatism” more broadly.

The challenge for capital was how to retain power in an age of mass politics. The lowest common denominator of the various strategies

that emerged across continental Europe was the discrediting of liberal ideas. The new conservatism identified by Rosenberg spawned a whole welter of ideologies that rejected the idea of equality in favor of traditional forms of hierarchy and racial and ethnic oppression. This was a form of conservatism that was fundamentally unreconciled to democracy but forced to adapt to its gradual extension through a controlled mobilization of the masses. In its continental version, it was a conservatism that exalted the power and authority of the state above everything else.

Rosenberg seemed to suggest that racism (he spoke of “racial frenzy”) was integral to the kind of demagogic nationalism that began to mobilize masses by targeting minorities (within Europe, Jews). It was a central part of his argument that fascism contained nothing especially new: it simply welded together a pastiche of these late-nineteenth-century ideological currents and was in that sense only the most modern form of the reactionary, anti-liberal mass movements that had emerged in Europe over the previous fifty years.

What was new and distinctive about fascism was the calculated use of storm troopers as a means either of containing the advance of democracy (as in Germany after 1918), or of pushing back against a threatened working-class insurgency (as in Italy). Rosenberg stressed how little the existing state authorities (including the courts) had done to curb the violent activities of these armed right-wing bands.

Authoritarian Ideology

The key point to take away from Rosenberg’s short book was that fascism only succeeds as a mass movement; therefore, from the standpoint of the Left, it was crucial to understand the factors that contributed to creating and stabilizing such a mass base. This is a lesson that has lost none of its relevance for us today, whether one looks at the United States under Donald Trump or India under Narendra Modi. The two later sections of the essay dealt in detail with the respective situations of Italy and Germany, but it was the early pages that mapped out Rosenberg’s conception of why fascism arose in the first place, and what enabled its emergence and success in the Europe of the 1920s and ’30s.

For Rosenberg, the major role was played by “ideology” — above all,

the use of nationalism as a tool for mobilizing the masses to support movements that were manifestly opposed to their economic and political interests. The only other Marxist analysis that came anywhere close to the penetration of Rosenberg's essay was Wilhelm Reich's original draft of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, published a year before in September 1933. The difference between them was that Reich, as a psychoanalyst, was more directly concerned with the "biopsychological" grounding for the sort of ideas that Rosenberg considered vital to fascist politics.

Reich saw the authoritarian/patriarchal family as the theater of fascism's earliest rehearsals, in the sense that the ideological preparation for fascist politics essentially occurred there, in the family. Authoritarian ideology, inculcated in repressed-repressive patriarchal families, provided what he called the "groundwork for the reception of National Socialist propaganda." These are not dimensions of analysis that Rosenberg went into, since his perspective was purely historical, and focused on politics more than culture. In one respect at least, however, Reich's book did express Marx's insight more lucidly than Rosenberg did, through his conception of ideology as a material force (the very title of Reich's first chapter). This is a notion that is presupposed in the importance Rosenberg himself ascribed to cultural pathologies, such as subservience to authority and genuflections before nationalism. So many countries in the world today display both features in abundance.

Bolshevism and the Comintern

In Rosenberg's *A History of Bolshevism*, the last four chapters present what is arguably our earliest history of the Russian Revolution between the years 1921 and 1932. It is a document of exceptional value, both because Rosenberg was a fine historian and because these chapters were written by a European socialist who had witnessed the vicissitudes of the German revolution at close quarters.

Rosenberg estimated that of 1.2 million Bolshevik party members at the start of 1927, roughly half were state employees and party bureaucrats ("*Angestellte und Apparateleute*"). Although many of them were former workers, those officials dominated the masses through the machinery of the party and the state and were thus, both

psychologically and in practice, no longer part of the working class. Moreover, it was estimated at the time that only a tenth of those at the party's leadership levels were former factory workers.

Rosenberg argued that in this way, "a state-capitalist ruling apparatus established its independence vis-à-vis the producing strata." Writing in 1932, what he saw in the Soviet Union was an "absolutism of dogma" that banned any independent, critical discussion of Marxism or socialism. Stalin's concept of "Socialism in One Country" sanctified the myth that a purely national Russian socialism was possible and in fact no different from socialism in its true Marxist sense.

Although he was never a Trotskyist, Rosenberg's sympathy for Leon Trotsky is clear in these final pages. He wrote the following, for example, when discussing Trotsky's expulsion from the USSR in 1929 to exile in Turkey: "Here in the last few years he has shown tremendous ability as a writer. He struggles implacably against the theory of Socialism in One Country."

Rosenberg always reserved his sharpest criticisms for the disastrous role that he considered the Comintern to have played. When Victor Serge met him in the Berlin offices of *Die Rote Fahne* back in 1923, Rosenberg asked him: "Do you really think the Russians want a revolution in Germany?" Serge was shocked to discover that Rosenberg himself was doubtful on that score. In *A History of Bolshevism*, he argued that in the cases of Germany (1923) and China (1927) alike, the Comintern never seriously believed that an independent workers' revolution was possible, and therefore "paralyzed" the activity of the German and Chinese Communist parties.

Interestingly, in sharp contrast to the positions he had taken throughout the early 1920s, Rosenberg now rued the fact that the German Communists had failed to work together with the Social Democrats in a transparent way, thanks to the direction they had received from the Comintern. At any rate, it seemed clear to him that the Comintern's positions were always driven by sudden sharp changes of policy in the USSR itself, and had little to do with the international situation.

The sudden proclamation of a "Third Period" by the Comintern

leadership in the summer of 1928, and the ensuing ban on joint work with other non-Communist sections of the Left, left the KPD more dependent than ever on a recruitment base among the unemployed in Germany. Rosenberg saw unemployed workers as a politically unstable element capable of moving from the far left to the far right almost overnight. He argued that it was a catastrophe for the KPD to have almost no base among organized workers — that is, those still in active employment.

Last Years

In February 1937, the Nazis stripped Rosenberg's entire family of their German citizenship. With no further prospect of a job in the UK, he and his family left for the United States in October 1937, on the eve of the massive groundswell of refugees from Central Europe that began in 1938. The great social historian Hans Rosenberg, himself a refugee, claimed that American antisemitism reached a crescendo in the Depression years of the 1930s. And of course, the more rabid Nazism became, the more German immigrants to the United States encountered feelings of hostility, not least when the war broke out. "The rise of fascism in interwar Europe may never be repeated in that exact form, but study of that experience will remain as long as the danger of right-wing authoritarianism has not been exorcised."

It was virtually impossible for Rosenberg to find a proper university position, so he settled for the post of tutor at Brooklyn College, teaching history with as much passion as he had in Berlin. Many of his students were of Irish, Italian, and East European descent. Hans Rosenberg, who also taught there briefly, recalls in his own memoirs that during the dire years of the Depression, many of those students "still proudly called themselves Marxists or Leninists, Stalinists, Trotskyists or socialists of one kind or another."

Among the last few references we have is of a talk Rosenberg gave to a summer school organized by Avukah, the Jewish student organization, in 1941. Figures like Zellig Harris, Seymour Melman, and Noam Chomsky would all have encountered him there.

According to Robert Barsky, Rosenberg "served as a kind of intellectual leader" for the young American Jews who gravitated to Avukah as a left-wing, anti-fascist network — albeit one that

contributed to Zionist mythology with its belief that Jewish immigration to Palestine would help “liberate” the Arab masses. Arthur Rosenberg died in New York on February 7, 1943, having lived for most of his US stay in a small house in Brooklyn, at 1316 East 26th Street. There is now abundant literature on the left-wing intellectuals who sought refuge from Nazi Germany in the United States, whether they returned to one of the two German states after the war (Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer), or carried on working at American universities (Herbert Marcuse), or remained outside US academic life altogether (Paul Mattick Sr). However, Rosenberg remains an unjustly neglected figure — perhaps reflecting a greater scholarly interest in those whose work concentrated on philosophical or aesthetic questions, rather than history and political analysis.

Rosenberg’s pioneering essay on fascism is of particular relevance today. His points about the ideological common ground between fascist movements and wider forms of authoritarian conservatism, and the collusive relationship between far-right street gangs and the state security forces, will not be lost on observers of the contemporary political scene. The rise of fascism in interwar Europe may never be repeated in that exact form, but study of that experience will remain as long as the danger of right-wing authoritarianism has not been exorcised — and Arthur Rosenberg will be one of our most valuable guides.