

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > On the Left (Europe) > History of the Left (Europe, except France and Britain) > History (modern) (Europe) > History of people's struggles (Europe) > **The Debate at Halle - Which way for the German revolution? On the USPD (...)**

The Debate at Halle - Which way for the German revolution? On the USPD congress in October 1920

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***Martov and Zinoviev: Head to Head in Halle.* Edited with introductory essays by Ben Lewis and Lars T. Lih. November Publications Ltd., First Edition 2011, 229 pages, \$22 paperback.**

THERE WERE TWO defining moments in the history of the international working-class movement in the first half of the 20th century. The first, by far the most discussed and written about for obvious reasons, was the revolution in Russia in October 1917 and its subsequent isolation and defeat. The second was the disaster in the German movement, which had been for half a century the model of a militant, socialist working-class movement, and the subsequent collapse of that movement in the face of Nazism.

The two stories were intimately connected but the second, perhaps the most important, has been much less explored within the left. The vast literature on the subject in English, German, Russian and other languages doesn't really fit anybody's party line. The subject is left to academic specialists. The book under review is one of the few attempts to present this largely untold story to a contemporary, non-academic audience.

In April of 1917 the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) was formed by long time leaders of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), not all of them particularly left wing, who had become increasingly alienated from the wartime leadership of the SPD. (In this review I will follow the standard practice and use either the initials or the simplified forms Independents or Social Democrats.)

The alienation began with the decision of the SPD leadership in August of 1914, not simply to support Imperial Germany in the war but to take the lead in whipping up the chauvinist hysteria that made possible this betrayal of what the movement had stood for. This split preceded by several months the Russian October Revolution. The February upheaval in Russia undoubtedly encouraged the German movement, but did not create it. In fact, the expulsion of the left wing of the SPD from the parliamentary fraction, a move which precipitated the split, took place even earlier, in January of 1917.

But the reaction of the SPD leadership to the revolt against the war by party supporters, especially those in the conscript army, was what led to the final split. The SPD came to power when the popular revolt, led by its own supporters and members organized in the *räte* or councils, made it impossible for the Hohenzollern monarchy to remain in power. Indeed, had the emperor not fled to Holland it is likely that he would not have remained in existence.

But while the SPD leadership came to power as a result of the revolt in the council movement, it had no intention of submitting to the control of that movement. Instead, it set about replacing the monarchy with the parliament that had been for several decades, as Wilhelm Liebknecht put it, “the fig leaf of absolutism.”

This repudiation of the movement that had brought it to power made the SPD acceptable, even desirable, to the social classes and institutions that had lost their former protector. The leadership of the SPD actively sought their support, undoubtedly thinking they could use this new position of power to implement, gradually and carefully, reforms that would lead to the socialist society of the future. But the immediate task was to quell the popular upsurge that had bought them to power.

If anything, the commentaries by Ben Lewis and Lars Lih underestimate the enormity of this ultimately suicidal project of the SPD leadership. They mention several times the use of the Freikorps — the proto-Nazi militia composed of young, demobilized, conscripts unable to adjust to a civilian life that they had never really experienced — to suppress the council movement that bought the SPD to power. But this chapter in history needs to be emphasized. There is only one source I know of that begins to adequately cover it (*Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany, 1918-1923*, by Robert G. L. Waite, Harvard Historical Studies, 1969, available on Amazon).

Without understanding this history you cannot understand why the standard interpretation of the USPD’s hostility towards the SPD leadership as mere sectarianism is a complete distortion of the historical reality.

Martov’s Speech

In the parliamentary elections of June 1920, the USPD won almost as many votes and seats as did the SPD. Together they won over 39% of the vote. The question for both parties was: what next?

The congress of the USPD in October 1920 took place in Halle. The conference was dominated by the debate between two Russians, Grigory Zinoviev and Julius Martov.

The issue was posed very clearly. Should the USPD support the efforts to form a new international, the so-called “Second-and-a-half International,” which would attempt to revive the pre-war International that had been destroyed by the pro-war leaderships of the member parties? Or should the USPD join the new Third (Communist) International, which was in effect a division of the foreign office of the new soviet republic?

The advocate of the second-and-a-half international was Julius Martov. Martov is most remembered as Lenin’s leading opponent in the 1902 debates over how to relate to the official state-run union movement, and later he was the most outspoken opponent of the October Revolution. Nevertheless, Martov was a revolutionary of long standing whose personal courage and commitment were never questioned.

After the February Revolution, Martov was as critical as Lenin was of those Russian socialists who joined the provisional government, which was dominated by unelected veterans of the old Duma — the fig-leaf of Russian absolutism. Unlike Lenin, however, he believed that they could be won over to the cause of a republic based on the soviets, and he opposed the Communists (Bolsheviks) when, after winning a majority in the soviets, they moved in October 1917 to dissolve the unelected provisional government. He remained in Russia where he continued to function as a loyal oppositionist to the Communist-dominated soviet government.

The translation of Martov’s speech that is included in this book is, to my mind, its most valuable

contribution. I had never read it before, and it is a clear, and devastating, self-portrayal of what motivated the “left” critics of the October Revolution. It was not opposition to the dictatorial methods the Communist government resorted to in response to foreign invasion and the economic crisis that invasion provoked. It was fear of the outraged masses who dominated the Russian soviets and the German räte. Consider the following quote from the beginning of the speech.

“And if it [reformism — EH] has not entirely disappeared from the workers’ movement ... this is due only to the primitive and contagious reaction against reformism that has swept across Europe — a reaction of the wide masses against a reformism gone bankrupt, a reaction based on feelings not awareness. This reaction has carried chaos, demoralization and disorganization into the entire workers’ movement and in this way it has temporarily thrown the remaining section of the workers back into the embrace of the crafty politicians and wheeler-dealers of the reformist camp.”

Martov goes on in this vein for some time. He mentions the increasing restrictions on political opposition in the Soviet Union, but this part of his speech is pretty perfunctory — and since Martov was living in Russia and was given a passport to deliver this virulent attack on the Third International and the Russian government to a German movement whose support for that same government and international was vital, he wasn’t really in a position to make much of this issue.

It is clear from his own speech that what Martov feared was the revolutionary enthusiasm sweeping through the workers’ movement, not only in Germany but throughout Europe.

Zinoviev’s Speech

The speech at Halle by Zinoviev, the head of the Communist International, is better known. For most detractors of the October Revolution, it is a classic text proving that from day one the new soviet government could not stomach any criticism or allow any opposition. The Comintern’s insistence on adoption without debate or amendments of the notorious “twenty-one points” (e.g. the exclusion of explicitly named Social Democratic leaders) as a precondition for a party’s acceptance into the new International is taken as proof of the proposition.

But there is more to it than that. What Zinoviev and the leadership of the Russian party were doing is appealing to the very revulsion against the old SPD tradition which Martov denounced in his speech.

It was not just the discredited party leadership that was repudiated by this set of conditions. The large body of workers who, for historical reasons, remained loyal to the old (Second) International were also placed outside the pale.

The insistence, in point 10 of the 21 points, that adherents to the new international were to avoid any contact with the trade union international affiliated to the Second International meant that there could be no attempt to win over the millions of workers who remained members of those unions.

Zinoviev’s speech is a brilliant attack on, and exposure of, the treason of the leadership of the pre-war International. Even more important was his emphasis on the danger represented by Martov and his associates in the USPD, like Karl Kautsky, whose fear of revolution led them to moderate their attacks on that leadership and play down the need for an open break with it.

As he had throughout his career in the Russian movement, Martov based his hopes in the “spontaneous” development of working-class militancy which, at some point in the future, would overwhelm the reformist tendencies in the movement. Since this was to take place in the future, one could remain vague as to how this defeat of the reformist leadership would actually come about.

Martov's problem in 1920, as in 1917, was that working-class militancy led, in the here and now, to an open split with the reformist leadership. And Martov's response was to try and find some way to calm things down. But neither the old leadership nor the new militants were in the mood for that.

Martov emphasizes the threat of uncontrolled, ill-thought-out militancy to the unity of the workers' movement. He is silent about the reformist leadership's use of armed reaction against the workers' movement, including their own supporters.

At the Halle Congress, Zinoviev won out. The USPD right wing was soundly defeated, and the USPD left merged with the newly formed Communist Party of Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) and the newly formed Third International. But the consequences of this split were not what Zinoviev and the Russian leadership had anticipated.

Within a year the new KPD was involved in an unforeseen and disastrous "March Action" (1921), an attempt at an armed uprising by a small revolutionary minority, which had the effect of splitting the German workers' movement. And the split persisted as the Nazi threat grew.

Was this inevitable? Could the new KPD have developed a strategy that would win over the working-class base of the SPD rather than alienating it? And, more to the point, did Zinoviev and the leadership of the Russian party bear some responsibility for this development?

The new soviet government was under tremendous pressure because of the military invasion that was destroying the country. The German government was complicit in this armed assault against what was still a workers' state. There was a measure of desperation behind the move to set up a new International. And there is no question that Zinoviev's speech and the demand for an immediate split in the workers' movement did appeal to that section of the movement whose anger led to a suicidal confrontation with the government without any attempt to win over the majority of the class.*

Historical Footnote: Another Strategy?

Was there a third alternative? There is no way of knowing, of course, whether any alternative would have worked. The demoralization of the movement as a consequence of the defeat of the Russian working class might have made any revolution outside Russia impossible. But that there was an alternative is, I think, proved by the history of the Russian movement itself.

There is, of course, the history from February to October 1917, when the newly formed Communist Party fought a seven-month political campaign to win a majority of the soviets. But I think there is a more relevant analogy in the campaign years earlier by the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) to win over the worker militants in the pro-Tsarist so-called Zubatov unions.

Sergei Zubatov was a militant underground activist in the Narodnaya Voliya or People's Will party, a predecessor of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. At some point he was turned by the Okhrana, the Tsarist secret police. But he was unable to adjust to the role of a simple traitor and renegade. He invented for himself a sort of Christian socialism that saw the struggle of workers against capitalist oppression through trade unions as a kind of sacred crusade which had nothing to do with the struggle to replace Tsarism with a democratic republic. The struggle for democracy was as foreign and unchristian as capitalism itself.

The Okhrana had already experimented with this idea, and it made sense in a pre-capitalist imperial system where capital was mostly foreign capital. The notion that the Tsarist autocracy could act as a kind of arbitrator between foreign capitalists and the exploited Russian workers, a defender of the latter against the excesses of the former, had an appeal in this environment.

The Zubatov unions enjoyed considerable success. Previously, the only trade union movement was an underground movement whose leadership was heavily influenced by revolutionary intellectuals inspired by the German socialist movement. These underground unions could not compete with the Zubatov unions, which were flooded with recruits. Many of the new movement's leaders had been trained in the underground social democratic unions.**

The question before the pre-revolutionary underground socialist movement was: how do we relate to this movement? We are not talking, at this point, of a movement led by reformist socialists. We are talking about a movement run by the Okhrana.

The underground movement split into roughly three camps. One, the Mensheviks, advocated working in the new unions and remaining silent on the question of political democracy. Not surprisingly, one of the leaders of this tendency was Julius Martov.

On the other side were those socialists who regarded any association with these police-run unions as a betrayal of the socialist movement. These included Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and perhaps most importantly the leadership of the Jewish Bund, which in Poland, the Ukraine and parts of Russia was the most successful of the socialist unions.

Ironically, when the Zubatov-run competitors of the Bund organized strike waves the Bund leadership, having no base in these new unions, was forced to enter into "united fronts" with the Zubatov leadership. The same pattern would be repeated in Germany later in the 1920s when the KPD had to enter into "united fronts" with the SPD leadership of the unions.

The third tendency, the Bolshevik faction of the underground socialist movement, argued for entry into the new unions. But unlike the Mensheviks, they argued for continuing to present for "the full social democratic program," that is political democracy. Of necessity, that meant an underground apparatus that could agitate through pamphlets and newspapers for a republic. That is the thesis that Lenin defended in *What is to be Done?*

When the Zubatov unions collapsed in the revolution of 1905 they were replaced, after the revolution was defeated, by new, legal unions whose leaders were invariably social democrats. And like their German counterparts in 1917, these Russian social democrats hushed up any talk of revolution — which in Tsarist Russia meant any talk about political democracy.

So frightened by the prospect of an anti-Tsarist revolt were these leaders in 1910, when a new wave of strikes broke out, that they tried to quell them.

The new recruits who poured into the unions in the wake of this upheaval responded by electing new leaders from "the Pravda list" named after the newspaper *Pravda* (Truth), edited at that point by Lenin. The leaders who were thrown out by the newly militant workers denounced them in language remarkably similar to those used by Martov at the Halle congress.

Would Lenin's approach have worked in Germany in 1920? No one knows. It wasn't tried.

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P.S.

* Against the Current (ATC) 156, January/February 2012.