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Historical events

August 1914 and World War I

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August, 1914 was truly a world-historical moment for European socialism. Forced to choose between its internationalist principles and the pull of nationalism, the movement collapsed as the latter sentiment revealed itself to be a much more powerful force than most socialists had expected. Their division over the war would prove of immeasurable importance to the future of Europe and the world. [1]

At the beginning of the 20th century the European socialist movement appeared to be an unstoppable force. The establishment of parliamentary institutions in most countries during the last third of the 19th century had opened the door to the creation of new political organizations calling themselves "Socialist," "Social Democratic," or "Labor" parties, some of which soon had tens or even hundreds of thousands of dues-paying members and millions of voters.

Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) was the quintessential model. Equipped with a theoretical and practical program largely grounded in Marxist principles, the party called for the overthrow of the system of competitive capitalism based on private property and its replacement by a socialist order based on cooperation and public property.

In addition to its demands for immediate reforms in such spheres as social insurance, collective bargaining rights, education and workplace safety, it supported the democratization of political and economic life and called for the universal emancipation of workers, oppressed minorities and women. By 1913 the SPD had over one million members and the electoral support of one-third of the country's 12 million voters.

On the national level, Europe's socialist parties had the backing of an even more rapidly-growing trade union movement, while their commitment to workers' internationalism was symbolized by their membership in the Socialist International, founded in 1889, to link the theoretical and practical aims of member parties around the world. [2] It appeared to many workers "and even to many in the ruling classes" that history was on the side of socialism and it was only a matter of time before the growing labor movement would bring capitalism to its knees.

Yet this powerful movement rapidly splintered and never fully recovered its strength. The outbreak of the First World War revealed a number of ideological and political tensions that had long been present within socialism but had never seemed divisive enough to challenge its fundamental unity.

The war acted as the catalyst: it destroyed the International and precipitated 30 years of upheaval that included the Russian revolutions of 1917, the longterm division of the labor movement into competing social democratic and communist currents, and the rise of fascism. By the time of the latter's defeat in 1945, these developments had fundamentally altered what it meant to be a socialist.

If the two decades preceding the outbreak of war can be regarded as socialism's halcyon days, its apparent strength was chimerical. During this time virtually all socialists believed that capitalism was obsolete and should (and inevitably would) be replaced by "socialism," but what that would look like remained vague and serious disagreements erupted about how to move toward it.

At the outset, the basic division in the movement was between reform-oriented socialists such as Edward Bernstein in Germany and Jean Jaurés in France, and more radical socialists such as August Bebel and Karl Kautsky in Germany, who believed that capitalist development paved the way for proletarian revolution.

Reformists argued that the movement should use the institutions of bourgeois democracy, such as parliament, to press for immediate reforms that over time would lead to socialist transformation. Indeed, some pushed for entering into coalition governments with moderate bourgeois parties to implement change.

Buttressed theoretically by Bernstein's "revisionist" challenge to some of Marx's fundamental assertions about the crisis-prone nature of capitalism and the inevitability of class struggle, this group also insisted that the movement openly recognize its reformist rather than its revolutionary character as a means of broadening its support to non-proletarian voters.

Over time the reform approach won a political base among many activists in the trade union and party organizations, who focused their activities on "bread and butter" issues and feared the repression that would follow violent political confrontation with the state. Bernstein's statement summed up what many felt:

"I freely admit that I have extraordinarily little feeling for, or interest in, what is usually termed "the final goal of socialism." This goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything."

The reformist approach encountered sharp opposition, however, from a solid majority of the movement's political leaders. The widely-respected Bebel, co-founder of the SPD, and Kautsky, known as the "Pope" of socialism, did not deny the importance of reforms for improving workers' political and economic circumstances, but rather insisted on reaffirming the party's revolutionary identity.

They had the strong support of key figures such as Victor Adler in Austria-Hungary, the Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, and Russia's V.I. Lenin among many others. These "radical" leaders not only repeatedly condemned "revisionism" at their own national party congresses and at the meetings of the International, but also produced an array of articles and books seeking to undercut Bernstein's theoretical claims and to reaffirm the predominance of Marxist theory within the movement. [3]

In practical terms, however, these often-acrimonious debates had little concrete impact on the day-to-day operations of the movement. Wherever the basic civil rights of bourgeois democracy and parliamentary institutions existed, even in pseudo-autocratic Germany where the Emperor sharply curtailed parliamentary power, socialist activity largely focused on expanding the parties' electoral strength, building the trade unions, and pressing for political and economic reforms.

Most socialists agreed with Kautsky that to prepare the masses for the coming revolution required raising their political consciousness, a task for which the party, the unions, and their myriad ancillary organizations were essential instruments. Hence the focus was on institution building and electioneering rather than on radical political action. It seemed imperative that the movements protect themselves by avoiding large-scale political confrontations with the state, while preserving their revolutionary purity by remaining in the parliamentary opposition rather than entering coalition governments with bourgeois parties.

Among the most controversial issues dividing socialists in the decade prior to the outbreak of the war was the use of the political mass strike. Some reformers, such as Bernstein, actually supported the mass-strike as a way to win concrete reforms, such as expanded suffrage. Others, such as the Austro-German radical theorist Rudolf Hilferding and his mentor Kautsky, argued that the political mass strike was a weapon that should be reserved for the final confrontation with the capitalists who, fearing socialist parliamentary gains, would attempt to roll back workers' rights and thus precipitate a violent confrontation.

To use the political strike prematurely, Hilferding and Kautsky asserted, would only invite massive state repression of

the movement's organizations, so carefully built up in Germany after the lifting of draconian anti-Socialist laws in the early 1890s.

A third current also emerged, however, one that led to new complications in inner-party politics. After establishing herself as a major opponent of revisionism with the publication of *Reform or Revolution* in 1900, in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905 Rosa Luxemburg also became increasingly critical of the party leadership's "passive" electoral strategy.

A participant in the revolution in Poland, Luxemburg had witnessed effective popular mobilization that included the use of mass strikes and now stressed their importance in educating workers for revolution. Importantly, she rejected the strait-jacketed separation of economic from political demands and the notion that the use of mass strikes was to be decided by the top-down tutelage of party officials. She sought to encourage workers to take action, to learn from their mistakes, and thus gain confidence. [4]

Many trade union leaders, such as the head of Germany's main trade union federation, Carl Legien, regarded the mass strike as an impractical, adventurist tactic. They resented the political debates on the issue as meddling in their affairs and, at the SPD's Mannheim Congress of 1906, managed to take the use of the mass strike off the agenda. This effort largely succeeded because a majority of the party leaders, including Bebel, came to share their feeling that the use of the mass-strike, especially in the sense promoted by Luxemburg, could get out of control.

Although individuals often crossed factional lines depending on the issue, the mass-strike debate revealed that three basic divisions had emerged within the German party. On the right, revisionism grew increasingly influential among a new generation of reform-oriented party leaders charged with overseeing an ever-growing and more complex set of institutions.

On the left arose a small group of leaders, such as Luxemburg and the especially sharp critic of German militarism, Karl Liebknecht, who aimed to steer the movement along a more radical course. It was the so-called "Marxist Center," however, led by Bebel, Kautsky and Hilferding, who commanded a majority of party support by holding high the banner of theoretical "orthodoxy" and the party's radical identity, but without actually challenging its reformist practice.

These fissures within German Social Democracy replicated themselves to various degrees in most European countries, but it is important to bear in mind that, despite the vitriolic and sometimes intensely personal conflicts that occurred, international socialism prior to 1914 was by-and-large a tolerant movement. The debates over revisionism, for example, usually fought out in the party press and at party congresses, resulted in virtually no expulsions of defeated exponents.

Even the much-criticized Bernstein remained a respected comrade. He had helped lead the party from exile during the period of the anti-socialist laws (1878-1890), had known Marx and Engels personally, and co-authored, with Kautsky, his one-time close friend, the SPD's model Erfurt Program of 1891. Expulsion was never really a serious option and the same was true for others, like Rosa Luxemburg, who raised the ire of the party executive.

It is also true that, for most socialist leaders of this period, quitting the party was never a serious choice. The party was the movement's vehicle for changing the world and it was their political home. For activists at all levels and in most countries, leadership often came with substantial personal risk. To voluntarily leave was tantamount to quitting one's post in the struggle, abandoning one's belief system, and turning one's back on the most important socialist organization with organic ties to the masses.

Although many socialists expected the rivalries among the imperialist powers eventually to result in a major conflagration, the events of the summer of 1914 caught them off guard. Many were on vacation in the weeks following the assassination of Austria-Hungary's heir to the throne, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, by a Serb nationalist on 22 June. As tensions in Europe rose, they responded as they always had when their governments threatened war: they mobilized mass demonstrations in protest.

In this case, though, the leaders of Europe's rival political blocs — the Triple Entente consisting of France, England, and Russia and the Triple Alliance linking Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy (which later dropped out) — were unable or unwilling to confine the conflict to the Balkans. In August they opted instead for all-out war.

Virtually all of Europe's socialist parties had to make a choice: they could stand on the long-established principle of socialist internationalism and reject their respective country's call to the colors or they could join in the national struggle as patriotic citizens. That a strong majority of socialist leaders across Europe chose the latter course ultimately shattered the movement and led to its permanent division.

The question is why they made that choice. Of course the answer is complex.

For the majority of socialists, capitalism and war were inextricably intertwined and some theorists, such as Hilferding, had written extensively linking the rise of finance capital to the aggressive colonial rivalries of the great powers, to the arms race on land and sea, and to the emergence of the alliance system that divided Europe into two armed camps.

Hilferding, like Lenin, believed that war could serve as a catalyst for proletarian revolution, but virtually no socialists wanted to promote such a scenario. On the contrary, most believed it was the labor movement's duty to combat militarism and to prevent the outbreak of war. In 1907 the International's Stuttgart Congress unanimously accepted a resolution, written by a subcommittee that included Bebel, Jaurés and Luxemburg, among others, which read as follows:

"If a war threatens to break out, it is the duty of the working classes and their parliamentary representatives in the countries involved, supported by the coordinating activity of the International Socialist Bureau, to exert every effort in order to prevent its outbreak. They must employ the means they consider most effective, which naturally vary according to the sharpening of the class struggle and the general political situation.

"In case war should break out anyway, it is their duty to intervene for its speedy termination and to strive with all their power to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule." [5]

The language of this statement was bold — but served primarily to paper over sharp disagreement among the committee members about how to respond to the outbreak of hostilities (e.g. with mass strikes, demonstrations, etc.). Moreover, their often heated debates revealed that, contrary to Marx and Engels's famous pronouncement in *The Communist Manifesto* that "proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," many socialists identified strongly with their respective countries and saw no contradiction between their commitment to international working-class solidarity and their nation's right to self-defense.

This commonly-held feeling meant that, rather than respond as one to any hostilities, their actions would depend on the degree to which they perceived their own country to be threatened by foreign aggression.

While the weaknesses of the International's position would become clear in 1914, after Stuttgart, however, the

movement forged an impressive “demonstration political culture” as it mobilized large numbers of workers against repeated threats to peace. [6] Socialist antiwar protests culminated in November of 1912 as the International responded to the start of the First Balkan War “in which Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro attacked and defeated the Ottoman Empire” with a Europe-wide series of antiwar demonstrations attended by hundreds of thousands of participants.

The penultimate event of the protests took place at the International’s extraordinary Basel Congress on 25 November, at which tens of thousands of demonstrators welcomed delegations from across Europe. Asserting that “The ruling class’ fear of a proletarian revolution resulting from a world war has proved to be an essential guarantee of peace,” the Congress left many feeling confident. As Jaurés put it to a friend, “Don’t worry, the Socialists will do their duty. Four million German socialists will rise like one man and execute the Kaiser if he wants to start a war.” [7]

As the major European states moved toward war, however, it was Jaurés who, on 31 July 1914 was shot down by a nationalist fanatic, while Kaiser Wilhelm II remained unscathed. The International Socialist Bureau (ISB), headquartered in Brussels, attempted once again to mobilize demonstrations against the impending war. It tried to move its planned congress from Vienna to Paris and vainly called for international arbitration.

All eyes were on Germany in late July, as tens of thousands of workers demonstrated for peace in Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig and elsewhere, but by the first week of August, events and pro-war sentiment overtook the socialists.

Recent studies have shown that Europe’s workers did not share the enthusiasm for war so widespread among the middle classes, but, impressed by the growing chauvinism in the streets and fearful of opposing what the government called a “defensive” war against Russian aggression, the German socialist leaders capitulated. On 4 August, after a heated debate revealed a 78-14 majority in their parliamentary delegation, the SPD’s representatives, including Karl Liebknecht, adhered to party discipline in the Reichstag and voted unanimously in favor of granting the government war credits.

A number of factors shaped this fateful decision. As we’ve noted, many party and trade union leaders, for example, feared that confronting the state would lead to mass repression that would destroy their organizations and roll back the accomplishments of the past 20 years.

Most of the new generation of social democratic leaders had risen through the movement’s institutions as administrators, journalists, organizers and parliamentarians. A substantial part of this group had grown comfortable working within the system and regarded radical action, like the mass strike, as foolhardy.

Patriotic and nationalist sentiments were also important. Despite their second class status under the German monarchy, most German socialists, like their counterparts virtually everywhere, were proud of many of their nation’s achievements, wanted to prove their worth as citizens, and were willing to defend their country against attack.

Just as their French comrades reveled in their revolutionary republican history and feared the threat of Germany’s autocratic regime, many German socialists, echoing Marx and Engels’ statements many decades earlier in a different period (when Czarist Russia was the bulwark against democratic revolutions sweeping Europe), felt it was their duty to fight against Russia, Europe’s most reactionary power.

For many revisionists, such as the German parliamentarian Edward David, the war represented an opportunity. In return for their support of the wartime social truce (“Burgfrieden”) and socialist sacrifices at the front, they expected sweeping changes that would democratize the franchise in Prussia, introduce wide-ranging social reforms, and grant the unions collective bargaining rights.

Others, such as the leading revisionist journalist Josef Bloc, reveled in the freedom to promote national, rather than international, aims. They did not flinch at Germany's attack on neutral Belgium nor did they alter their views when their country's aggressive and annexationist war aims became increasingly clear.

For the reasons outlined above, if the SPD had voted against war credits on 4 August, it is unlikely that many other socialist parties would have followed suit. As it was, only the tiny Serb party and the Russian Socialists (Mensheviks and Bolsheviks) voted "no" in their respective parliaments.

Yet the SPD's action shocked the European socialist movement. Many looked to it as the International's strongest and most influential party to set an example, and the party's failure to say no to the war undercut its credibility. To a minority of socialists, both inside and outside of Germany, the decision was a "betrayal" and marked a split in the labor movement.

From exile in Galicia, Lenin summed up such feelings most pointedly. On 5 August, after learning of the SPD's vote, he remarked, "From today I cease to be a social democrat and have become a communist." [8] For some like him it was now imperative for socialists to distance themselves from the "chauvinists" supporting the war and to build a movement committed to revolutionary action.

It soon was very clear that the International would play no role in promoting such a movement. The war destroyed any possibility of cooperation among the parties of the warring blocs. French, English and Belgian socialists felt themselves to be part of a struggle to defend democracy against Prussian tyranny. They entered into coalition governments (in France, it took the form of L'union Sacree, "sacred union") to postpone class struggle and strengthen the war effort, and condemned their former comrades in Germany and Austria-Hungary.

The German, Austrian and Hungarian socialists, for their part, were silent about their countries' aggressive actions and adopted a rhetoric stressing the centrality of self-determination and national independence. All mediation efforts by the American and Italian parties failed. The International was effectively dead.

It was not long, however, before rising opposition to the war led a growing minority of socialists to call for the radical renewal of the workers' movement and the creation of a new international. As the war unfolded few major divisions developed within the socialist parties in the West, but in Germany and Russia matters were very different.

After 4 August, the SPD and the trade unions joined a government-sponsored "civil peace" that set aside class struggle in the name of national unity. This unity quickly began to erode, however, as casualty lists grew and it became clear that the government's claim to be fighting a defensive war was fraudulent.

Writing from prison in 1915, Rosa Luxemburg attacked the SPD leadership for abandoning its principles and transforming the party from an instrument of proletarian revolution into "the shield bearer for imperialism in the present war." [9] She joined with other members of the party's radical left, such as Liebknecht, the socialist feminist Clara Zetkin and journalist Franz Mehring, to systematically agitate against the war.

Closed out of the party press, they published an underground circular that came to be known as "Spartacus Letters" and, in 1916 founded a new journal, The International, which aimed, as the Russian revolutionary Yuri Pyatakov put it, to serve "as a mighty voice of protest and revolt." [10]

Meanwhile opposition grew at all levels of Social Democracy. In December of 1914 Liebknecht became the first parliamentary delegate to vote "no," but one year later over one-third of the Socialists refused to vote for war credits.

In June 1915, over 1,000 party and trade union officials sent a petition to the SPD's Executive Committee in which they criticized the "imperialist war" and called for a change of policy. They were joined by leaders of the party center, such as Kautsky, Hilferding, and co-chair Hugo Haase, and even some revisionists, such as Bernstein, who criticized government repression and the "civil peace." Stopping short of outright opposition to the war, they called for a negotiated peace without annexations.

The majority of the SPD leaders, however, resolutely opposed all such demands. Led by co-chair Friedrich Ebert, they were determined to continue their policy and maintain discipline at all costs. [11] They postponed holding a party congress until the end of the war, discouraged local meetings, and purged the party press of opposition voices. In January of 1917, after the radicals, now known as the Spartacus group, and center left opposition forces met to discuss strategy, the SPD Executive committee expelled them from the party en bloc.

The dissidents, however, quickly regrouped. In March they founded the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), a rather diverse group of reformists, centrists and left radicals united by their opposition to the war. This schism, long in the making and the harbinger of more to come, would have a profound effect on the future of Germany's labor movement, which remained divided for the rest of the century.

Outside Germany, too, antiwar sentiment in the labor movement grew. In September of 1915 a group of 38 delegates assembled in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, to organize international action against the war. Coming from Russia, Germany, Bulgaria, Italy, Switzerland, Romania, France, Sweden and Holland, a majority of the participants aimed to restore the unity of the International, called for a peace based on the principle of national self-determination, and rejected annexations and war indemnities.

For Lenin and a small group of supporters, however, these demands did not go far enough. Lenin argued, instead, that socialists should transform the imperialist war into a civil war against capitalism and for socialism. He asserted that revolutionaries must separate themselves from the treacherous opportunists on the socialist right wing and from the vacillating "social pacifists" of the center, such as Kautsky and Haase, who focused on ending the war rather than on making revolution.

Lenin insisted that the time had come to found a revolutionary "Third International." This perspective won the support of only seven delegates at Zimmerwald, but as the war continued, discontent and radical sentiment intensified.

As casualties mounted, food and basic necessities ran short, and working conditions declined, workers in all countries expressed their anger in large-scale strikes and demonstrations. In Berlin, for example, 300,000 metalworkers struck in April of 1916, and in January of 1918 four million German, Austrian and Hungarian workers downed tools in protest against wartime conditions.

Against this background, in April 1916 a second international conference of antiwar socialists convened in Kienthal, Switzerland. Similar in size and makeup to the earlier meeting, this time the group struck a more radical tone. Indeed, a majority still rejected Lenin's standpoint, but now they sharply criticized the majority socialists' support for the war and the International's passivity.

Lenin won only a few more backers at Kienthal, but attitudes seemed to be shifting his way. No one could have predicted, however, that seventeen months later his party would be in power in Russia and that much of Europe's old order would stand on the brink of destruction.

If the events of August 1914 brought the fissures within Social Democracy to the surface and paved the way for the fracturing of the labor movement, the revolutionary upheavals of 1917-1920 deepened those divisions and made

them permanent. The war created the pre-conditions for the destruction of the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, facilitated the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, and placed socialist revolution on the international agenda across much of the continent.

As the Entente powers imposed peace on their defeated enemies, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces in much of central and southern Europe fought for power in the streets. Choosing sides was the order of the day. In many of these struggles “Social Democrats,” “Independent Socialists,” and “Communists,” most of whom were formerly comrades, were often on opposite sides of the barricades.

The war created an unbridgeable chasm between those willing to work within the system and those set on overthrowing it. The difficulty of striking a compromise was best illustrated by the heterogeneous makeup of the USPD, which like the pre-war SPD contained reformist, centrist and revolutionary elements, united against the war.

In November of 1918, after the German Empire collapsed and the war ended, the USPD found it difficult to form a coherent program. Most of the reformists quickly returned to the SPD and the left wing broke away to form the new German Communist Party. After drifting awhile, most of the party’s centrist elements also returned to the SPD.

Thus, by 1922 the fundamental rift on the German left was between a Social Democratic Party that supported a bourgeois republic and a Communist Party dedicated to its overthrow. This division was largely replicated on a world scale, as most socialist movements split along reform-oriented social democratic and revolutionary communist lines. It was the result of internal tensions that had long existed within the labor movement, as well as the actions of the Bolshevik-led Third International, founded in 1919 to accomplish the goals Lenin had outlined at Zimmerwald and Kienthal.

Basing its structure on the democratic-centralist model of the Bolshevik Party, Lenin hoped to build an institution that could enforce discipline on member organizations and, thus, promote revolution around the world. Splitting the old Socialist Parties by excluding those regarded as counterrevolutionaries and requiring new Communist Parties to adopt democratic-centralist organizational norms was at the core of that project, with longterm consequences from which the labor movement is only now just recovering.

Exacerbated in the revolutionary upheavals spawned by the war and later deepened by the emergence of Stalinism, the rift smoothed fascism’s path to power in Italy, Germany and elsewhere as the polarized forces of labor proved too weak to halt the march of counterrevolution.

The victory of liberal and communist armies in 1945 did little to overcome the split. Only since the end of the Cold War has overcoming the division become a real, though still unrealized, possibility.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] This is part 2 of a series being carried in [Against the Current](#) on World War 1. Part 1 is here [World War I and Its Century](#)

[2] The Socialist International is often called the Second International because it was the successor to the Workingmen’s International Association, which existed from 1864-1876.

[3] Bernstein’s basic position was summarized in English in *Evolutionary Socialism* (New York: B. W. Heusch, 1911). Among the most important

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responses were Rosa Luxemburg's "Reform or Revolution" reproduced in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970): 33-90; and Rudolf Hilferding's, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*. Edited and introduced by Tom Bottomore, translated by Morris Watnick (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

[4] Of related interest: Kim Moody discusses the general and mass strike in the context of the discussions in the Occupy movement, online at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/n...>

[5] John Riddell, ed., "The Stuttgart Congress of 1907," in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International. Documents: 1907-1916, The Preparatory Years* (New York: Monad, 1986, 2nd ed.), 35.

[6] Kevin Callahan explores this development most thoroughly in *Demonstration Culture. European Socialism and the Second International, 1889-1914* (Leicester: Troubador, 2010).

[7] For the resolution of the congress see Riddell, "Basel Manifesto," in *Documents: 1907-1916*, 89. Jaurés is quoted in James Joll, *The Second International* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 157.

[8] Quoted in Helen Rappaport, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 246.

[9] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Reconstruction of the International," in Riddell, *Documents, 1907-1916*, 184-185.

[10] Quoted in Riddell, *Documents, 1907-1916*, 192.

[11] Friedrich Ebert succeeded August Bebel as Co-chair of the SPD after the latter died in 1912. He shared the leadership with Hugo Haase, who succeeded Paul Singer as Co-chair in 1911, but after 1914 they were at loggerheads and Haase eventually became leader of the USPD.