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Fifty Years Ago - 1914: The Great Schism in the Second International

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HISTORY has come to ascribe to Bolshevism the responsibility for the rift in the international workers' movement. But the role of the historian is to challenge established notions and to undo the damage wrought by the distorting myths of the past. A case in point is the emergence of Communism and the breach it is supposed to have caused in the international socialist movement. In fact, that breach was not the result of the foundation in Moscow, in March 1919, of the Third International: it was the result of the collapse of socialism in August 1914, of the failure of internationalism, of the dramatic revelation of incapacity hitherto concealed by verbal daring and electoral successes.

There was a hope, at the time, that the war would only be a parenthesis in the history of socialism. This was suggested by no less a figure than Karl Kautsky, who was almost the official oracle of international socialism before the First World War. Kautsky tried to minimize the significance and meaning of the outbreak of war and was even anxious to deny that this had been a catastrophe or even a defeat for the proletariat. He had also gravely explained in *Die Neue Zeit* that "the International cannot be an effective instrument in time of war: it is essentially a peace-time instrument." [1] Kautsky, therefore, wanted leaders and led to be patient until the generals had settled their quarrels, and to place a time-limit on their hatreds: once peace had returned, the workers' representatives would again be fraternally united in the bosom of the International.

All this was pure illusion. The proletariat had until then been asked to forge alliances beyond national boundaries against capitalism and war. But the proletariat of each country was now separated by trenches; French socialists now saw "pan-Germanism" as their worst enemy; German socialists saw Tsarist Russia as their worst enemy; as Rosa Luxemburg put it, the slogan "Proletarians of all countries, unite" had now been changed into "Proletarians of all countries, unite in peace-time, but cut each others' throats in wartime." [2] From then on, things could never be the same again.

Ever since its foundation in 1889, the Second International had proclaimed its opposition to war, and had affirmed the link between capitalism and war: "War, which is the inevitable result of present economic conditions, will only finally disappear with the disappearance of capitalism itself." [3] But this principle, however well founded, was not of a kind to induce action against the threat of war; it was hardly sufficient to tell the masses that war, being the inevitable product of capitalism, they must have socialism or they would have war. It was a good deal more satisfactory to think that war and capitalism being linked, the struggle against war would also be a struggle against capitalism: by preventing war, socialists would also rob capitalism of one of its vital outlets. This, rather than the first formula, became one of the main themes of the International.

The resolutions voted at the various Congresses of the International on the subject of war became steadily more radical as diplomatic tension in Europe increased, and as grew more frequent the series of international incidents which foreshadowed ultimate conflict. But radical though they were,

these resolutions left a good deal unresolved. The International was dominated by the strength and prestige of the German socialists. But the German socialists had no intention of having anyone dictate to them what means should be adopted to prevent war; and rather than allow a precise definition of these means in an official resolution, they saw to it that only such resolutions should be passed which were both revolutionary in sentiment and ambiguous as to practical proposals. The accusation which Jaurès had levelled against social-democracy in regard to matters of national policy was also valid on the international plane: "You have concealed from the working classes your poverty in action by taking refuge in inflexible theoretical formulas." [4]

This dual concern to satisfy the desire for revolutionary action on the one hand, and to accept no firm commitment on the other, led to the vote of the famous resolution on war at the Stuttgart Congress of 1907; or rather, the International, unable to agree to any of the resolutions put forward, agreed to the amendment put forward by Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Martov. This solemnly declared that "should war none the less break out (i.e. despite the workers' opposition), it is their duty to intervene in order to bring it promptly to an end, and with all their strength to make use of the economic and political crisis created by the war to stir up the deepest strata of the people and precipitate the fall of capitalist domination." [5]

This commitment was confirmed at the last Congresses of the International, in Copenhagen in 1910 and Basle in 1912, and there was added to it a number of statements which appeared to underline the determination of socialists to turn war into revolution, should the capitalists be criminal and reckless enough to start a conflagration. In Basle, the vaults of the Cathedral had echoed with calls to action, while warnings and ultimata had been issued to the European chancelleries. Edouard Vaillant, the old and still militant Communard, had warned that "if ... capitalism starts a war, it will have to face the consequences at the hands of the proletariat"; "these consequences," he had added, "have a name: social revolution." [6] Jaurès had echoed the warning and so electric was the atmosphere that a socialist as mild and down to earth as the Belgian Anseele had also been led to scale the heights of revolutionary eloquence: "The International," he had said, "is powerful enough to speak to governments with the voice of command and, if necessary, deeds will follow words." [7]

Declarations such as these were not merely attributed to the enthusiastic climate of international Congresses. On the contrary, they were held to be a faithful reflection of the considered and balanced judgment of the European proletariat. Karl Kautsky seemed only to be expressing a widely-held view when he wrote in 1909: "World War threatens ever more closely; but war means revolution." [8]

We know what did in fact happen. In its first years at least, war was quite the reverse of revolution. It meant the rallying of the vast majority of socialist leaders to the call of patriotism, of national defence and of class collaboration. This complete reversal was bound to be the more keenly felt as a betrayal, for opposition to war, in the absence of any opportunity for socialists to apply their economic programme, had earlier come to seem the essence of socialism.

The division of the European proletariat into two camps, separated by an abyss of hatred and blood, had crucial consequences. It led to, or at least dramatically accelerated, the integration into capitalist society of an important part of the socialist movement. In turn, this destroyed the precarious co-existence which had somehow been established before the war between revolutionaries and reformists inside the working-class parties and inside the International. That co-existence was doomed as soon as the "moderate" socialists gave up the very idea of class struggle and offered their assistance to the bourgeoisie, precisely at the moment when the latter's bankruptcy was demonstrated in war. It matters very little whether the split came from the left (as was generally the case) or, as in France, from the right. The very notion of unity was irremediably shattered with the outbreak of war.

Furthermore, the long years of war meant that the class collaboration begun in August 1914 had time to take root and to spread to many facets of life, from industrial relations to co-operation with the military. Of course, this integration within capitalist society was not altogether new. There had already been many signs of it before 1914, in the period described as that of "the peaceful development of the working-class movements." But bourgeois hostility had both limited that integration and had also served to conceal it. Besides, as it was accompanied by the marked advance of the socialist parties, it could easily be construed as a continued investment of the capitalist citadel, rather than as a capitulation before the capitalist system. The experience of the war years was altogether different: the absence of reaction to the outbreak of war, the emphasis on national unity, and the cessation of all socialist propaganda turned the socialists' leaders into anything but socialist conquerors; they seemed more like hostages, though of a rather special kind – hostages eager to serve their captors.

Nowhere had this eagerness more important consequences than in Germany where revolutionary socialism, in 1918, was opposed, not by reformist but by counter-revolutionary socialism. Socialist "moderates" were no less chauvinistic in France or in Britain than in Germany. But Germany was the country of Hohenzollern absolutism, the State whose monarch had denounced the socialists as the enemies of the nation, and whose semi-feudal structures seemed to leave no room for the illusions of parliamentarism. Germany was also the country with the best organized working-class in Europe, and nowhere was theoretical sophistication greater or Marxism more deeply implanted. It was the German socialist electorate which had been described at the Basle Congress as a "wonderful guarantee (of peace) to the peoples." [9]

Yet, it was here above all that Social-Democracy placed itself at the service of the State, of the capitalist, imperialist and autocratic State. On the diplomatic or quasi-diplomatic plane, leaders like Scheidemann, Südekum and Parvus set out on missions to neutral countries to influence "brother parties" and to justify the policies of the Imperial Government. On the domestic front, socialist "good will" was no less evident. As early as August 2, 1914, the trade union leaders had called off all impending strikes and had agreed that they would no longer pay out any strike allowances, whatever the circumstances of the strike. [10] This remained their attitude throughout the war, and they had the full support of the political leaders. The socialists were not members of the Government until October 1918, but close though discreet contacts existed between Scheidemann and the Chancellor. Scheidemann's speeches in the Reichstag, while apparently directed against Government policy, were in fact designed to make it easier for the Government to define their views. The debates were often preceded by talks between Scheidemann and the Chancellor, in the course of which the texts of their respective speeches were agreed. [11]

For their part, the authorities offered the socialist leaders valuable help in their struggle against the dissident minority, especially with regard to newspaper censorship and the organization of meetings. This help, sometimes called for by the leaders, often took the form of direct intervention by the military in the internal affairs of the Party. In his concern to enhance the authority and prestige of the social-democratic leadership, a high civil servant even felt it necessary to ask the bourgeois Press to tone down its praise of that leadership, as "such praise complicates rather than assists their work." [12] This solicitude alone would be sufficient to show how rapidly integration had progressed since the beginning of the war. Furthermore, the most respected among the socialist leaders proclaimed that the new policy must be seen neither as a lesser evil nor as a transient necessity, but that it marked on the contrary a decisive and final reappraisal of socialist strategy.

In France, where class collaboration was applied in the most varied realms and found its ultimate expression in ministerial participation, the principal champion of the new philosophy was Albert Thomas. For him, it was necessary that "the workers should get used to see the employer class as, to a great extent, the trustee of the future of industry." [13] "It is necessary," Thomas was also saying

in April 1916, "that industrial unity should endure in peacetime." [14]

For those socialists who refused to support the war and who continued to see capitalist governments as class enemies, the attitudes of the socialist leadership created a situation that was bound to become intolerable: inevitably, the conflict between the majority and the minority grew even more acute. Before long, the relations between them were characterized by crude invective and even physical violence. In Germany, a socialist of the prominence of David publicly accused Hugo Haase, formerly the chairman of the socialist group in the Reichstag, of being a foreign agent. [15] In France, the minority leader Merrheim went to trade union meetings accompanied by two watchdogs, for protection against his "comrades." [16]

Once the first shock had been absorbed, the opponents of the new policy regrouped themselves and, with varying degrees of sharpness and coherence, resumed their socialist agitation. In France, anti-war and revolutionary sentiments were mainly to be found among trade union elements. In Germany, on the other hand, the opposition, more numerous but less homogeneous, marshalled its forces within the Party and was even found in its parliamentary group. It was in fact in the parliamentary group that the first steps were taken which led to the formation, first, of the USPD (Independent Social-Democratic Party), and then of the German Communist Party. Twenty socialist deputies had, in December 1915, voted against war credits: the right-wing majority forbade them to express their views publicly. The twenty then formed, in April 1916, a "Sozialdemokratische Arbeitsgemeinschaft." Despite the desire for unity constantly expressed by the dissidents, it was obvious that matters would not rest there. In January 1917, the dissidents met in separate conference, and the executive committee of the Party then declared that, in taking this step, the minority had, by its own will, excluded itself from the Party. [17] In these circumstances, the foundation conference of the USPD in Gotha, in April 1917, was only the acknowledgment of an existing situation. In pleading for unity, Kautsky was refusing to face reality. [18] Unity had ceased to exist. It had been killed by the war.

The same was true of the International. British socialists, and particularly Belgian and French socialists, refused to retain any link whatever with the socialists of enemy countries. Socialists from neutral countries, mainly the Dutch and the Swedes, tried to maintain the illusion that there was still a semblance of life amidst the ruins of what had been the Second International. But even their hopes were very modest. All they wanted was that the European socialist parties should agree to compare their respective views on the nature of the post-war settlement. Even this proved too bold for the socialists of the Entente powers. However, Swiss and Italian socialists, together with Russian socialists in exile and the minority anti-war groupings, came together, at Zimmerwald in September 1915, and Kienthal in April 1916. This led to the creation of a "Socialist International Commission." The majority of its members refused to make a final break with the "social-patriots," as they were urged to do by Lenin. But the virulent attacks that were levelled against the pro-war socialists clearly foreshadowed complete separation.

Such then were the consequences of the drama of 1914 for the European socialist movement; and the fact that pre-war unity between reformists and revolutionaries had rested on many unsatisfactory compromises, does not reduce the fundamental importance of the schism.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the socialist reaction to 1914 should have provoked passionate debate.

Bourgeois ideologists found in the "miracle of 1914" proof of the falsity of the Marxist schema and confirmation of the superiority of national over class allegiance. At the other end of the spectrum, Lenin, while admitting that "nationalist ideology ... has left deep marks in the mass of the petty-bourgeoisie and in a section of the proletariat" [19], attributed the major responsibility to the

opportunism which dominated most of the socialist parties before the war. According to him, this opportunism was based on the interests of a "labour aristocracy," feeding on the crumbs left to it by the bourgeoisie and relying, in their struggle against healthy socialist elements, on the support of their State apparatus. [20]

Responsibility has also been attributed to the propaganda of governments and the Press, to the fear of repression, and to the confusion of the socialist leaders, a confusion born of their complete unpreparedness. This last factor, allied to ideological weaknesses, must be reckoned to have been of decisive importance.

The socialist parties, it must be stressed again, had repeatedly issued the most energetic resolutions and warnings. But while the general staffs were getting ready, the International had altogether failed, notwithstanding its consciousness of the danger, to provide its own troops with any kind of precise instruction or concrete lead. However, the International itself would in any case have been unable to get a plan adopted and carried out by its member parties. Bebel had made the point with brutal frankness to the English and French socialists who had, at the Congress of Copenhagen in 1910, tried to reopen the question of strike action in the event of war: "It is your business to decide," he had said, "and you can decide what you like, but we Germans will not participate." [21] Nor indeed could they be bound, since the Second International was only a loose federation of entirely autonomous parties, whose only executive organ, the International Socialist Bureau, was only charged with the task of information and co-ordination.

Added to these structural weaknesses, there were also major ideological deficiencies. It was generally agreed that war was the product of capitalism. But if the cause of modern wars resided in capitalism, it did not seem very logical to attribute the responsibility of war to a specific aggressor against an innocent victim. This, however, was the clear implication of the acknowledgment in the resolutions of the International of the right of self-defence.

A second difficulty lay in the attempt to distinguish with any degree of certainty between a war of defence and a war of conquest, particularly in periods of acute international crisis. In 1907, Kautsky had denied that such a distinction was possible, and had put forward a criterion he claimed to be more solid, namely the interest of the proletariat. But how was such a rule to be applied in an international conflict between coalitions of states in which liberal democratic states were allied to autocratic ones? Later, Kautsky was to judge that self-defence and the interest of the proletariat were both inadequate criteria, and sought to rely on the criterion of invasion. This was an absolute evil, and where the guilty party could not be determined, the invaded country had the right and even the duty to defend itself. The response of the proletariat was thus made to depend, not on the nature of war itself, but on particular military operations.

Marxist doctrine on the subject of war was itself inadequate. [22] Marx had never given systematic attention to the problem. Neither he nor Engels had any pacifist leanings. On the contrary, they thought of war as one of the main forcing grounds of revolution. [23] But it was Engels who, in 1892, supplied a basic "text" on the subject of war, in the form of an article written for the Almanach of the French Parti Ouvrier, which was then reproduced with an addendum in Die Neue Zeit. This article is extremely important for, rightly or wrongly, it was later used as a justification of German socialism's attitude to the First World War.

In his article, Engels said that in the event of war between France and Russia on the one side, and Germany and Austria on the other, German socialists would have the duty to defend their country, to "the last man." Admittedly, France was the country of the Revolution, albeit of the Bourgeois Revolution; but "Tsarist Russia is the enemy of all Western peoples," so that "France, allied to Russia, would bring not the least shred of freedom to Germany." Also, it was necessary to take in to

account the fact that the future of Germany would soon belong to the socialist party, whose victory, meaning the taking of power, was, according to Engels, very near: "about ten years" would see this come about. Engels also foresaw that Germany would be invaded by French armies, and would solely be fighting for its national existence. The German socialists would have to fight because "confronted with a (French) Republic at the service of the Tsar, German socialism would undoubtedly represent the proletarian revolution." Its inspiration would be the French revolutionaries of 1793.

In the last years of his life, Engels keenly followed the progress of social-democracy in Germany, and his article had undoubtedly been influenced by his hopes of its coming victory. In the addendum which he wrote for *Die Neue Zeit*, he also explained that the article had been written under the immediate impact of the visit of the French fleet to Kronstadt, the first demonstration of the alliance between France and Russia. However, in the use that was subsequently made of Engels' text, it was overlooked that his attitude to war rested on certain premises which had not been fulfilled, namely that the country should have been invaded and, even more important, the existence or at least the imminence of a socialist regime in Germany. In 1914, Germany was still Imperial Germany and, notwithstanding electoral successes, there was nothing to suggest that the triumph of socialism lay only a few years ahead.

Marx himself had had no real knowledge of the era of imperialism. Nor had Engels, in the few years in which he followed its early development, been able to fathom all its implications. The inadequacy of their views for the new era should have led their followers to re-examine the whole problem in depth. But, save for some exceptions, mainly to be found in the "radical" minority wing of German socialism, most socialist leaders, rather than engage in a thorough reappraisal of the question, were content to stick to the texts or to slogans. European socialism paid dearly for their failure.

In the last analysis, it is the whole nature of European socialism, rather than any particular feature of it, which needs to be taken into account to explain its reaction to the outbreak of war. Some of the contradictions from which it suffered were even more fundamental than those already mentioned; for instance, the purely defensive strategy of a self-proclaimed revolutionary movement. In actual fact, the very notion of revolution had come to have an hypothetical and defensive meaning: peaceful evolution and purely constitutional means would produce a parliamentary majority, which would give the socialists the legal right to transform the structure of society. The bourgeoisie might then be tempted to infringe constitutional processes and to resort to violence. The socialists would, in that case, answer violence with violence. [24] But no consideration was given to the question of the means by which the socialists would meet the threat of bourgeois violence. The progress of the organized working-class movement and its electoral successes [25] had created a climate of optimism, particularly in Germany, which made a revolutionary and offensive strategy appear as superfluous and as smacking of adventurism. Given this climate and attitude, how likely was it that Western socialists would successfully meet the challenge of 1914, steeped as they were in the contradiction between their insistence on the necessity of a peaceful and gradual conquest of power on the one hand, and their warning of the approach, indeed of the inevitability, of war. The German "radicals" alone, with Rosa Luxemburg at their head, proposed the only policy which was capable of resolving the contradiction, namely militant class struggle. Notwithstanding all the accusations of "romanticism" and "adventurism," they, almost alone, were concerned to prepare the working class to meet the danger of war. The theory of the general strike, which Rosa Luxemburg had revitalized, on the basis of the experience of the 1905 revolution, pointed to an appropriate strategy which the socialist parties could have elaborated together had they really wanted to fulfil the purposes they proclaimed. Instead, they chose to denounce the "romantic" extremism of the socialist left and to proclaim, with Kautsky, that the left constituted the "principal internal enemy" of socialism. [26] For the rest, they relied on the power of words and on the formal impressiveness of their political organization.

The abdication of 1914 caused even the most seasoned activists to lapse into utter despair. Yet, it only represented the last episode in a long series of socialist derelictions. The first major confrontation between the old order and the European proletariat thus occurred on a battlefield which had been deserted by the socialist leaders. Three years later, however, proletarian triumph followed proletarian defeat – and its name was October.

Marcel Liebman

NOTES

1. *Die Neue Zeit*, XXXIII, 1914-15, vol.1, p.248.
2. P. Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg* (1940), p.238.
3. Congrès International Ouvrier Socialiste de Paris (12-20 juillet 1889): Resolutions (Paris 1889), p.22.
4. Congrès International d'Amsterdam, *Compte-rendu analytique* (Brussels. 1904), pp. 81-2.
5. G.D.H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought*, vol.III, Pt.I, The Second International (1889-1914) (1956), p.69.
6. Ausserordentlicher Internationaler Sozialistenkongress zu Basel am 24. und 25. November 1912 (Berlin 1912), p.38.
7. Ibid., p.7.
8. K. Kautsky, *Le Chemin du Pouvoir* (Paris 1910), p.162.
9. C. Andler, *Le Socialisme Imperialiste de l'Allemagne Contemporaine* (Paris 1918), p.20.
10. C. Schorske, *German Social Democracy (1905-1917)* (Cambridge, Mass. 1955), p.289.
11. E. Bevan, *German Social-Democracy and the War* (1918), pp.136-8.
12. Revolutionäre Ereignisse and Probleme in Deutschland während die Periode der grossen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution (Berlin 1955), p.73. In a report to his Government, the diplomatic representative of Saxony in Berlin deplored the loss of influence of trade union leaders on the working classes. (ibid., p.16)
13. Ch. Maurras, *Les Chefs socialistes pendant la Guerre* (Paris 1918), p.294.
14. *L'Humanité*, 19 April 1916.
15. P. Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York 1962), p.288.
16. E. Dolléans, *Histoire du Mouvement Ouvrier*, vol.2, 1871-1936, 3rd ed. (Paris 1948), p.225.
17. E. Bevan, op. cit., p.147.
18. C. Schorske, op. cit., pp.314ff.
19. Lenin, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Moscow 1960), vol.XXI, p.158. The article in which the quotation

appears was published in March 1915.

20. Lenin, *La Faillite de la IIe Internationale* (published in September 1915) (Paris 1933), pp.51 and 59.

21. M. Drachkovitch, *De Karl Marx & Leon Blum: La Crise de la Social-Démocratie* (Geneva 1954), p.44.

22. For a short but thorough analysis of Marxism and war, see E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution (1917-1923)*, vol.III (1953), pp.549-66.

23. L. Kaufmann, *Die Einstellung Marx und Engels zu Krieg und Frieden* (Würzburg 1932), pp.95ff.

24. As far as revolution was concerned, many authors based their definition of it, not on the method by which power might be obtained, but on the aim pursued. The concept of revolution then became so vague that Kautsky was able to describe German Social-Democracy as revolutionary “because it fights for the class interests of the proletariat”. (*Le Chemin du Pouvoir*, op. cit., p.1)

25. In 1890, the social-democrats had obtained more than 1,400,000 votes (19.7 per cent) and thirty-five seats in the Reichstag. In 1898, they had more than 2 million and in 1909, 3 million (31.7 per cent) and eighty-one seats. In 1912, as the leading German party, Social-Democracy was supported by 4,250,000 electors (about thirty-five per cent of the whole electorate) and numbered 110 deputies in the Reichstag.

26. C. Schorske, op. cit., p.253.

P.S.

* “1914: The Great Schism”. From The Socialist Register 1964, pp.283-292.:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebman/1964/xx/schism.htm>

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