

# Party and Class in Revolutionary Crises

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## ***The German Revolution, 1917-1923***

**By Pierre Broue**

**Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2006, xvii +991, \$50 paper.**

## ***Lenin Rediscovered: What is to Be Done? in Context***

**By Lars H. Lih**

**Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2008, xvii + 867 pages, \$50 paper.**

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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION of October 1917, the first successful revolution made by and for workers in world history, posed an immense paradox for revolutionary socialists. On the one hand, the combination of the most advanced forms of industrial capitalist development with a largely non-capitalist countryside and autocratic-absolutist state institutions made Russia “the weak link” in world capitalism, the society where a workers’ revolution could first succeed. On the other, Russia’s economic underdevelopment and the minority status of the working class in the population made the prospects of constructing a viable, democratic post-capitalist society impossible.

The Bolsheviks, the revolutionary workers’ organization that led the seizure of power in Russia, understood this paradox. They firmly rejected the utopian notion that socialism could be built in a single society — especially one as economically undeveloped as Russia. They were firmly convinced that their revolution could not survive without successful revolutions in the West. Toward this end, they helped launch the Third, Communist International (Comintern or CI) in 1919 to regroup the revolutionary wing of the international socialist movement, which had been destroyed when the reformist parliamentary politicians and trade union officials supported their national capitalist classes in the First World War.

The Bolsheviks, like revolutionary workers around the world, believed that Germany would be the site of the next working class struggle for political power. Germany was the home of the largest socialist workers’ movement in the world before 1914, including a substantial layer of revolutionary workers and intellectuals like Rosa Luxemburg who had battled the growing conservatism of the leadership of the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) before the First World War.

The Bolsheviks’ optimism was not misplaced. Germany’s defeat in 1918 unleashed a prolonged and profound crisis of capitalist rule. The German Imperial capitalist state, under which capitalism was consolidated and Germany became an imperialist power, collapsed overnight. Very rapidly a

situation of dual power developed in late 1918 and 1919, pitting the newly formed parliamentary Weimar Republic led by the SPD and the left-wing Independent Social-Democrats (USPD) against workers' and soldiers councils.

A precipitous, minoritarian Berlin Spartacus uprising in January 1919, initiated by the newly formed German Communist Party (KPD), provided the SPD government with the pretext for repressing the workers and soldiers councils. With the Imperial army in disarray, the social-democratic leaders of the new capitalist republic relied on the Freikorps — paramilitary organizations of right-wing veterans, many of whom would become the leadership of German fascism in the 1920s and 1930s — to defeat the workers' councils, city by city and region by region. Not only were the most prominent leaders of the KPD, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, assassinated, but hundreds of worker radicals were murdered, jailed and blacklisted by the German state and employers.

The defeat of the workers' councils in 1919 did not usher in a new period of stable, democratic capitalist rule in Germany. The social-democratic administrators of the new Weimar Republic found it difficult to put the genie — the Freikorps and the reorganized German military — back in its bottle. Right-wing attacks on unions, cooperatives, factory councils and parties — both Social-Democratic and Communist — intensified in late 1919 and early 1920.

Emboldened by the crushing of the workers' councils, segments of the reconstituted army attempted to overthrow the Weimar regime in an unsuccessful military coup d'état, the Kapp Putsch of March 1920. Armed militias mobilized by the SPD-led unions rescued the capitalist republic, opening the way to a new strike wave and the renewed growth of the left-wing of the USPD and KPD, which merged to form a new united Communist Party (VKPD) in December 1920 with nearly 400,000 members. [1]

Workers' struggles peaked again in 1923. Faced with demands for the rapid payment of reparations from the victorious Allies, the German government began to print money to meet their war debts. The resulting inflation and the French occupation of the industrial Ruhr region polarized German society and politics. Remnants of the Freikorps, now reorganized as various fascist groups including Hitler's Nazis, grew among middle class professionals, managers and small business people who were ruined by inflation. Fascist gangs renewed their attacks on both Social-Democratic and Communist workers' organizations, and made several unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the Weimar Republic.

On the left, workers' mobilizations for wage increases tied to inflation and against the growing fascist threat strengthened the revolutionary left. As the Republic teetered near collapse, Communist and left-wing Social-Democrats took control of key regional governments, began forming armed workers' militias, and appeared to be on the verge of seizing power in Germany as a whole. However, the Communists and their supporters in the German working class backed off plans for an insurrection in October 1923.

The failure of the German revolution radically altered the relationship of class forces globally. On the one hand, the stabilization of capitalist democracy in Germany was short-lived. The Great Depression of 1929-1931 pushed the bulk of the middle classes toward fascism. The Nazis' ascension to power in 1933 ended democratic capitalist rule in Germany and destroyed both the Social-Democratic and Communist wings of the oldest and best organized workers' movement in the world.

Defeat of German workers' movement in 1923 also facilitated the consolidation of the emerging party-state officialdom under the leadership of the Stalin in post-revolutionary Russia. In the midst of the global capitalist crisis, this layer of officials destroyed the remnants of capitalism and consolidated a bureaucratic command economy in Russia that presented itself to the world as

“socialist.”

Why was the Russian working class, despite decades of Tsarist repression, able to take power in 1917? Yet why was the German working class, which had decades of socialist and trade union organizational experience, unable to take power in the face of the grave instability of capitalist rule in Germany between 1918 and 1923? This issue has been at the center of debate among revolutionaries since the mid-1920s.

Two books, one newly available in English and the other recently written, provide fresh insights into the vexing questions of the success and failure of workers’ revolutions in Europe immediately after the First World War. Pierre Broué’s classic study of the German revolution focuses on the inability of German revolutionary workers and intellectuals to form a coherent, independent revolutionary organization capable of challenging the SPD and union leaders for leadership in the German workers’ movement.

Lars Lih’s study of the historical and political context of Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* provides new insights into what did, and did not account for the successful formation of such a revolutionary workers’ party in Russia. Together these two works demystify much of the left’s discussion of the theory and practice of revolutionary organization in the tumultuous class struggles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **The German Communist Tragedy**

Pierre Broué, who died in 2005, was perhaps the foremost historians of the revolutionary and workers’ movements in the interwar years. Unfortunately, few of his works are available to in English. [2] However, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*, first published in French in 1971, was translated as part of the Historical Materialism book series in 2005 and became available in paperback from Haymarket Press in 2006.

Broué’s masterful narrative of the tumultuous class struggles of these years combines a social historian’s grasp of the social basis of different currents in the workers’ movement with a political militant’s insights into the strategic and tactical debates among revolutionary leaders and organizers. The result is a work, despite being written over three decades ago, as innovative and astute as when it was first published.

Rejecting the notion that skilled workers constituted a “labor aristocracy” that conservatized the German socialist movement before 1914, [3] Broué clearly locates the social base of the reformist wing of the SPD in the trade union officialdom, parliamentary politicians, party staffers and workers in small and medium workplaces. Skilled workers — especially skilled metalworkers in the largest industrial plants — were the main supporters of the left-wing of the pre-war SPD.

These divisions persisted during and immediately after the war. The pro-war socialists of the SPD majority found their greatest support among workers in smaller plants and among party and union functionaries, while the skilled metalworkers tended to support the anti-war socialists in the USPD.

These workers continued their battles against deskilling and speedup during the war, against the wishes of the SPD union and party officials who were committed to “civil peace” and a “temporary truce in the class struggle” in the name of the “defense of the fatherland.” In the later years of the war these workers’ struggles radicalized, leading to anti-war and anti-government strikes and demonstrations.

Before 1920, however, despite their hostility to the war and the reformist SPD majority, most of the skilled metalworkers did not gravitate toward the explicitly revolutionary Spartacus League and early KPD led by Luxemburg and Liebknecht. This strategic layer of activists — the core of the social and political vanguard [4] of the workers' movement — tended to support the USPD leadership, which wavered between revolutionary rhetoric and a reformist practice that promoted the dismantling of the workers' councils.

The Spartacists and KPD, like many of the early Communist parties, initially tended to attract youth — mostly veterans of the defeated German army and the unemployed, and very few with any experience of workplace organization and struggle. These young people, thoroughly disillusioned with capitalism and the tepid if not openly counter-revolutionary politics of social-democracy, gravitated toward the politics of "Left Communism." Believing that capitalism had entered a terminal economic and political crisis, the Left Communists (with some encouragement within the Comintern) formulated the "theory of the offensive:" Workers were potentially ready, at any time or place, to take action against capital and only needed the catalyst of minority actions, relatively small-scale assaults on capital and the state, to "force the development of the revolution."

By 1920, the official leadership of the Comintern, in particular Lenin and Trotsky, led a political struggle to win the German and other newly formed Communist parties from the politics of Left Communism. Recognizing both the temporary economic and political stabilization of capitalism after the war and the persistent support of the majority of the working classes outside of Russia for the reformist social-democracy, the Comintern counter-posed the United Front strategy to the Left Communists' theory of the offensive. The strategy rested on two basic assumptions. First, working-class radicalism and power emerge from militant mass struggles against the employers and the state. Second, the social position of the social democratic parliamentary politicians and union officials made them an obstacle to both socialist revolution and the effective struggle for reform. [5]

Communist parties were encouraged to work in the existing unions and workers' organizations to promote united action around wages, working conditions, the defense of social welfare and all reforms with any and all forces willing to engage in mass action, including the leadership of the social democratic parties and unions. It would be through the experience of common struggle around concrete goals that the Communist parties, who organized the conscious revolutionary minority of the working class, would be able to demonstrate the limits of reformism and win the majority of the workers to revolutionary politics. [6]

In Germany, the Comintern majority found enthusiastic support from Paul Levi, a close associate of Luxemburg and founder of the Spartacus League, and his allies in the KPD. Levi understood that the ultra-leftism of the KPD majority, in particular its refusal to mobilize with social-democratic workers against the Kapp Putsch, only reinforced the loyalty of broad sectors of the working class to the SPD and, more importantly, the allegiance of the radical skilled metalworkers to the USPD.

Levi was able to expel the Left Communists from the KPD in April 1920, but their new organization, the Communist Workers Party (KAPD), received recognition as a "sympathizing organization" from the leadership of the CI under Zinoviev. Over the ensuing months, Levi and the KPD worked with the leaders of the leftwing of the USPD to win their party to the Comintern.

The right wing of the USPD refused to accept this decision, and returned to the SPD in late 1920. In December 1920, the left-wing of the USPD and the KPD merged to form a new unified German Communist Party, with Levi as its chair and a membership of nearly 400,000, including the vast majority of skilled metalworker activists.

Levi's hopes that the new, mass KPD would apply the united front strategy, promote united action

with the SPD against capital and the state, and begin the “conquest of the masses” proved short-lived. Levi objected to the Comintern’s support for Bordiga, the Italian Left Communist, who precipitated a premature split in the Italian Socialist Party in early 1921. With the collusion of Zinoviev, Radek and other Comintern leaders, Levi was removed from the leadership of the KPD.

This cleared the way for the “March Action” — the KPD’s catastrophic attempt to spark a revolution in March 1921. Communist militants initiated strikes and factory occupations, with little or no support from their fellow workers, provoked street fights with the police and attempted to seize power in a number of towns and cities. With little support outside their own ranks, the Communists’ actions were easily isolated.

Broué describes the disastrous aftermath:

*“The days which followed the defeat of the March Action revealed the extent of the disaster which the VKPD leaders had inflicted upon their party. They had not even been able to lead all of their members into action. Some members publicly denounced the strike. Many left the Party, sometimes noisily, sometimes quietly slipping away. In a few weeks, the party lost 200,000 members [almost 60% of their membership — CP]. Moreover, it was facing repression; its newspapers were being banned or suspended; and its members being arrested, sometimes held for a few hours or days, but often charged and jailed for many months. The courts-martial went to work with a vengeance; by the beginning of June, it was calculated that of the strikers or fighters in March there were already 400 sentenced to some 1,500 years hard labor, and 500 to 800 years in jail, eight to life imprisonment and four to death, and there were still plenty awaiting trial...Tens of thousands of strikers lost their jobs, and were blacklisted by their employers. Moreover, in many factories and localities, the action of the authorities and the dismay of the workers led to the severing of the links between the Communists and the working class, links that had often only been recently forged.” (505-506)*

Levi publicly denounced the catastrophic Marzaktion in a pamphlet, *Our Path: Against Putschism*, which led to his expulsion from the KPD for “indiscipline.” [7]

The inconsistent reaction of the CI leadership to the Marzaktion seriously undermined the development of German Communism as a revolutionary internationalist current rooted in its own national reality. On the one hand, the Comintern leadership rightly condemned the Marzaktion as an attempt to substitute the action of the revolutionary minority of the class for the self-activity and self-organization of the class as a whole. On the other, Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev condemned Levi and blocked his reinstatement in the leadership of the KPD — despite the fact that his act of ‘indiscipline’ was no greater than that of Zinoviev, who had publicly denounced the plans for the Petrograd insurrection in October 1917. [8]

The result, on the one hand, was the exclusion of the person “best placed...to seek a synthesis between the specific revolutionary tradition of the German workers’ movement and the successful example of Bolshevism.” [9] On the other hand, the new leadership of the KPD around Heinrich Brandler became thoroughly dependent, politically and organizationally, on Zinoviev, Radek and the Comintern leadership.

The depth of the KPD leadership’s dependence on the Comintern leadership, and its disastrous impact on the class struggle in Germany became clear during the revolutionary crisis of the Fall of 1923. Brandler and his comrades were almost completely reliant on the Comintern for day to day tactical guidance. Constantly “looking over their shoulder” to the CI, the KPD prepared for an insurrection based on the KPD-left SPD “workers’ governments” in Saxony and other industrial regions during October 1923. When the Comintern decided, at practically the last minute, to cancel the insurrection, the KPD and the majority of German workers who were preparing for a

revolutionary seizure of power suffered, in Broue's words, a "defeat without a fight."

There was never a political discussion of the roots of the defeat of the German revolution in 1923 in either the ranks of the KPD or the Comintern. Instead, the Comintern leadership under Zinoviev imposed an organizational solution.

Claiming that the root of the defeat in Germany was the lack of "Bolshevik discipline" in the KPD, Zinoviev, with the support of Stalin and Bukharin, launched a campaign to "bolshevize" the Communist parties. The origins of what most of today's left considers "Leninism" and "democratic centralism" — the bans on organized minority currents (either factions contending for leadership or ideological tendencies) except for extremely limited periods of time; the notion that disagreements within the revolutionary movement reflect the influence of "alien class forces;" the subordination of the ranks of the organization to the unquestionable authority of "higher bodies," including their ability to dictate tactics; and the ultimate authority of the Communist International to determine the political orientation of the Communist Parties, including the selection of their leadership — can be found in the "bolshevization" campaigns launched after 1923. [10]

### **Kautskyan Roots of *What is to Be Done?***

Today, there is a growing historical consensus among serious scholars of Lenin and the Bolsheviks that the organizational norms imposed on the Communist Parties after 1923 bore little resemblance to the way the Bolsheviks organized themselves before 1921. [11] Recent research has demonstrated that attempts to impose these organizational forms on the Communist Parties before 1923 were vigorously denounced by Lenin as "too Russian." [12] At the time, Trotsky was one of the few voices criticizing Zinoviev and the rest of the Comintern's leadership for substituting organizational measures for political discussion in the wake of the defeat in Germany. [13]

Trotsky, and most of the revolutionary left in the twentieth century, correctly argued that the ability of the Bolsheviks to cohere as an independent organization of revolutionary workers before the revolution was crucial to their ability to compete successfully for the support of the majority of Russian workers against reformist political currents (Mensheviks and right-Social Revolutionaries) in 1917.

By contrast, the absence of an independent revolutionary workers organization in Germany and most of Europe before World War I, meant that revolutionaries were attempting to hastily assemble revolutionary workers organizations in the midst of the revolutionary wave of 1918-1923. As a result, revolutionaries in the west were at a distinct disadvantage in their political competition with social-democracy. [14]

For most on the revolutionary left, the Bolsheviks' ability to construct a revolutionary workers party in Russia before 1917 was the product of Lenin's theoretical originality in matters of revolutionary organization — although Lenin himself made no such claim to "originality." In this view, Lenin's path-breaking 1902 pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* (WITBD) broke with the model of the "all-inclusive" party and proposed a "party of the new type" — organized around an explicitly revolutionary program, to be made up exclusively of revolutionary workers, and led by professional revolutionaries.

While Rosa Luxemburg was often more insightful in her criticisms of reformism in Germany, she remained wedded to the notion of a socialist party that embraced the "entire working class." As a result, she refused to organize an independent organization of revolutionaries inside or outside the SPD before 1914.

Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered* presents a powerful critique of the notion — common to both the “Leninist” left and the anti-Leninist right — that WITBD marked a sharp break with the dominant theory and practice of socialist organization before 1914. With an in-depth knowledge of the Russian socialist and revolutionary movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a command of the subtleties of the Russian language, Lih situates WITBD in the complex debates among Russian socialists and worker activists, demystifying most of the received wisdom about Lenin and “Leninism.”

The result, including a new annotated translation of WITBD, demonstrates that Lenin (as he stated himself) was an enthusiastic supporter of the dominant model of pre-war socialist organization — the SPD. Lih's exhaustive analysis confirms the scattered insights of dissident Trotskyists associated with this journal: that Lenin was a quite orthodox follower of Karl Kautsky, the premier theorist of pre-war social-democracy, in matters of both socialist politics and organization. [15]

Of course, Lenin in 1914 would break abruptly and violently with the German Social-Democrats — both the right-wing pro-imperialists and the compromising “centrists” led by Kautsky — over their policy at the outbreak of the war. But the very fact that Lenin was so profoundly shocked by Social Democracy's failure to oppose imperialist war testifies to Lih's argument that pre-war Bolshevism made no claim to a brand-new type of socialist organization.

At the center of what Lih dubs the “textbook interpretation” of WITBD is Lenin's purported “worry about the workers.” In the liberal and conservative variants of this thesis, the growth of bureaucratic trade unionism and parliamentary politics in the Western European labor movement led Lenin to reject the optimistic Western European socialist consensus that the working class under capitalism was spontaneously moving toward revolutionary socialism. Convinced that workers tended instead toward reformist politics, Lenin argued that socialist intellectuals, organized in a disciplined and centralized party, had to lead the workers' movement toward revolution.

In the left-wing or “activist” version, Lenin rejected the economic determinism of the Second International — that capitalism would collapse economically and the working class would assume power through its mass socialist parties. In this variant, Lenin was the first Marxist of his generation to understand that without the conscious self-organization of revolutionaries, workers' struggles would not spontaneously lead to a revolutionary seizure of power. [16]

Lih establishes that Lenin in WITBD was most definitely not “worried about the workers” in 1902. Instead, his main concern was that the socialist intellectuals and party-organizers were falling behind the most active workers politically. Large layers of Russian workers, through their experience of massive industrial struggles in the 1890s, were mobilizing for political freedom and the overthrow of the Tsarist state in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Lih, “At the time Lenin wrote his book, the entire spectrum of revolutionary opinion was encouraged and energized by the willingness of workers to demonstrate their political dissatisfaction in the streets.” (20-21) Lenin was concerned that many Russian social-democratic intellectuals and organizers in the underground were “lagging behind the workers,” and were too willing to accommodate to those on the Russian left (the “economists”) [17] who argued that workers were interested solely in the struggle for legal reform of labor relations.

Nor was Lenin's vision of socialist organization an innovation in 1902. Through an exhaustive reconstruction of Kautsky's writings, in particular the SPD's Erfurt Program of 1891, Lih argues that Lenin was a “Russian Erfurtian.” Both Kautsky and Lenin understood the specificity of the Marxist socialist movement — its insistence that socialism must be the product of class struggle, not of a blueprint model — in much the same way as Hal Draper in *Two Souls of Socialism*. [18]

Earlier, pre-Marxist socialist theorists (and many post-Marxist theorists in the social-democratic and Stalinist traditions) viewed workers' struggles in the workplace as "narrow" and "selfish" — inimical to the development of a collectivist and planned social order. An enlightened elite of intellectuals would impose socialism on the backward masses. For Kautsky in the *Erfurt Program*, Marxism rejected this tradition and rooted socialism in day-to-day self-organization and self-activity. Thus, it was through fusion of the socialist intelligentsia with the most active and "purposeful" worker activists that a mass socialist party would be built:

*"The keynote of Lenin's outlook was not worry about workers but exhilaration about workers. The formulations about spontaneity are not the heart of WITBD but a tacked-on polemical sally... WITBD was not a gloomy response to a crisis (however defined) but an exuberant response to an opportunity. WITBD did not reject the Western model of a Social-Democratic party but invoked this model at every turn. Lenin certainly advocated a 'vanguard party,' for this was the common understanding of what Social Democracy was all about. Lenin thus did not revert to the populist tradition in any way. WITBD did not advocate hyper-centralism or an elite, conspiratorial party restricted to professional revolutionaries from the intelligentsia...The centrality of political freedom in Lenin's platform makes it impossible to draw a direct link between WITBD and Stalinism."* (20)

Lenin, according to Lih, actually sought to build a party like the SPD — the flagship organization of the contemporary socialist movement — as Lenin explicitly emphasized, in the specific conditions of Russian autocracy. [19] The absence of elemental democratic freedoms and the constant threat of repression led Lenin to advocate revolutionaries becoming "professionals" steeped in the practice of "conspiracy" — as Lih puts it, "the fine art of not getting arrested."

For Lih, there was no inconsistency between Lenin's desires to limit party membership during periods of repression, while "throwing the gates wide open" during the brief periods of democratic opening (1905-1907, 1917). Both represented his commitment to building an "all-inclusive" party of the working class in "Russian conditions."

Even Lenin's concept of "democratic centralism" was not an innovation. Like socialists in the West, Lenin equated "democratic centralism" with "congress sovereignty" — that only decisions made by democratically elected delegates at party congress' were binding on all members of the party.

In fact, Lih (following Draper and LeBlanc) [20] argues that the dispute on "congress sovereignty" — rather than Lenin's demand for a party of "professional revolutionaries" — split the Russian social-democracy in 1903. Lenin insisted that the decisions of the party congress on the editorial personnel of *Iskra*, the central social-democratic newspaper, be respected against the demands of many Russian social-democrats, supported by both Kautsky and Luxemburg, to reorganize the editorial board. [21]

## **Failure of Revolution in the West**

Clearly, the Bolshevik experience of building an independent organization of revolutionary workers and intellectuals, with almost two decades of common practice in the class struggle, was a key factor explaining the success of the Russian workers' revolution in 1917. The attempts to forge such organizations in Germany and the rest of Europe "on the fly" — in the midst of the most sustained wave of revolutionary workers' struggles in the history of the advanced capitalist world — failed.

It should be clear, however, that the construction of that party in Russia was not the product of the Bolsheviks' theoretical superiority to other left-wing social-democrats before 1914. Lenin did not claim or develop an original "theory of the party," nor did the Bolsheviks achieve programmatic-



theoretical clarity on revolutionary strategy in Russia.

On the one hand, Lenin and the leaders of the Bolshevik wing of Russian social-democracy assumed that they were constructing the standard model embodied in the SPD — a party of the “entire class” — under the conditions of Tsarist autocracy. Put simply, Lenin and the Bolsheviks shared the same conception of socialist working-class organization as the rest of social-democracy.

On the other hand, the Bolshevik’s program for Russia proved not to be an accurate vision of how the class struggle unfolded in 1917. The Bolsheviks trained a cadre of worker-revolutionaries to prepare to lead a worker and peasant uprising that would overthrow Tsarism and establish a “workers’ and peasants’ government” to carry out land reform, the eight-hour work day and trade union freedom.

This call for a “bourgeois revolution” even against the wishes of the bourgeoisie, laid out by Lenin as early as 1905, was the perspective of the extreme left wing of the Russian Social Democratic movement, which expected the revolution, without overturning capitalism, to turn power over to a democratic but not socialist government organized by a constituent assembly. [22] Even the Bolsheviks did not foresee the possibility — before 1917— that the working class would have to establish its own government, based on the workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ councils, which would be the first phase of a world revolutionary process

The roots of the success of the revolution in Russia and its failure in western Europe is found not in the different ideas and theories, but in the different social and political conditions revolutionaries faced in the East and West. [23] The long-period of capitalist expansion that began in the late 1880s and ended shortly before World War I produced three massive strike waves (1889-1894, 1904-1907, 1910-1914) across the United States, Japan and Europe, including Russia. In all these societies, these industrial struggles created a significant minority of militant activist workers — a workers’ vanguard — who gravitated toward revolutionary and anti-capitalist politics.

In Germany, Italy, France and Russia, these workers — mostly skilled workers in larger industries facing speedup and deskilling — came together with Marxist intellectuals and activists to form the mass social-democratic parties. These workers made up the majority of the activists of these parties, and were the main audience for the left-wing of pre-war social-democracy.

Outside of Russia, the establishment of capitalist states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also allowed for the emergence of a socially independent and politically conservative layer of trade union officials and party politicians. While most of the Western European capitalist states of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often restricted the right to vote and occasionally repressed socialist parties and trade unions, there was considerable room for legal organization.

The existence of what the British socialist Richard Hyman called “trade union (and we can extend to “party”) legalization” [24] permitted unions and socialist political parties to stabilize themselves and grow. For those worker activists who became the full-time officials of the parties and unions, these organizations ceased to be primarily instruments of workers’ struggle, but the source of their relatively privileged employment. It was this emerging layer of union and party officials, along with workers in smaller workplaces and the passive membership of the unions and parties that provided the social foundation of reformism.

Thus the European social-democratic parties, outside of Russia, were considered parties of “the entire working class” — parties of both militant, revolutionary workers and of the more conservative union and party officialdom. The reformist officials dominated these parties, dictating their day-to-day practices which prioritized winning elections, securing reforms through legislation,

consolidating unions and bargaining over working class self-organization and activity in the workplace and the streets.

The First World War destroyed the “all-inclusive” workers’ parties. In the postwar revolutionary crisis in Western Europe, the revolutionary workers’ lack of experience of collective action and organization independent of the reformist officials put them at a distinct disadvantage in their political competition [25] with the social-democrats. The reformists’ continued leadership of the workers’ movement allowed them to isolate and repress revolutionary minorities among the workers, derail the mass revolutionary upsurge and help stabilize capitalism in Europe in the 1920s.

The creation of an independent organization of revolutionary workers in Russia was not, as Lih makes clear, the product of Lenin or the Bolsheviks’ superior theory, but flowed from the unique social and political conditions in Russia. Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not simply a relatively underdeveloped capitalist society. It was a society where the capitalist class did not rule through a bourgeois state.

The Tsarist state allowed no space for a stable parliamentary regime and very little for trade union legalization. [26] Put simply, the social and political environment in pre-revolutionary Russia was inimical to the development of the forces of official reformism — the trade union and party officialdom. As a result, reformist politics in Russia lacked the deep social roots they had in the rest of the rest of Europe. Russian reformism entered the Russian revolution in a much weaker position than its western counterparts, allowing an autonomous organization of revolutionary workers — the Bolsheviks — to sweep them aside in the course of the revolution. In sum, the Bolsheviks’ success was not the result of their superior organizational or strategic theory, but of a combination of historical circumstance and their consistent anti-capitalist political practice.

The subordination of the new Communist Parties, and the revolutionary workers they organized, to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the 1920s and 1930s — which the “bolshevization” of the CI prepared — effectively strangled the project of building mass, independent revolutionary workers’ organizations in the capitalist world. The Comintern’s imposition of the “popular front” strategy on the Communist Parties began their decades-long transformation into social-democratic, reformist parties. [27]

The social basis for a revolutionary party — a substantial layer of worker organizers leading mass struggles and open to revolutionary anti-capitalist politics — barely exists in most advanced capitalist societies. The long-road toward the reconstruction of a socialist workers’ movement will not today, no more than it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, primarily a matter of “programmatic” or “theoretical clarification” or the adoption of certain organizational structures.

Instead, a new revolutionary left, armed with “in the ballpark” politics of class independence, self-organization and militant anti-capitalism, will need to promote, in any and all ways, the organization of working people in struggle independent of the forces of official reform — in the United States, from the Democrats, the union officialdom and the middle class leaderships of the oppressed. Put another way, while the pre-World War I Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not leave original theoretical tools to guide the reconstruction of revolutionary workers’ organizations, the study of their historical experience remains invaluable.

**Charlie Post**

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\* From *Against the Current*, January/February 2011, No. 150.

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## Footnotes

[1] Germany in 1920 had a population of approximately 62,000,000. The United States in 2010 had an estimated population of 308,000,000 — four and one-half times the population of Germany in 1920. A German revolutionary party of 400,000 in 1920 — overwhelmingly working class in social composition — would translate into a party of 1,800,000 in present-day U.S. terms.

[2] In addition to the work reviewed here, a new paperback edition of Broue and Terminé's classic study *Revolution and Civil War in Spain* is available from Haymarket Press.

[3] For a critique of the theory of the labor aristocracy, see on ESSF C. Post, [The Labor Aristocracy Myth](#).

[4] The term “workers’ vanguard” as used in this essay does not refer to a self-appointed Marxist sect that will lead the working class to salvation. The “workers’ vanguard” are all those workers who help lead workers’ struggles, and who “continue the struggle by other means” during periods of relative class quiescence.

[5] The Comintern leadership did not develop — except for the theory of the labor aristocracy — an explanatory theory of working class reformism. For a contemporary presentation of the revolutionary Marxist analysis of reformism that is rooted in the writings of Rosa Luxemburg [*The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971)], see R. Brenner, “The Problem of Reformism,” *Against the Current* 43 (March-April 1993).

[6] For the Comintern’s strategy of the united front in the 1920s see: V.I. Lenin, “Left-Wing” Communism — An Infantile Disorder in *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1971), III, 345-430; L.D. Trotsky, “On the United Front,” in *The First Five Years of the Communist International* (New York 1972), II, 91-110.

[7] Both Levi’s pamphlet and his speech before the party tribunal that expelled him have been translated by David Fernbach in a recent issue of *Historical Materialism*. Paul Levi, “Our Path: Against Putschism” *Historical Materialism* (2009) 17, 3: 111-145; Paul Levi, “What Is the Crime: The March Action or Criticizing It?: Speech at the Session of the Central Committee of the German Communist Party on 4 May 1921” *Historical Materialism* (2009) 17,3: 146-174.

[8] Today, many in the Trotskyist tradition continue to defend Lenin and Trotsky’s support for Levi’s expulsion. Ian Birchall of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has gone as far to claim that “Levi’s action in publicly criticizing the KPD at a time of vicious state repression can only be described as political scabbing.” Birchall, “Review of Jean-Francois Fayet’s *Karl Radek (1885-1939)*,” *Historical Materialism* (2009), 14:3: 265. Bryan D. Palmer, a much more orthodox Canadian Trotskyist, is a bit more circumspect but in some ways equally dismissive of Levi whom he labels “a Left social democrat...resistant to Leninism and democratic centralism.” James P. Cannon and the *Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 224.

[9] David Fernbach, “Editorial Introduction to Paul Levi, *Our Path and What Is the Crime?*”

Historical Materialism, (2009) 17, 3: 103. Broue, although sympathetic to Levi's leadership of the KPD, never directly criticizes Lenin and Trotsky's defense of Levi's expulsion.

[10] These organizational norms were not limited to organizations in the Stalinist and Maoist tradition, but have been adopted by most English-speaking Trotskyist organizations. See James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (Chippendale, Australia: Resistance Books, 2001) [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1940/party>].

[11] The most important work is Marcel Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin* (London: Merlin Press, 1980). On the discontinuity between Bolshevik practice and what is today described as "Leninism," see Valentine Garrantana, "Stalin, Lenin and 'Leninism'" *New Left Review* I/103 (May-June 1977). Alexander Rabinowitch's pathbreaking work — *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July Uprising* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1968); *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976) and *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2007) demonstrate that prior to late 1918 there was barely a hint of the political "homogeneity" that purportedly characterized the Bolsheviks.

[12] Paul Kellogg, "Leninism — It's Not What You Think," *Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies*, (Fall 2009), 5,2: 41-63.

[13] *The Lessons of October* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971) [<http://www.marxist.com/classics-old/trotsky/lessonsoct.html>].

[14] For an excellent contemporary defense of the centrality of an independent revolutionary workers organization with deep roots and sustained collective experience in the class struggle before the revolution, that attempts to integrate the insights of the new social historians of the Russian working class, to the victory of the Russian Revolution, see John Marot, "Class Conflict, Political Competition and Social Transformation: Critical Perspectives on the Social History of the Russian Revolution," *Revolutionary Russia* (December 1994) 7,2: 111-163; and "Political Leadership and Working-Class Agency in the Russian Revolution: Reply to William G. Rosenberg and S.A. Smith," *Revolutionary Russia* (June 1996) 9,1: 114-128.

[15] Lih acknowledges the work of one of the dissident Trotskyists, Hal Draper, "The Myth of Lenin's 'Concept of the Party' — What They Did to What Is To Be Done?" (1990) [<http://www2.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/archive/draper/1990/myth/myth.htm>] See also Steve Zeluck, "The Evolution of Lenin's Views on the Party Or, Lenin on Regroupment" *Against the Current* (Old Series) (Winter 1985). In a recent essay, Lih argues that Lenin remained a Kautskyian through 1916, even against Kautsky after 1914. Lars Lih, "Lenin's Aggressive Unoriginality, 1914-1916," *Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies*, (Fall 2009), 5,2: 90-112.

[16] Paul LeBlanc's *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993) is a good example of this approach.

[17] Lih also demystifies "economism." Not only were the "economists" not Lenin's main polemical target in WITBD, but Lenin believed strongly that revolutionary socialists had to root themselves in militant workplace struggles. He and the mainstream of social-democracy internationally, rejected restricting socialist education and organizing to workplace struggles, abandoning the struggle for political freedom and power. The "economists" vision of the workers' movement, in fact, rejected workplace militancy. As David Finkel points out in "Another Look at

*What Is To Be Done?*” (*Changes*, 1980, 22-24), the “economists” aspired to the role of reformist social-democrats, advocating bureaucratic trade unions engaged in routine collective bargaining and grievance handling, state-regulated labor-management relations, and state regulation of wages and hours.

[18] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm>.

[19] Paul LeBlanc’s useful study of Lenin, like many “activist” writers, denies that Lenin remained a Kautskyian through at least 1914. Against Zeluck (“The Evolution of Lenin’s Views”), LeBlanc argues, erroneously, “At least for Russia itself, the essential components of the Leninist party had become fully developed theoretically in the years 1903 to 1914.” Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 209.

[20] Draper, “What Have They Done”; Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 79-87.

[21] Luxemburg’s famous “Organizational Questions of the Russian Social-Democracy” (1904) [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/index.htm>], re-titled *Leninism or Marxism?* by the ex-Communist Bertram Wolfe in 1961 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), is often presented as a democratic, revolutionary socialist response to WITBD and a prophetic warning about how Lenin’s view of the party led to the Stalinist-bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Unfortunately, Luxemburg ended up defending the undemocratic practices of the minority (“Mensheviks”) against the demands of the majority (“Bolsheviks”) that the Iskra editorial board respect the decisions of the party congress.

[22] L. Trotsky, “Three Concepts of the Russian Revolution” in *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941). [[www.internationalist.org/three.html](http://www.internationalist.org/three.html)] Lenin had presented his perspective during the 1905 revolution in *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*. As Rabinowitz points out in *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, many of the tactical divisions among the Bolsheviks in 1917 flowed from the ambiguity of their strategic vision of a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.”

[23] The following argument is presented on ESSF in greater historical detail in C. Post, [The Emergence of the Mass Workers’ Parties and Trade Unions](#).

[24] Richard Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of the Trade Unions* (London: Pluto Press, 1971).

[25] This is the central insight of Marot’s “Class Conflict, Political Competition and Social Transformation.”

[26] Victoria Bonnel’s *Roots of Rebellion: Workers’ Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) details the profound limits on trade union freedom in the Tsarist period.

[27] See C. Post and K. Wainer, *Socialist Organization Today* (Detroit, MI: Solidarity Pamphlet, 2006) [<http://www.solidarity-us.org/pdfs/socialistorgtoday.pdf>].