
Lecture nine: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International

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Postwar confusionists: the Frankfurt School

Along with the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of fascism in Germany is another major question of the twentieth century that has not been understood. By “not understood” I do not mean unknown. German National Socialism and the Second World War are included in the curriculum of almost every school in the world—and certainly of every German school. Countless historical articles, papers and books have been written on the theme, and most aspects of the Third Reich have been investigated in detail. But as far as the historical lessons of these events are concerned, there is an enormous amount of confusion.

The rise of Hitler to power and the horrendous crimes committed by his regime—culminating in a war of aggression that cost the lives of 80 million people, including the systematic annihilation of 6 million Jews—is certainly the most traumatic experience of the twentieth century. Even more so, as Germany was known as one of the leading, if not *the* leading, cultural nations in the world. It has produced thinkers like Kant, Hegel and Marx; musicians like Bach, Beethoven and Brahms; writers like Goethe, Heine and Thomas Mann; and scientists like Röntgen, Planck and Einstein—to name just a few. In the decade preceding the assumption of power by Hitler, Berlin was the cultural centre of Europe, bursting with artistic life in every field—music, theatre, painting, etc.

How is it possible that this nation of culture fell back into the darkest forms of barbarism? Why did Hitler succeed? Why was he not stopped? Who is responsible?

Sixty years after Hitler’s downfall, official ideology has given no satisfactory answer to these questions. References to Auschwitz, the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes are utilized to justify all and everything, among them not a few historical crimes: the oppression of the Palestinian people, the war against Yugoslavia and the bombing of Belgrade, the Iraq war and the imperialist occupation of the country, the ban on left-wing, as well as extreme right-wing, parties in Germany.

Typical, and in many ways an important factor in the prevalent confusion concerning the meaning of Nazism, is a document that was written in the final years of World War II and published shortly after the war: “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In this document, the two leading representatives of the so-called Frankfurt School set themselves the task of providing a fundamental explanation of Nazism. “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” they announce in the introduction.

This document had a major impact on the interpretation of Nazism in Germany and internationally. Soon after the end of the

war, Horkheimer and Adorno left their American exile for Germany and became professors at Frankfurt University. The German government entrusted them with the task of working out a conception for the education on Nazism in German schools. Later on, the Frankfurt School had a considerable impact on the 1968 student movement. One cannot understand the evolution of the Greens—the heirs of the 1968 protest movement—into a major pillar of the German state, without an examination of the ideology of the Frankfurt School.

The first thing that comes to mind when reading “Dialectic of Enlightenment” is the complete absence of any reference to concrete historical, economic or political events, social classes, political parties or questions of perspective. Neither the policies of the Social Democrats nor those of the Communist Party are examined. Not even Hitler is mentioned. Instead, everything is treated at the level of pure thought, which is presented as an independent subject, completely detached from thinking individuals, social consciousness, the struggle of classes and the struggle of ideas. Horkheimer and Adorno describe this as “thought ... reflecting on its own guilt.”

They claim that the germs of the social regression manifested by Nazism were already contained in the Enlightenment. “The first matter we had to investigate,” they write, was “the self-destruction of enlightenment.” And: “We have no doubt ... that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today.”

Most of their arguments proceed on a strictly philosophical level, written in an esoteric language that is almost incomprehensible. They are very outspoken, however, when they deal with the consequences of economic and industrial progress and its impact on the masses.

According to Marx and Engels, the productive forces developed by capitalism come into conflict with the capitalist property relations, initiating an era of social revolution and providing the basis for a higher, socialist form of society. Horkheimer and Adorno hold the opposite view. According to them, progress of the productive forces inevitably results in the stultification of the masses, in cultural decline, and finally in a new kind of barbarism.

They deplore “the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism” and their “self-destructive affinity for nationalist paranoia.”

Further down they write: “Humanity, whose skills and knowledge become differentiated with the division of labor, is

thereby forced back to more primitive anthropological stages, since, with the technical facilitation of existence, the continuance of domination demands the fixation of instincts by greater repression. Fantasy withers.... *The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression*" (emphasis added).

And: "The more complex and sensitive the social, economic, and scientific mechanism to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the experiences of which the body is capable. The elimination of qualities, their conversion into functions, is transferred by rationalized modes of work to the human capacity for experience, which tends to revert to that of amphibians.... *The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrial society...*" (emphasis added).

These passages—and there are many similar ones in the book—demonstrate very graphically the conclusions drawn by Horkheimer and Adorno from the Nazi experience: The Marxist conception, that the essential impulse for historical change is the dialectical interaction of the productive forces and social relations of production, has proven to be wrong. The growth of the productive forces results, on the contrary, in the strengthening of capitalist rule and the regression of society into barbarism.

The subjects, they write, "accept the existing development, which renders them a degree more powerless with each prescribed increase in their standard of living, as inviolably necessary. Now that the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be provided with a minimal part of the working time which the masters of society have at their disposal, the superfluous remainder, the overwhelming mass of the population, are trained as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs. They are kept alive as an army of unemployed. Their reduction to mere objects of administration, which operates every department of modern life right down to language and perception, conjures up an illusion of objective necessity before which they believe themselves powerless."

Where is the way out of this dead end of society?

In critical thought, answer Horkheimer and Adorno. "It is the servant which the master cannot control at will," they write. While "power" subjugates everything, "thought" develops a high degree of independence.

"The instrument [i.e., thought] is becoming autonomous: independently of the will of the rulers, the mediating agency of mind moderates the immediacy of economic injustice. The instruments of power—language, weapons, and finally machines—which are intended to hold everyone in their grasp, must in their turn be grasped by everyone. In this way, the moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from it. The thing-like quality of the means, which makes the means universally available, its 'objective validity' for everyone, itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means."

In its early years, the Frankfurt School borrowed many conceptions from Marxism and even now it is sometimes wrongly described as a variety of Marxism. The passages from "Dialectic of Enlightenment" quoted above demonstrate that the contrast between Marxism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School

could hardly be deeper.

Marxism puts great emphasis on critical thought and consciousness as well. As we have seen in the lecture on Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, it is the task of Marxists to bring socialist consciousness to the working class from without. But the power of this socialist consciousness is derived from the fact that it is based on a scientific understanding of the development of society governed by laws. "We call our dialectic materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depths of our 'free will', but in objective reality, in nature," Trotsky once wrote. (*In Defence of Marxism*)

Marxists strive to develop the practice of the working class in accordance with the objective tendencies of historical development. With the Frankfurt School, it is the other way round. Here, critical thought conducts a heroic—and rather hopeless—struggle *against* the objective tendencies of historical development. According to their views, economic and technological progress and the increasing division of labour force humanity "back to more primitive anthropological stages." They tend to revert the human capacity for experience "to that of amphibians" and lead to "irresistible regression." Critical thought can oppose this development only by detaching itself from objective tendencies of social development and confronting them as an independent object.

It would be possible to give an entire lecture on the political implications of this conception. The hopeless undertaking of confronting a hostile social reality equipped exclusively with the weapon of critical thought reminds one of Don Quixote's famous battle against the windmills. This conception produces the pessimistic mood that runs like a thread through the Frankfurt School and all its derivatives. Here, the cultural pessimism of the German "Bildungsbürger," the highly educated philistine, intermarries with a deep-rooted distrust of any kind of mass movement. This is particularly evident in Horkheimer and Adorno's writings on mass culture: Their reaction to cultural innovations like film or popular music, mainly jazz, is sheer horror.

The writings of the Frankfurt School exerted a major influence on the 1968 student protest movement. The generation of '68, born towards the end or shortly after the war, was intensely searching for answers to the question of fascism—an issue that had been suppressed for two decades after the war. They were horrified by the crimes of their fathers' generation, and this was one of the main driving forces of the protest movement in Germany, providing it with a sharply anti-capitalist character. But the answers given by the Frankfurt School led to a dead end.

The Frankfurt School criticised certain aspects in the superstructure of bourgeois society in a brilliant manner. But it was unable to reveal the contradictions in the capitalist foundation of society that created the conditions for its final overthrow. The working class was not seen as a potentially revolutionary subject, but as a passive, accommodated mass, terrorized by consumerism. After an initial radicalization that, in the most extreme cases, assumed the form of individual terrorism, the '68 movement flowed back into the channels of the bourgeois order and finally, with the Greens' entrance into

the federal government in 1998, assumed political responsibility for that order.

Many themes suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno in their 1944 document can easily be detected in the platform of the Green Party and its evolution: Scepticism towards technological and scientific progress, distrust towards the masses, and many more. After roaming around for decades, the critical spirit finally found shelter in the apparatus of the German state.

The Greens, for a long time opponents of state repression and pacifist adversaries of militarism, are now glorifying the repressive apparatus of the state as the guarantor of democracy and the German army as the guardian of international civilization and peace. But this is not the subject of today's lecture.

In answering Horkheimer and Adorno, general theoretical considerations are not sufficient. It is necessary to analyse the historical event that led them to their conclusions: the rise of National Socialism. In this respect, the writings of Leon Trotsky are unsurpassed up to the present day. A comparison of Trotsky's writings on National Socialism and the analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrates the deep gulf that separates the critical theory of the Frankfurt School from Marxism and historical materialism.

Despite its name, critical theory amounts to a mere apology. It explains why things had to happen this way, and why they could not happen differently. It explains the "sinking of humanity into a new kind of barbarism" by general deficits of enlightened thought, by some kind of original sin of enlightenment. It explains the affinity of the masses (in general) "to nationalist paranoia" by the division of labour (in general) and technological progress (in general). Despite the complicated arguments and the dialectical phraseology, the analysis remains superficial, speculative, idealistic, metaphysical—and deeply mendacious.

It is entirely different with Trotsky. The general platitudes of Horkheimer and Adorno are completely alien to him. For him, the cause of National Socialism is not a deficit of enlightened thought, technical progress or capitalism in general, but the contradictions of a specific capitalism under definite historical circumstances—the impasse of German capitalism under the conditions of imperialist decline. He does not speculate on the masses as such, but carefully examines the situation of all the different classes in society. And, above all, he deals intensively with the programme and politics of the political parties and their leaders.

Trotsky wrote numerous articles and pamphlets on Germany in the fire of events. The German edition of his writings on Germany, published in the 1970s, contains 76 articles written between 1929 and 1940, the overwhelming majority in 1932 and in 1933. Trotsky's aim was to change the course of the Communist Party. With a correct policy, this party would have been able to stop the rise of National Socialism and prevent Hitler's victory.

Fascism and imperialism

It was not the masses as such, as Horkheimer and Adorno claim, who constituted the social base of fascism, and certainly not the working class, whose development is intimately bound up with modern industry and technology. It was very specific social

layers: those sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariat who had been left behind and ruined by the development of capitalism, whose existence had been destroyed or who feared pauperization.

It was the artisans, the peddlers and the civil employees hit by the postwar chaos no less cruelly than the workers; it was the peasantry ruined by the economic crisis in agriculture; it was the small proprietors perpetually facing bankruptcy, their university sons without posts, their daughters without dowries or suitors; it was the lower and middle commanding ranks of the old army—as Trotsky wrote in the article *What is National Socialism?*

He summed up: "The national 'renaissance' leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history. Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath. Impotent before big capital, the petty bourgeoisie hopes in the future to regain its social dignity through the ruin of the workers."

But while the Nazis based themselves on the petty bourgeoisie and mobilized it against the working class, their policies corresponded in no way to the social needs of the petty bourgeoisie. Once Hitler's party had attained power, it raised "itself over the nation as the worst form of imperialism," as Trotsky pointed out.

He wrote: "German fascism, like Italian fascism, raised itself to power on the backs of the petty bourgeoisie, which it turned into a battering ram against the organizations of the working class and the institutions of democracy. But fascism in power is least of all the rule of the petty bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital." (*What is National Socialism?*)

In order to understand the trajectory of fascism, it is necessary to look at the crisis of world imperialism and its impact on German imperialism—and not at the defects of enlightened thought or the impact of mass culture on the working class, as do Horkheimer and Adorno. Again it is Trotsky who summed up in a brilliant way what Nick Beams has explained in detail in his lecture on the 1920s:

"Capitalism in Russia proved to be the weakest link in the chain of imperialism, because of its extreme backwardness. In the present crisis, German capitalism reveals itself as the weakest link for the diametrically opposite reason: precisely because it is the most advanced capitalist system in the conditions of the European impasse. As the productive forces of Germany become more and more highly geared, the more dynamic power they gather, the more they are strangled within the state system of Europe—a system that is akin to the 'system' of cages within an impoverished provincial zoo. At every turn in the conjuncture of events German capitalism is thrown up against those problems which it had attempted to solve by means of war." (*What Next?*)

For the bourgeoisie there was only one way out of this crisis. It had to achieve what it had failed to achieve in the First World War. It had to reorganize Europe by military force, subject it to German domination and to conquer new "Lebensraum" in the East. The war was not a result of Hitler's fantasies and megalomania, but of the objective needs of German imperialism.

But in order to conduct war, the imperialist bourgeoisie had first of all to defeat the “enemy within”—the powerful and well-organized German working class.

The dishonesty of Horkheimer and Adorno is shown most clearly in their complete disregard of the fact that the working class in its overwhelming majority was opposed to fascism. Their remarks on what they call “the subjects”—the “self-destructive affinity” of “the technologically educated masses” for “nationalist paranoia,” the reversion of “the human capacity for experience” to “that of amphibians”—has more in common with the picture created by Nazi propaganda (e.g., by the films of Leni Riefenstahl) than with the social reality of Germany.

It is an irrefutable political fact that Hitler’s movement found hardly any support amongst workers before it took power in January 1933. In the last more or less democratic election in November 1932, the two big workers’ parties—the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Communists (KPD)—received 13.2 million votes, 1.5 million more than the Nazis, who received 11.7 million votes. In particular, “the technologically educated masses,” i.e., the workers in the big factories, almost unanimously supported the SPD and the KPD.

The central task of the Nazis was precisely to smash the organized working class. This is why the Nazis, who had been scorned by most sections of the bourgeoisie in their initial stage of development, won the support of all the major sections of the German elite as the crisis deepened in the 1930s—the big industrialists, who pledged support for Hitler at a Düsseldorf conference in January 1932, and the general staff of the army, who played a crucial role in establishing him as chancellor in January 1933.

The extent of brutality espoused by the Nazis was in direct proportion to the high cultural and organizational level of the German working class. It was not enough to arrest and imprison the revolutionary leaders—that could have been done by a police or military dictatorship. It was necessary to destroy the result of the decades-long work of Marxist education and organization which had molded the working class in Germany.

It was not an accident that the works of Heinrich Heine, Stefan Zweig, Heinrich Mann, Sigmund Freud and many others were publicly burned, and not just secretly removed from libraries and bookshops. The Nazis felt it necessary to organize a public demonstration against culture, which they associated instinctively with the working class, social progress and socialism. In this respect, Hitler and Goebbels had a much clearer understanding of the connection between the working class and culture than Horkheimer and Adorno.

“Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force, and of police terror,” Trotsky wrote. “Fascism is a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society. The task of fascism lies not only in destroying the Communist vanguard but in holding the entire class in a state of forced disunity. To this end the physical annihilation of the most revolutionary section of the workers does not suffice. It is also necessary to smash all independent and voluntary organizations, to demolish all the defensive bulwarks of the proletariat, and to uproot whatever has been achieved during three-quarters of a century by the Social

Democracy and the trade unions. For, in the last analysis, the Communist Party also bases itself on these achievements.” (*What Next?*)

The ultimate victims of this policy were the European Jews. In the initial stages, anti-Semitism, which has a history going back to the Middle Ages, was used by the Nazis to mobilize backward layers of the population and as a diversion from growing class tensions. Once Hitler was in power, anti-Semitic pogroms were organized whenever popular pressure on the regime was mounting. After the war had started, all limitations to the most extreme anti-Semitic forces were removed and they developed according to their own logic.

Underlying the holocaust was a combination of irrational and entirely rational motives: *Arisierung*, the expropriation of wealthy Jews, provided considerable means for the enrichment of the Nazis, other sections of the bourgeoisie and the German state. The extinction of millions of poor Jews in the East was part of wider policy of genocide, aimed at providing space for German settlers in the East.

This is a complex question, which can hardly be dealt with in this lecture. One thing however is obvious: The fate of European Jews was entirely bound up with the fate of the working class. Once the German working class was defeated, there was no social force left that could have defended the European Jews against the genocidal policies of the Nazis.

Once the Nazis were in power, the imperialist nature of their policies emerged into the open. Hitler disregarded the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty and initiated a massive program of armament. A network of motorways was built that would allow the German army to move very swiftly from one end of the country to another. The massive amounts of money poured into these projects as well as the smashing up of the workers’ organizations led to a temporary recovery of the economy that allowed Hitler to consolidate his dictatorship. But in the long term, the massive public spending undermined the economy to an extent that war was the only option to prevent an immediate collapse.

As the historian Tim Mason wrote: “The only ‘solution’ open to this regime of the structural tensions and crises produced by the dictatorship and rearmament was more dictatorship and more rearmament, then expansion, then war and terror, then plunder and enslavement. The stark, ever-present alternative was collapse and chaos, and so all solutions were temporary, hectic, hand-to-mouth affairs, increasingly barbaric improvisations around a brutal theme.”

Many of Hitler’s international opponents, above all the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, appraised him completely wrongly in this respect. They thought that under massive economic pressure he would be amenable to compromise. After the Munich agreement, which conceded the Sudetenland and, with it, the entire system of defences of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, Chamberlain thought that he had secured a lasting peace. The opposite was the case. For Hitler, the conquest of the Sudetenland was just another step towards war. Driven into a corner by an economic impasse, the only way to save his regime was to act in an ever more aggressive way.

There are obvious parallels to the present. Tim Mason’s

remarks on the Hitler regime could also be applied to the Bush administration: The only “solution” open to this regime to the structural tensions and crises produced by war is more war. It would be an illusion to believe that the Bush administration—or the American elite as a whole—faced with a major crisis in Iraq and an untenable economic situation will just withdraw the troops and return to more normal conditions. This would not only undermine US imperialism in the Middle East and internationally, but at home as well. So the only solution is more war and more attacks on democratic rights.

There are also definite parallels between the crisis preceding Hitler’s rise to power and the present situation in Germany. The decision of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to call an early election is the outcome of a deep political and economic impasse. In foreign policy, German ambitions for a greater role as an imperialist power have been thwarted by the failure of the European constitution and the collapse of the plans for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Economically, massive attacks on the working class have failed to reduce the figure of 5 million unemployed and to revive the economy. And on the domestic front there is massive popular hostility to the attacks on welfare and workers’ rights.

The elections were meant to be a liberating act to set in place a government that is strong enough to implement unpopular measures. In calling them, Schröder violated a provision of the constitution that was introduced to avoid the kind of instability that characterized the final years of the Weimar Republic—a ban on the self-dissolution of parliament.

It is, however, clear that the election, whatever its result, will not resolve the political crisis. It could well be that neither the present coalition nor a coalition of the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats will have a majority. The ruling elite is increasingly aware that a change of government by itself is not sufficient to resolve the pressing political and economic tasks posed by the international situation. In order to break the broad and deeply rooted resistance to social inequality and welfare cuts, new methods of rule are required which represent a fundamental break with the postwar traditions based on social and political consent.

Why were the Nazis able to defeat the working class?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to descend from the field of sociology and economics to the field of politics. While National Socialism had deep economic and social roots, its rise and success were by no means inevitable. They were the result of the failure of the workers’ organizations or, to put it more precisely, the betrayal of their leaders.

Without explaining the role of Social Democracy and Stalinism it is impossible to draw the lessons of National Socialism. It is significant that Horkheimer and Adorno do not mention this once and keep clear of a discussion of Stalinism in all their other works. While putting great emphasis on “thought” and “criticism,” they adopt an entirely objectivist standpoint when it comes to the real significance of the subjective factor.

As we have seen in previous lectures, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) sided with the bourgeois order in 1914 and became the main prop of the bourgeois state in the Weimar Republic. After World War I, it organized the suppression of the proletarian revolution and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In the final years of Weimar, it supported the government of Heinrich Brüning which attacked the working class based on emergency decrees. For Trotsky it was clear that the SPD bore the main responsibility for the rise of fascism, and that it would rather support the seizure of power by the fascists than a proletarian uprising.

It was different, however, with the Communist Party. The KPD had been founded in 1919 as an answer to the betrayals of the SPD. In its ranks were the most revolutionary elements of the working class. And it defended—at least in words—revolutionary aims. But it had a perspective and a political line which completely misjudged the political situation, disoriented and paralysed the working class, and finally allowed Hitler to take power without meeting any organized working class resistance—and this despite the fact that both the Social Democrats and the Communists had their own armed detachments who were more than willing to fight the Nazis.

The failure of the KPD was a result of the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International. The German Communist Party, after losing its most outstanding leader, Rosa Luxemburg, only days after its founding congress in January 1919, had gone through a series of crises in the revolutionary upheavals of the early 1920s, and then through several purges of its leadership by the Stalinist faction in Moscow. At the beginning of the 1930s, the leadership under Ernst Thälmann was a pliant tool in the hands of the Moscow bureaucracy.

Stalin did not deliberately strive for a victory of Hitler and a defeat of the German Communist Party. But with all internal democracy suppressed, the line of the Comintern was motivated by the most narrow factional interests of Stalin’s bureaucratic clique and guided by the doctrine of “socialism in a single country.”

Unlike in Britain, where the Communist Party sided with the trade union bureaucracy, and China, where the CP sided with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang, the policy of the KPD in Germany took a left-wing form. The KPD refused to make any distinction between fascism and Social Democracy, which it labelled social fascism, and rejected the policy of the United Front, developed by the initial congresses of the Comintern under the leadership of Lenin.

Trotsky demonstrated that this ultra-left line was a form of bureaucratic centrism. It was a mechanical reproduction of the left line adopted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in its struggle against the Kulaks. At its sixth congress in the summer of 1928, the Communist International decided that a “third period” had begun which put the struggle for power on the agenda in every single country of the world. It rejected tactics like the united front, worked out by the initial congresses of the Communist International to win over to the Communist parties the majority of the working class, and, in particular, the social democratic workers.

In the summer of 1929, the German Communist Party adopted this ultra-left line. It described the Social Democrats as social

fascists and formed its own trade unions, separate from the social democratic ones. However, the radical shouting and swearing against the Social Democrats concealed a pessimism and passivity, most clearly expressed in the slogan: “Nach Hitler kommen wir”—after Hitler, it will be our turn.

At the heart of the line of the KPD was its refusal to make any distinction between Social Democracy and fascism. From the fact that both supported the bourgeois order, the Stalinists concluded that there was no distinction between the two. Trotsky rejected this emphatically.

“It is absolutely correct to place on the Social Democrats the responsibility for the emergency legislation of Brüning as well as for the impending danger of fascist savagery. It is absolute balderdash to identify Social Democracy with fascism,” he wrote. “The Social Democracy, which is today the chief representative of the parliamentary-bourgeois regime, derives its support from the workers. Fascism is supported by the petty bourgeoisie. The Social Democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can have no influence. Fascism cannot entrench itself in power without annihilating the workers’ organizations. Parliament is the main arena of the Social Democracy. The system of fascism is based upon the destruction of parliamentarianism. For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion; it has recourse to one or the other, depending upon the historical conditions. But for both the Social Democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance; more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.” (*What Next?*)

This contradiction had to be utilized. In the article “For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism” Trotsky explained: “The thousands upon thousands of Noskes, Welses, and Hilferdings [leaders of the SPD] prefer, in the last analysis, fascism to Communism. But for that they must once and for all tear themselves loose from the workers. Today this is not yet the case. Today the Social Democracy as a whole, with all its internal antagonisms, is forced into sharp conflict with the fascists. It is our task to take advantage of this conflict and not to unite the antagonists against us. The front must now be directed against fascism. And this common front of direct struggle against fascism, embracing the entire proletariat, must be utilized in the struggle against the Social Democracy, directed as a flank attack, but no less effective for all that.”

By rejecting a united front with the SPD, by delivering ultimatum after ultimatum to the SPD and—in some instances—working with the Nazis against the SPD, the Communist Party pushed the social democratic workers, who were very critical of their leaders, back into their arms. It paralyzed the working class and demoralized its own members.

At the same time, it strengthened the fascists. As Trotsky demonstrated again and again, the passage of the radicalized petty bourgeoisie into the camp of fascism is not a necessary process. Had the KPD fought the Nazis with a decisive and energetic policy and not with empty phrases, many of them would have joined its

ranks. In the article “Vital Questions for the German Proletariat” Trotsky described the mechanism that drives the petty bourgeois into the arms of fascism.

The petty bourgeoisie, he wrote, “is quite capable of linking its fate with that of the proletariat. For that, only one thing is needed: the petty bourgeoisie must acquire faith in the ability of the proletariat to lead society onto a new road. The proletariat can inspire this faith only by its strength, by the firmness of its actions, by a skilful offensive against the enemy, by the success of its revolutionary policy... But if the revolutionary party, in spite of a class struggle becoming incessantly more accentuated, proves time and again to be incapable of uniting the working class behind it. If it vacillates, becomes confused, contradicts itself, then the petty bourgeoisie loses patience and begins to look upon the revolutionary workers as those responsible for its own misery.”

The failure of the KPD finally enabled Hitler to take power without provoking a civil war. Within a few weeks, the Communist Party was banned and destroyed. The German proletariat, for many decades the best organized in the world, had suffered a devastating defeat.

Trotsky’s struggle was aimed at changing the line of the KPD and the Comintern. Despite his own expulsion from the Communist International and the vicious persecution of his followers by the Stalinists, the Trotskyists still considered themselves as a Left Opposition within the Communist Party. Against those advocating a break with the KPD, Trotsky argued that the degree of degeneration of a revolutionary party cannot be established on the basis of symptoms alone; the living verification of events is indispensable. The catastrophic defeat of the German Communist Party was such a living verification. It demonstrated that the KPD was dead for the purpose of revolution.

Trotsky still hesitated to say the same about the Communist International. He waited to see if any section would react to the German catastrophe and criticize the Stalinist clique. But this did not happen.

“The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler, but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred,” Trotsky wrote. “And this shameful interdiction was not violated, nor overthrown. No national congresses; no international congress; no discussions at party meetings; no discussion in the press! An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it. To say this openly and publicly is our direct duty toward the proletariat and its future. In all our subsequent work it is necessary to take as our point of departure the historical collapse of the official Communist International.” (*To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew*)

The conclusion Trotsky drew from the collapse of the Communist International was that it was necessary to build the Fourth International, which was founded in 1938.