Author Interview--Mark Kruger (The St. Louis Commune of 1877) Part 1

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Hello H-CivWar Readers:


Mark Kruger has previously taught at several universities, including Saint Louis University, where he was the director of the Criminal Justice Organization program. He is retired and lives in St. Louis. He has also published Individualism and Community in America: The East Wind Experience.

Mark, to start, could you tell us a little how you became interested in writing a book about the St. Louis Commune?

MK: Throughout many years I read many books on labor history, and while discussing the Railroad Strike of 1877, several mentioned a general strike in St. Louis and the takeover of the city by the Workingmen's Party of the United States. Generally, there were only a few sentences about those incidents. The facts that the events in St. Louis constituted the first general strike in the United States and the only time an American city was ruled by a communist party seemed to me to be not only unique, but important events in American history. I was amazed that so little had been written about them. More interestingly, no one in St. Louis seemed to know anything about it or had even heard of it. At some point I came across David Burbank's book, Reign of the Rabble, which provided a day-to-day description of the events. That book fed my curiosity. I wondered: How was this unknown to people in St. Louis? Who were these people who had led and participated in the takeover of the city? Why did it occur? Why did it occur in St. Louis and not elsewhere? How did it happen? What factors led to such events?

I felt that more should be written on the subject that tried to answer some of those questions. However, at the time I was a practicing lawyer, and it was impossible for me to dedicate the time necessary to investigate that subject. Later, having obtained a PhD and a teaching position, I was in a better position to study the matter. As I considered the history of the period, I realized that the answers to those questions went far beyond American labor history, but rather were rooted in European history and the rise and spread of socialist thought and practice. So, I attempted to tell the story of the St. Louis general strike and the St. Louis Commune and its place in European and American history.

What is the main argument in The St. Louis Commune of 1877?

MK: There were a number of points that I attempted to make in the book. First, I simply wanted to tell the story of the general strike in St. Louis in 1877 and of the St. Louis Commune. Since those events were little known, I felt that it was important to tell their story. Second, there is a general feeling that the United States has escaped the class conflict that characterized European societies, that this country was unique in that regard. I wanted to show the American working-class efforts and
battles in the nineteenth century that were clearly of a class nature and not unlike European workers' movements. Third, although racism was rampant in nineteenth century America, the St. Louis general strike and the St. Louis Commune were examples of workers identifying their common interests as workers despite differences in race and ethnicity. Black and white workers, Germans, Irish, French, and Bohemians all came together, participated in, and supported each other during the strike. Finally, I sought to place the 1877 railroad strike, the St. Louis general strike and the St. Louis Commune in historical perspective. The events in the United States and St. Louis particularly were not divorced from but actually part of the revolutions that shook Europe in the mid and late nineteenth century. All were part of an international movement of workers against the emergence of international capitalism.

Let me follow up here, because you devote an extensive amount of attention to Europe, why did you think this European background was so crucial to the story of the St. Louis Commune?

MK: As I studied and thought about the St. Louis Commune, I realized that it was strongly affected by and really a part of a working-class European movement. The 1848 revolutions in Europe, and particularly in the German states, were characterized not only by attacks on the remnants of feudalism in Europe, but also a reaction against the emergence of industrial capitalism. And all had a strong socialist personality, as did the Paris Commune of 1871. The founding of the First International in London in 1864 was an attempt to unite the working-classes on an international scale. It appeared to me that all of those European elements came together in the United States in 1877. Revolutionaries from German-speaking countries, France and the Hapsburg Empire emigrated from those countries, with many fleeing to the United States. They were united by the First International, its headquarters being moved from London to New York. When the First International was disbanded in 1876, the Workingmen's Party of the United States was immediately founded by European revolutionaries. Fueled by the depression in 1873 and the expansion of industrial capitalism and particularly the railroads, working-class rebellion exploded in the United States. St. Louis boasted a disproportionately large German population, many of whom were revolutionaries and socialists. They were joined by remnants of the Paris Commune. Many were members of the First International, which was especially strong in St. Louis with German, French, English and Bohemian sections. The leaders of the strike in St. Louis were primarily German, as were the leaders of the Workingmen's Party in St. Louis, who would lead the general strike and establish the St. Louis Commune. So, it became clear that all of those European elements, the German revolutionaries, the example of the Paris Commune, the First International organization and the Workingmen's Party came together in St. Louis, resulting in the general strike and in the establishment of the St. Louis Commune. The one common thread leading to the St. Louis Commune was European socialist thought and practice.

Many of the individuals who participated in 1848 and eventually took part in the St. Louis Commune were also involved in the American Civil War, how did the conflict change their outlook on the relationship between workers and business?

MK: I think that all of the 1848 veterans who fought in the American Civil War, and were active in St. Louis, remained consistent in their political beliefs and careers after the Civil War. With no immediate revolutionary struggles, they appeared to take up their lives where they had left off before serving the Union.
The 1848 revolutionaries reflected various political beliefs and motivations. Some were socialists and friends and followers of Karl Marx. Others were German nationalists who sought to unite the separate German states. Others were republicans, who sought a more democratic and politically open government in Germany. They all supported the North’s battle against southern feudal interests and were opposed to slavery as an institution. Even the socialists joined with republicans in serving the new Republican administration, seeing it as part of the progression from capitalism to socialism. Their post-Civil War careers seemed to mirror their earlier political beliefs.

Whatever their political beliefs, most of those veterans had earlier worked as journalists and continued to do so after the war. Karl Bernays was a friend and follower of Marx, served as a colonel in the Union army, had been editor of the radical Vorwärts! and wrote for the Anzeiger des Westens. He worked as a journalist after the Civil War and occupied several offices in the new Republican Party. Karl Danzer served as an editor of the Anzeiger des Westens, helped found the Westliche Post, both progressive German-language newspapers in St. Louis, and after the war dedicated himself to raising money for German soldiers who were injured in the Franco-Prussian War. Another veteran of the 1848 German revolution, Friedrich Hecker, had been a radical democrat in Germany, served as a colonel in the American Civil War, and after that conflict farmed and worked as a journalist, translating various American political documents into German, strongly supported the American Constitution, wrote for the German-language press in the United States and worked for the Republican Party. Heinrich Boernstein had worked with Marx on Vorwärts! in Paris, served as a colonel during the Civil War, and was a hero in the Camp Jackson capture of Missouri forces sympathetic to the Confederacy. He edited the Anzeiger des Westens, was a strong supporter of Lincoln and the Republicans, and served as U.S. consul to Bremen. He was active in the arts prior to the Civil War and continued writing plays following the war. Another German revolutionary, Carl Schurz, had strong German nationalist, republican beliefs and fought for democratic reforms in the 1848 revolution, later working as a lawyer and journalist, and served as a general in the Civil War. He went on to serve as a US senator from Missouri, was a Liberal Republican, worked for civil service reform, and served as Secretary of the Interior under Rutherford Hayes. He also was a newspaper editor in St. Louis and later New York. Franz Sigel, who was trained as a Prussian military officer, became a revolutionary in Germany, a Union general and another hero of Camp Jackson in St. Louis. After the war he worked as a journalist, lecturer and editor and held various offices in New York. He was so effective that statues of him exist today in both St. Louis and New York. Finally, Joseph Weydemeyer, a close friend of Marx and Engels, was an active communist organizer prior to the Civil War. He was a founder of the Communist League in Germany and founded various socialist organizations after moving to the United States. He published many of Marx's works and served as Marx's literary agent in the U.S. He served as a colonel during the Civil War and later worked as a working-class organizer and editor. He wrote for the Westlische Post in St. Louis, and after the war was elected as St. Louis County auditor.

Whatever their political views were before the Civil War, those German revolutionaries who came to St. Louis and served the Union during the war all continued with their careers after the war, most as journalists and some as office holders. They continued to work for progressive causes after the Civil War, as they had done in their earlier years, and they continued to support socialist or republican values throughout their lives.