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HST 4300: Nazi Germany

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Essay

General Strike in Mössingen, Germany on January 31, 1933

A little town offers resistance to fascism- anti-fascist blessing or communist curse?

1. Introduction

“Da ist nirgends nichts gewesen außer hier”¹ is a quotation by an inhabitant of Mössingen which refers to the general strike organized by the KPD (German communist party) in a little German town, located at the foot of the Swabian Alps in the region of Baden-Württemberg, on January 31, 1933. Even if the general strike was supposed to take place all over Germany, the event in Mössingen can be seen as the only attempt to thwart Hitler’s takeover one day after his appointment as chancellor of the Reich. On that day, numerous workers of the industrial town Mössingen followed the Communist appeal to demonstrate against fascism by downing their tools and going on strike. The demonstration, which was already planned on January 30, 1933 by several workers’ associations in the local sports hall in Mössingen, began in the morning of January 31 and was smashed by the police in the late afternoon.² The consequences for most of the strikers were terms of imprisonment of several months on the ground of “breach of the peace” or “treason”.

The general strike of 1933 in Mössingen is a delicate topic in the region and the question if this event, which tried to stop the rise of the Nazi regime, can be seen as a positive act of resistance against fascism or if it should be considered as an attempt of a communist

¹ Althaus, Hans-Joachim et al. *Da ist nirgends nichts gewesen außer hier*, Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1982, 7.

English translation of the citation: “there has been nothing nowhere except here”

² Berner, Hermann, “Blumenstadt Mössingen,” *Stadt Mössingen*, Apr 2014, <http://www.moessingen.de/177>

revolution, remains controversial. The following investigations should find an answer to this question as well as reasons for the fact that some people in Mössingen still keep silent about the general strike and that it took nearly 35 years to honor the attempt of the Swabian workers to stop the rise of the Nazi regime.

2. The general strike in Mössingen

2.1 Preparations

The general strike in Mössingen, which took place on January 31, 1933, was already prepared the day before. After the announcement in the radio on January 30, 1933 that president Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as new chancellor of the German Reich, the German Communist Party (KPD) planned a general strike all over Germany for the next day. A few hours later, a courier from Reutlingen informed the members of the KPD in Mössingen about the plan to strike the next day, and the president of the Communists in Mössingen, Martin Maier, decided to organize a public meeting for all workers' associations in the local sports hall, the *Langgass-Turnhalle*. Several hundreds of people followed the proclamation of the KPD and came to the local sports hall in order to discuss the procedure for the next day. Among them were not only Communists, but also social democrats and neutrals that wanted to participate in the Anti-fascist movement.³ One of the leading figures of the KPD in Mössingen, Jakob Stotz, explained the purpose of the general strike like this: "The next day, there has to be a general strike against the Hitler government, which means a great danger for the working class concerning domestic and foreign policy"⁴. Consequently, the people gathered in the sports hall decided to meet again the next day at noon in front of the *Langgass-Turnhalle* to start the protests in Mössingen. At this point, the members of the KPD in Mössingen assumed that a German-wide strike of workers will take place the next day and they had no idea that their little town will be the only community going on strike in the Reich.

³ Althaus et al., *Da ist nirgends nichts gewesen außer hier*, 151.

⁴ *ibid.*

After the meeting in the sports hall in Mössingen, the atmosphere in the town was tensed and the potential strikers traversed the streets while whistling and playing drums. Additionally, in the night of January 31, 1933, the pamphlets from the Communist office in Stuttgart also arrived in Mössingen and called for mass protest against fascism (image1). At the same time, the painter Jakob Textor created the banner “Heraus zum Massenstreik”⁵ and in the morning, the vice president of the KPD in Reutlingen, Fritz Wandel, arrived in the little Swabian town to support the strikers who already gathered in front of the local sports hall. After some statements made by Communist members and members of the gymnastics club of Mössingen like Martin Maier and Jakob Stotz, the about 200 strikers decided to start their march towards the local textile factory *Pausa* where the workers were voting for or against their participation in the general strike.

2.2 Procedure

Around 12:30pm on January 31, 1933, the demonstration in Mössingen against the rise of the Nazi regime started from the *Langgass-Turnhalle* towards the *Pausa* factory. Meanwhile, other workers or unemployed persons from nearer villages around Mössingen arrived and increased the number of participants in the general strike in the Swabian town. “Alles, was Füße gehabt hat, ist mitgelaufen”⁶, a quotation from a contemporary witness, summarizes the atmosphere in the town and illustrates that many inhabitants participated in the general strikes which shows the broad discontent of Germans with the appointment of the Nazi leader Hitler as chancellor of the Reich. Three flag bearers carrying red flags and the banner “Heraus zum Massenstreik” led the strike, whereas the strikers followed in rows of four.⁷ Even if the initiators of the general strike in Mössingen slowly realized that there was no strike going on in Stuttgart due to arriving trains, they kept on going and enjoyed more and more participants.

⁵ Hermann, “Blumenstadt Mössingen,” <http://www.moessingen.de/177>.
English translation “Come out for the general strike”

⁶ Felsinger, Katharina (contemporary witness). English translation: “Everything which had feet, participated”.

⁷ Althaus et al., *Da ist nirgends nichts gewesen außer hier*, 156.

The strikers shouted in unison “Hitler- verrecke!”⁸ or sang the anthem of the Communist party called *Die Internationale*, accompanied by drums and whistles. In contrast to other German cities, where a miniscule minority tried to strike, the police in Mössingen did not intervene or react to the strike in the streets.

At about 12:45pm, the strikers reached the textile factory *Pausa* where the workers were having lunch. A new vote was previewed for 1pm because the employees of the *Pausa* factory voted previously partly in favor of a participation in the general strike and partly against. Fritz Wandel however, used the break to convince the workers of the *Pausa* factory to go on strike by climbing up the stairs of the restaurant “*Zum Schwanen*” (image2) and giving an enthusiastic speech calling for the participation in the demonstration against fascism.⁹ As a result, a thin majority voted for the participation in the general strike and the owners of the *Pausa*, the Jewish brothers Arthur and Felix Löwenstein, gave their employees the afternoon off. After the workers of the *Pausa* factory joined the strike, there were about 600 people continuing the demonstration at about 13:45 downwards the *Falltorstraße* and towards the biggest textile factory in Mössingen, the *Merz* company.¹⁰

When the strikers arrived at the factory *Merz*, the strikes got confronted with obstacles for the first time. They entered the factory and wanted the workers to leave their workplaces in order to join the general strike. The strikers shouted that the employees of the textile factory should shut down the engines and come with them. The workers, mainly women on the sewing machines, however, did not want to leave their work and the situation escalated. The strikers started to use violence against the sewers so that the factory owner, Otto Merz, called the mayor of Mössingen, Karl Jaggy to ask for help. Jaggy in contrast did not want to stop the general strike and did not see any danger resulting from it. Consequently, he refused to ask for help from the police in Reutlingen or Tübingen and instead suggested Merz to go out for a

⁸ Ibid. English translation: “Hitler- die!”

⁹ *ibid.* 157

¹⁰ Hermann, “Blumenstadt Mössingen,” <http://www.moessingen.de/196>.

walk until everything will be over. After about one hour of conflicts in the *Merz* factory, the strike with around 800 people continued towards the train station in Mössingen at 3:15pm.¹¹

On the way to the train station, the strikers kept on singing slogans and Communist songs until they finally reached the third big textile factory in Mössingen, the weaving *Burkhardt*. This factory however, had already closed its doors and the workers continued their jobs. Furious about the fact that Otto Merz warned the *Burkhardt* factory about the approaching demonstration, some of the strikers crossed the gates and tried violently to break the doors and brutally waved their red flags in front of the factory's windows. When the initiators of the general strike realized that the demonstration turned into a violent act against civilians, they decided to stop the invasion in the Burkhardt factory and to go back to the sports hall. Meanwhile, the riot police from Tübingen has arrived in Mössingen and the strikers finally understood that there were no other demonstrations in the region because such a police unit would not have been called to come to such a little town if the big cities had have been on strike. At around 4pm, the strike came into conflict with the police and about 40 armed policemen smashed the mass demonstration so that the strikes had to flee over the fields around town.¹²

2.3 Consequences and personal experiences

The general strike in Mössingen had and still has consequences for the German history, for the whole town Mössingen, as well as for the participants of the strike, especially its leaders and their families. Already several hours after the general strike, police inspectors came to town and arrested men being suspected of having participated in the strike in Mössingen. Although many strikers fled and did not sleep at home, nearly 60 people were transported to prison on that day. They were accused of “breach of the peace” or “treason” and their examinations took place at the town hall in Mössingen and later in the criminal chamber of

¹¹ *ibid.* <http://www.moessingen.de/197>

¹² *ibid.* <http://www.moessingen.de/198>

Tübingen where the strikers were confronted with statements of contemporary witnesses. In total, 98 persons were accused and about 80 were convicted to terms of imprisonment of between three months and two and a half years.¹³

Due to the fact that my great grandfather, Martin Müller, was sentenced to eight months of imprisonment, I have the opportunity to get information about the general strike and its consequences at first hand. His daughter, my grandmother, Katharina Felsinger (born Müller), is one of the last living persons who actively participated as a young girl in the general strike in Mössingen and gave some interviews in 2013 on occasion of the demonstration's 80th anniversary. Even if Martin Müller was not a member of the Communist Party, but stored a red flag in the night of 30 to 31 January 1933 and participated in the strike, he was condemned to eight months of imprisonment. Exactly the same thing happened to lots of inhabitants in Mössingen. Many workers lost their jobs and reputation in the community.¹⁴

According to Katharina Felsinger, the years after the general strike were characterized by hunger, contempt and hard work for many families in Mössingen, whose family fathers were imprisoned. She and her mother for example had to work on farms or on fields in order to get bread and some milk at the end of the day to feed the family. Additionally, the family Müller, as many others, was observed by the Nazis until the death of Martin Müller in 1943 and did not receive any help, neither from neighbors nor the local priest. During this time and after his imprisonment of eight months, the family father got unjustly arrested several times for a few days on the basis of the assumption that he distributed flyers against Hitler. Furthermore, he lost his job at the textile factory *Pausa* and had to work for Hitler's new road constructions. His children, Katharina and Helmut, were not allowed to join Nazi organizations like the *Hitler Youth* or the *League of German Girls* what led to the discrimination in the community from which they suffered during their childhood. Even if the general strike had so many

¹³ *ibid.* <http://www.moessingen.de/199>

¹⁴ Deininger, Roman, "Die unerwünschten Helden von Mössingen," *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, April 5, 2013.

negative effects on her family, Katharina Felsinger is proud of the mass demonstration in Mössingen and her father who continuously showed resistance to the Nazi regime, as well as her mother who always supported her husband. As “victim” of the strikers’ arrestments and citizen of Mössingen for all her life, she cannot understand how certain people can still keep silent about the events and even argue that nothing happened on that day in town. In her opinion, the general strike was an important and effective way to show German discontent with Hitler’s takeover of power and should have been done in more than one city in Germany.¹⁵

3. Conclusion

The importance and meaning of the general strike in Mössingen is still controversial and illustrates one of the most interesting events planned against fascism in the early 1930s in Germany. Some claim that the strikers are heroes who showed, as one of the first people in Germany, resistance to the Nazi regime and should be honored for their courage. Others argue that the participants of the general strike were Communists who tried to establish a workers’ and peasant’s state in Germany. In general, the town Mössingen and historians took over 40 years to start their research about details of the general strike in Mössingen on January 30, 1933.¹⁶ During this process, it soon became obvious that the current inhabitants of Mössingen, among them several family members of the strike leaders and contemporary witnesses, have different opinions about the general strike on January 31, 1933. Marc Eisold, president of the *Freie Wähler* in Mössingen claimed in 2012: “Da standen totalitäre Ideen gegen totalitäre Ideen”¹⁷ and therewith rejects the image of the strikers as heroes. Other books like “Mössingen und der Generalstreik am 31. Januar 1933” by Paul Gucker, a contemporary witness of the mass demonstration even try to prove that no strike at all happened in

¹⁵ Interview with Felsinger, Katharina

¹⁶ Warneken, Bernd Jürgen, “Ein Dorf schrieb deutsche Geschichte,” *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, March 3, 2012.

¹⁷ Deininger, Roman, “Die unerwünschten Helden von Mössingen,” *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, April 5, 2013. English translation: “Totalitarian ideas were confronted with totalitarian ideas”

Mössingen. Nevertheless, professional historical research shows that the general strike in Mössingen took place and can be seen as one of the first attempts to resist to Nazi power in Germany. In the last decades, Mössingen learned more and more to deal with its past, which made German history, and to accept different point of views. After 70 years, the *Langgass-Turnhalle* got a memorial plaque for the initiators of the strike¹⁸ and the *Lindenhof Theater* (image 3) performed a play illustrating the events of the general strike in 2013 in celebration of the 80th anniversary of the mass demonstration.¹⁹ These events were often well attended and around 300 people participated in the simulated general strike in 2013 in Mössingen, what shows the importance as well as the general interest in the topic today.

So, even if Communist ideas were not the ideal starting point, the mass demonstration in Mössingen can be honored as brave effort to oppose fascist ideas, which, as we know today, led the German Reich to its darkest point in history. Consequently, the mass demonstration on January 31, 1933 in Mössingen illustrates clearly that there were numerous Germans, not all oriented to the left but “normal” citizens, who feared a “Führerstaat” as well as war, and who wanted to react against this development as early as possible.

¹⁸ Deininger, Roman. “Die unerwünschten Helden von Mössingen.” *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, April 5, 2013.

¹⁹ Theater Lindenhof, “Ein Dorf im Widerstand”. Theater Lindenhof. March 2014, <https://www.theater-lindenhof.de/index.php?docid=612>

4. Bibliography

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4.4 Indexes/ Research Aids Consulted

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5. Table of figures

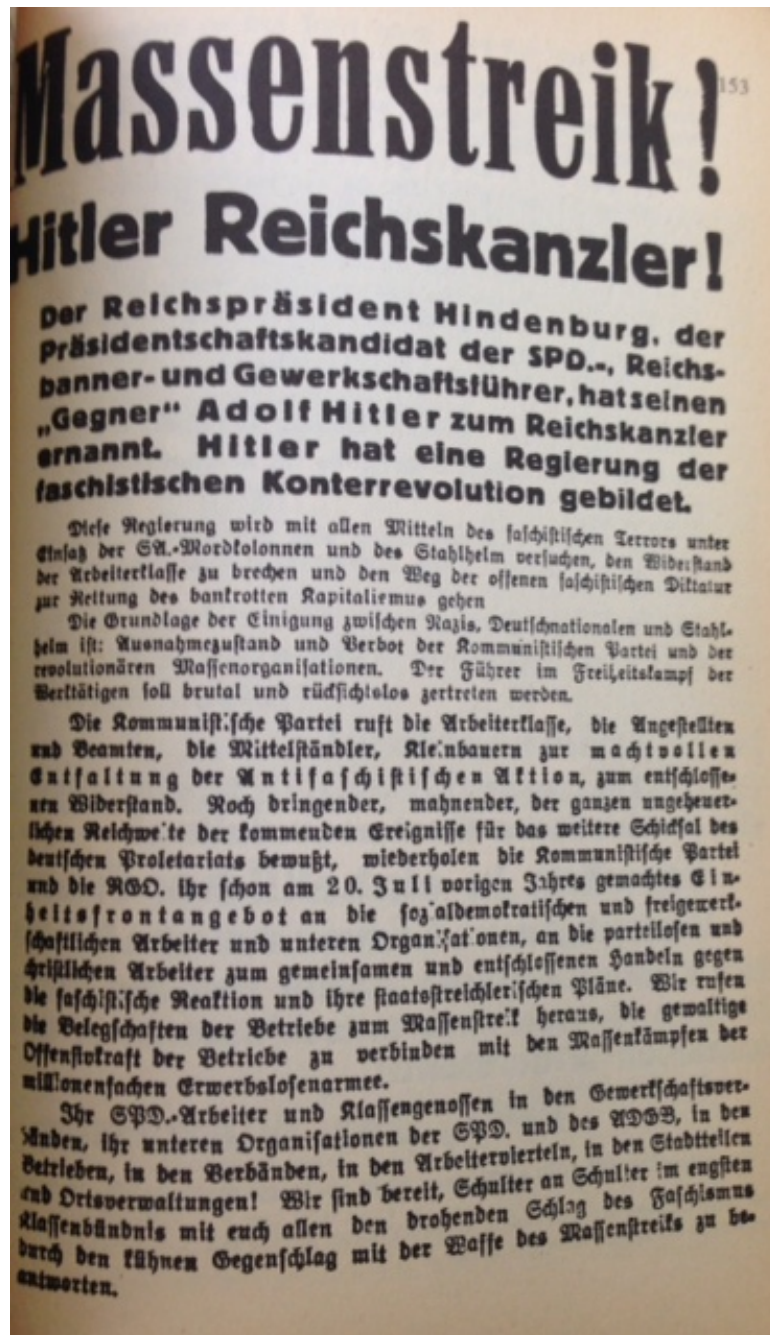


Image 1: pamphlet for the general strike
 (taken from Althaus et al.)



Image 2: *Pausa* factory and restaurant *Zum Schwanen*
(taken from the homepage “Blumenstadt Mössingen“)



Image 3: Play of the *Lindenhof Theater*
(taken from the homepage “Theater Lindenhof“)