

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part three

1 October 2010

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany held its Founding Congress May 22-24, 2010 in Berlin. The Congress adopted the document “The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit” on May 23.

We are publishing the document in serialized form. Below is the second of eleven parts.

Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4 | Part 5 | Part 6 | Part 7 | Part 8 | Part 9 | Part 10 | Part 11

VIII. The German Left Opposition and the Leninbund

50. In the German Communist Party, Trotsky was denounced as a right-winger after 1923 because he refused to scapegoat party chairman Heinrich Brandler as the only one responsible for the October defeat. Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, supporters of Zinoviev and representatives of the KPD left wing, replaced Brandler as party leaders and suppressed the documents of the Left Opposition. Only when Zinoviev broke with Stalin and allied with the Left Opposition, did a violent faction fight flare up in the KPD as well. On the order of Moscow, Fischer and Maslow were replaced and expelled from the party. In their place stepped Ernst Thälmann, who became a faithful accomplice of Stalin. On September 1, 1926 700 prominent KPD members publicly supported the Russian united opposition in an open letter. They rejected the theory of “socialism in a single country” and demanded an open discussion over the Russian question in the ranks of the KPD. In April 1928 they created the Leninbund.

51. Trotsky’s supporters formed the minority in the Leninbund. The majority, including its leader Hugo Urbahns, consisted of Zinoviev supporters. Many of the ultra-left positions that the Comintern under Lenin and Trotsky had fought lived on inside the Leninbund. It was inclined to petty bourgeois impatience and unprincipled manoeuvres, ranked unimportant squabbles above matters of principle and decided on international questions on the basis of national criteria. In 1929-30 a break was posed between the Leninbund and the Left Opposition. When Trotsky openly criticized the Leninbund, his supporters were expelled. The differences centred on the class character of the Soviet Union and the international orientation of the opposition.

52. The Leninbund put forward the view that the counterrevolution had already triumphed in the Soviet Union. Trotsky rejected this defeatist attitude, which regarded the struggle for a change of course inside the CPSU and in the Comintern as already lost. He dubbed the verbal radicalism of the Urbahns group, which equated Stalin’s rule with the

return of the bourgeoisie to power, “upturned reformism”. Already in the Thermidor of the year 1794, wrote Trotsky, the French bourgeoisie were able to snatch power from the plebeians only through civil war, “How then can anyone assume or believe that power can pass from the hands of the Russian proletariat into the hands of the bourgeoisie in a peaceful, tranquil, imperceptible, bureaucratic manner?” He pointed to the fact that the most important gains of the October Revolution remained untouched. “The means of production, once the property of the capitalists, remain to this very day in the hands of the Soviet state. The land is nationalized. The exploiting elements are still excluded from the Soviets and from the Army. The monopoly of foreign trade remains a bulwark against the economic intervention of capitalism.” From this Trotsky concluded, “The struggle continues, the classes have not yet spoken their final word.” 25 The Leninbund was the forerunner of a whole number of political tendencies whose turn away from Marxism began with their rejection of the defence of the Soviet Union—despite and against the Stalinist regime—as a workers’ state.

53. The second point at issue with the Urbahns group concerned the question of internationalism. It evaluated international questions on the basis of national criteria and, in the fight against Trotsky, allied itself with international groupings with which it had no agreement in principle. Trotsky noted that its “internationalism” was nothing more than “an arithmetical sum of national opportunist policies”. In an open letter to the members of the Leninbund, Trotsky stressed that the Left Opposition could develop only as an international organization: “Those who believe that the International Left will someday take shape as a simple sum of national groups, and that therefore the international unification can be postponed indefinitely until the national groups ‘grow strong,’ attribute only a secondary importance to the international factor and by this very reason take the path of national opportunism. It is undeniable that each country has greatest peculiarities of its own; but in our epoch these peculiarities can be assayed and exploited in a revolutionary way only from an internationalist point of view. On the other hand, only an international organization can be the bearer of an international ideology. Can anyone seriously believe that isolated Oppositional national groups, divided among themselves and left to their own resources, are capable of finding the correct road by themselves? No, this is a certain path to national degeneration, sectarianism, and ruin. The tasks facing the International Opposition are enormously difficult. Only by being indissolubly tied together, only by working out answers jointly to all current problems, only by creating their international platform, only by mutually verifying each one of their steps, that is, only by uniting in a single international body, will the national groups of the Opposition be able to carry out their historic task.” 26

54. The Urbahns group justified its refusal to accept international discipline by citing its right to internal party democracy. Trotsky rejected

this. “Under the guise of fighting against the bureaucratism of the Third International attempts are being made to smuggle in the tendencies and practices of the Second International,” he answered. “We stand not for democracy in general but for *centralist* democracy. It is precisely for this reason that we place national leadership above local leadership and international leadership above national leadership. The revolutionary party has nothing in common with a discussion club, where everybody comes as to a café (this is Souvarine’s great idea). The party is an organization for action. The unity of party ideas is assured through democratic channels, but the ideological framework of the party must be rigidly delimited. This holds all the more for a faction. It must not be forgotten here, too, that we are not a party but a faction, that is to say, the closest possible selection and consolidation of co-thinkers for the purpose of influencing the party and other organizations of the working class. It would be fantastic and absurd to demand of the Left Opposition that it become a combination of all sorts of national groups and grouplets, who are dissatisfied, offended, and full of protests and who do not know what they want.” 27

55. In the spring of 1930, the Trotskyists who had been expelled from the Leninbund formed the German Left Opposition. They conducted a courageous political struggle to correct the wrong course of the KPD and to strengthen communist influence in the working class. In a message of greetings to the first national conference of the German Left Opposition in September 1930, Trotsky opposed the “completely false view” that a growth in the influence of the KPD would strengthen the Stalinist party leadership. That was “the basis for every sort of ultra-left and pseudo-left sectarianism”. Rather “a real radicalisation of the masses and an influx of workers under the banner of communism would not consolidate the bureaucratic apparatus but would signify its destabilisation, its weakening.” “What could destroy the Opposition”, warned Trotsky, was “the mentality of a corner-alley sect, which lives from Schadenfreude and defeatism, without hope or perspective.” 28

56. The German Left Opposition worked under enormous political pressure and major material difficulties. The painful process of the decline of the KPD had left deep traces in its ranks that expressed themselves in fierce subjective conflicts carried out with destructive bureaucratic measures. In a series of personal letters, Trotsky sought to overcome these problems. In February 1931 he eventually addressed a letter to all sections of the International Left Opposition dealing with the crisis of the German Left Opposition. Trotsky identified the roots of the group’s problems in the “administrative approach of the epigones [i.e. the Stalinists] in the spheres of the principles, ideas and the methods of Marxism” since 1923. The Left Opposition had to be established on a foundation which is “overcrowded with the remnants and splinters of former breakdowns.” Trotsky then sharply criticized the clique mentality that prevailed in the German section: “The spirit of circle chumminess (you for me, and me for you) is the most abominable of organizational sicknesses. With the aid of chumminess, one can gather a clique around oneself but not a faction of co-thinkers.” He opposed the “toying with principles, journalistic light-mindedness, moral looseness, and pseudo ‘irreconcilability’ in the name of personal caprice.” In Trotsky’s opinion, the crisis of the German Left Opposition could only be overcome with “active international assistance”. He called for an immediate halt to all retaliatory organizational measures and the setting up of a control commission and the preparation of a party conference in collaboration with the International Secretariat. The group around Kurt Landau, which commanded a majority in the central leadership in Berlin, was not prepared to subordinate its clique interests to the IS. It categorically rejected Trotsky’s letter, carried out a series of expulsions of its opponents and eventually broke with the International Left Opposition. 29

57. The conflicts in the German Left Opposition were exploited and intensified by agents of the Stalinist GPU. A key role in this respect was played by two brothers from Lithuania, Ruvin and Abraham Sobolevicius,

who, under the party pseudonyms Roman Well and Adolf Senin, played a leading role in the Leipzig group that came into sharp conflict with the group in Berlin. Both brothers worked at that time for the GPU, as Senin admitted 30 years later to a New York judge, after being exposed as a Soviet agent operating under the name Jack Soble. The brothers functioned both as informants and agents provocateurs. They regularly reported their own versions of the conflict in the German Left Opposition to Trotsky and acquired sensitive information about Trotsky’s contacts and those of his son and close collaborator, Leon Sedov. When the political crisis in Germany intensified in the middle of 1932, the brothers openly switched to the camp of Stalinism and—10 days before Hitler took power—published a falsified edition of the newspaper *Permanent Revolution* declaring that the German Left Opposition was breaking with Trotsky. The Stalinist falsification was then spread and enthusiastically taken up by Stalinist newspapers.

58. Trotsky addressed himself to the case of Well in his article of 1933, “Serious lessons from an inconsequential thing”. He suspected there was a direct connection to the Stalinist secret police, but nonetheless ascribed more general political significance to the issue. Senin and Well, he wrote, “belonged to the type pretty well divided between the wavering intellectuals and semi-intelligentsia, for whom ideas and principles occupy second place and in first rank stands the concern for personal independence, which in a particular case turns into anxiety for one’s personal career.” While workers found it difficult to move from one country to another, learn foreign languages and write articles, the “mobile intellectual, who lacks both experience and knowledge but therefore knows all things and all people, and is present everywhere and ready to write with his left foot, frequently sits on the neck of the workers’ organizations.” Trotsky concluded that the Left Opposition must “seriously pose the question of the training and education of new cadres of the proletarian youth.” “Hand in hand with the political struggle, systematic theoretical training” had to be carried out dealing with the revolutionary conceptions, the history and the tradition of the Left Opposition. “Only on this basis can a serious proletarian revolutionist be educated. Two or three vulgarized slogans like ‘mass work’, ‘democratic centralism’, ‘united front’ etc.—that is sufficient for the Brandlerites and for the SAP, but not for us.” 30

59. Despite its numerical weakness, its brutal persecution by the Stalinist KPD leadership, the destructive work of Stalinist agents in its ranks and oppressive measures by the bourgeois state, the German Left Opposition gained a considerable hearing. It developed local groups in several dozen cities and won influence in the factories. Trotsky’s writings were widely circulated among members of the KPD, the SPD and the SAP. In 1932, the brochures “Germany, The Key to the International Situation” and “For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism” were circulated in editions of over 30,000 each.

IX. National Socialism and the Holocaust

60. The First World War did not resolve any of the problems that had given rise to it. Europe remained divided into hostile powers. German imperialism, which had tried to reorganize Europe according to its own needs, was shackled by the Versailles Treaty; England and France had been drained by the war. The ascendant American great power put Europe on rations. European capitalism suffered from constant fever attacks in the form of inflation, stock market crashes, political crises and class battles. The most malicious form of these ailments was expressed in the growth of National Socialism (Nazism).

61. Nazism expressed the most reactionary and brutal tendencies of

German capitalism. That is the key to understanding it. Hitler's rise from a Viennese homeless shelter and the trenches of the world war to becoming a megalomaniacal dictator cannot be explained by the social composition and psychology of his supporters. He owed his power to the ruling elite, which placed him at the head of the state. The millions that Thyssen, Krupp, Flick and other industrial magnates donated to the NSDAP, Hitler's appointment as chancellor by Hindenburg, the symbolic figurehead of the army, and finally the agreement of all the bourgeois parties to the Enabling Act are eloquent testimony to the fact that the vast majority of the ruling elite had placed themselves behind Hitler when all other mechanisms to suppress the working class had failed.

62. What differentiated the National Socialists from the other bourgeois parties was their ability to turn the despair of the ruined petty bourgeoisie and the rage of the lumpen proletariat into a battering ram against the organized workers' movement and place it at the service of German imperialism. "In order to try to find a way out, the bourgeoisie must absolutely rid itself of the pressure exerted by the workers' organizations; these must be eliminated, destroyed, utterly crushed", warned Trotsky in 1932. "At this juncture, the historic role of fascism begins. It raises to their feet those classes that are immediately above the proletariat and that are ever in dread of being forced down into its ranks; it organizes and militarizes them at the expense of finance capital, under the cover of the official government, and it directs them to the extirpation of proletarian organizations, from the most revolutionary to the most conservative." 31

63. National Socialism could not be content with suppressing the Communist Party: "Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force, and of police terror. 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." 32

64. The members of the National Socialist movement originated—at least up to its seizure of power—almost exclusively from the middle classes. It recruited from among artisans, peddlers, the civil employees and peasants, whom the war, inflation and crisis had robbed of any faith in democratic parliamentarianism and who longed for order and an iron fist. At the head of the movement were officers and NCOs from the old army, who could not reconcile themselves to Germany's defeat in the world war. However, the programme of the National Socialist movement was anything but petty bourgeois. It translated the basic needs of German imperialism into the language of mythology and racial theory. The dream of a "thousand-year Reich" and the hunger for "Lebensraum (living space) in the East" expressed the expansionist urge of German capital, whose dynamic productive forces were constricted by Europe's closely meshed system of states. Racial hatred provided consolation for the German petty bourgeois in the face of his real powerlessness and prepared him for a war of extermination.

65. Even the anti-Semitism of the Nazis had a rational core. The systematic destruction of more than six million Jews, Sinti and Roma by Hitler's regime is often described as historically "unique". This characterisation certainly applies as far as the extent of its criminal energy is concerned—the systematic, industrially organized, mass destruction planned by sections of the state apparatus. However, if it is taken to mean that the Holocaust is inexplicable and cannot be understood through historical-materialist analysis, it is wrong. Even if the anti-Semitic prejudices that Hitler exploited can be partly traced back to the Middle

Ages, the Nazis' anti-Semitism was a modern phenomenon. It was inseparably bound up with the destruction of the workers' movement and the war against socialism.

66. Hitler's own anti-Semitism stood in close relationship with his hatred of the socialist movement. "The labor movement did not repel him because it was led by Jews; the Jews repelled him because they led the labor movement," writes the historian Konrad Heiden. "It was not Rothschild, the capitalist, but Karl Marx, the socialist, who kindled Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism." 33 In Vienna, Hitler had personally experienced the fact that many Jews were active in the leadership of the workers' movement. Likewise in Vienna, he became acquainted with and admired the Christian Social Party of Karl Lueger, who purposely exploited anti-Semitism to drive a wedge between the workers' movement and the disconcerted petty bourgeoisie. Lueger won large support among the petty bourgeoisie and middle class with a mixture of anti-Semitism and anti-capitalist rhetoric, and from 1897 to 1910 was mayor of Vienna.

67. The claim that the Holocaust was the end product of latent anti-Semitism that was widespread throughout the entire German population, made amongst others by the American historian Daniel Goldhagen in his book "Hitler's Willing Executioners", is completely wrong. The Marxist workers' movement had energetically fought against anti-Semitism. As a result, the anti-Semitic Christian-Social Labour Party of Adolf Stöcker could not win influence among workers in the Wilhelminian Empire, because it encountered the bitter resistance of the SPD. "Opposition to anti-Semitism had become a badge of honour for the workers' movement", reports the historian Robert Wistrich. "The fierce campaign undertaken by the Social Democrats against Adolf Stöcker's Berlin movement did to a large extent immunise the working class against anti-Semitism." 34 The smashing of the KPD and SPD was the precondition for allowing anti-Semitism free rein. Before the term KZ (Concentration Camp) became a synonym for the persecutions and mass murder of the Jews, the Nazis established the first concentration camp in Dachau as a prison for workers' leaders. Even afterwards, there were numerous cases of selfless assistance and solidarity, which did not take on a broader, organized form only due to the pervasive terror of the Gestapo. The fate of the Jews was inseparably bound up with that of the socialist workers' movement.

68. Even after the Nazis had state power firmly in their grasp, they were not able to put their murderous fantasies of the ruthless extermination of "the entire Jewry, Freemasons, Marxism and churchdom of the world" into practice unchecked. 35 For that, war was necessary. Now the murder of the Jews merged with the war of extermination in the East, which aimed, from the outset, at physically exterminating the entire political and intellectual leading layer of the Soviet Union—"Judeo-Bolshevism" in Hitler's words—in order to secure centuries of German dominance. The cold-blooded murder of six million Jews was the high point of a campaign of destruction, to which millions of communists, partisans, intellectuals and ordinary people fell victim in Poland, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The barbaric character of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, found its highest expression in this campaign of destruction.

To be continued

NOTES:

25 Leon Trotsky, *The Defense of the Soviet Union and the Opposition*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1929/09/fi-b.htm>

26 Leon Trotsky, *An Open Letter to Members of the Leninbund*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/02/leninbund.htm>

27 *ibid*

28 Leo Trotzki, *An die Reichskonferenz der Linken Opposition*, in *Schriften über Deutschland*, volume 1, Frankfurt 1971, P. 72-74

29 Writings of Leon Trotsky (1930-31), *The Crisis in the German Left Opposition*, New York 1973, p.147, 151, 150

30 Writings of Leon Trotsky (1932-33), *Serious lessons from an*

inconsequential thing, New York 1973 p. 90, 93

31 Leon Trotsky, *What Next? Vital questions for the German proletariat*,

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next01.htm#s0>

32 Ibid

33 Konrad Heiden, *Adolf Hitler: Eine Biografie*, 1936

34 Quoted in: David North, *Anti-Semitism, fascism and the Holocaust. A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's 'Hitler's willing executioners'*, Labor Publications, p12

35 SS-leader Heinrich Himmler on November 9, 1938, the day of the Reichspogromnacht, quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact