

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part four

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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 fourth of eleven parts.

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X. The German catastrophe

69. The support of the ruling class and the brute force methods of the Nazis alone would not have been sufficient for Hitler to succeed. What was decisive was the complete failure of the large workers’ parties. In 1932, the SPD and KPD were still far stronger than Hitler’s NSDAP. In the last elections before Hitler’s seizure of power, they won together 221 of the 584 seats in the Reichstag, with the NSDAP winning only 196. And the Reichstag election was only a weak reflection of the real balance of power. The workers who stood behind the SPD and the KPD carried far greater political weight than the social dregs stirred up by Hitler. Hitler’s victory was the result of the failure of the SPD and KPD.

70. In 1918, the SPD had strangled the proletarian revolution in order to save the bourgeois order. The result was the Weimar Republic, in which the old forces of reaction continued to live behind a democratic facade. In 1929, when the world economic crisis blew apart the unstable social equilibrium, the SPD “saved” the republic by dismantling its democratic facade brick by brick. First, it placed itself behind the Brüning government, which disabled parliament and governed by means of emergency decrees. Then it supported the election of Hindenburg as Reich president, who in turn then appointed Hitler as chancellor. Instead of mobilizing its members against the fascist danger, the SPD placed its faith in the police, the army and the Reich president. Even as Hindenburg and von Papen removed the social democratic-led Prussian state government by force in 1932, the SPD did not lift a finger. Instead, it lodged a constitutional challenge in the Supreme Court. Trotsky summarized its attitude with the words: “A mass party, leading millions (toward socialism!) holds that the question as to which class will come to power in present-day Germany, which is shaken to its very foundations, depends not on the fighting strength of the German proletariat, not on the shock troops of fascism, not even on the personnel of the Reichswehr, but on whether the pure spirit of the Weimar Constitution (along with the required quantity of camphor and naphthalene) shall be installed in the presidential palace.” 36

71. The servile attitude of the SPD not only disarmed the working class, it also strengthened the fascists, as Trotsky made clear: “The effect which the appeals of the Social Democracy produce on the state apparatus, on the judges, the Reichswehr, and the police cannot fail to be just the opposite to the one desired. The most ‘loyal’ functionary, the most ‘neutral,’ the least bound to the National Socialists, can reason only thus: ‘Millions are behind the Social Democrats; enormous resources are in their hands: the press, the parliament, the municipalities; their own hides are at stake; in the struggle against the fascists, they are assured of the support of the Communists; and even so these mighty gentlemen beg me, a functionary, to save them from the attack of another party comprising millions whose leaders may become my bosses tomorrow; things must be pretty bad for the gentlemen of the Social Democracy, probably quite hopeless ... it is time for me [the functionary], to think about my own hide.’ And as a result, the ‘loyal,’ ‘neutral’ functionary, who vacillated yesterday, will invariably reinsure himself, i.e., tie up with the National Socialists to safeguard his own future. In this manner the reformists who have outlived their own day work for the fascists along bureaucratic lines.” 37

72. The trade unions behaved with even more servility than the SPD. In an effort to prove their reliability and indispensability to the National Socialists, the ADGB, under the presidency of Theodor Leipart, dissociated itself from the SPD three and a half months before Hitler’s seizure of power. While the SA proceeded against well-known trade unionists, social democrats and communists after Hitler entered the Reich Chancellery, the ADGB declared its readiness to place the trade unions, built over many decades, in the service of the new state: “The trade union organisations are an expression of an incontrovertible social necessity, an indispensable part of the existing social order. ... As a result of the natural order of things, they become more and more integrated into the state. ... Trade union organisations make no claim to influence state power directly. Their only task can be to place the experience and knowledge they have gained at the disposal of the government and parliament.” On May 1, the ADGB marched under the swastika. But the Nazis were not impressed. On May 2, they stormed the trade union offices, arrested and murdered numerous trade union leaders and dissolved the ADGB.

73. The KPD had been established as a response to the betrayal of social democracy. But it proved just as unable as the SPD to weld together the working class and lead it into a struggle against the Nazis. A ten-year campaign against “Trotskyism” had politically corroded the party and transformed its leadership into a willing tool of Stalin. It repeated all the opportunist and ultra-left errors, against which Lenin and Trotsky had fought ten years before, and hid its paralysis and fatalism behind radical phrase-mongering. Until 1933, Trotsky tried relentlessly to correct the wrong course of the KPD. His writings on Germany from these years, which fill two thick volumes, prove his genius as a Marxist and political

leader. Banished to a remote Turkish island, forced to rely on newspapers and reports from political friends, Trotsky demonstrated an understanding of German events and their internal dynamics that remains unparalleled to this day. He foresaw the events clearly and precisely and developed a convincing alternative to the devastating course of the KPD. The KPD responded not with arguments, but with slanders, violence and the entire weight of the Moscow apparatus.

74. At the heart of the policy of the KPD was the thesis of social fascism. From the fact that both fascism and bourgeois democracy were forms of capitalist rule, the Comintern drew the conclusion that there was no contradiction between them, not even a relative one. Fascism and social democracy were the same—in the words of Stalin: “not antipodes, but twins”—the social democrats therefore were “social fascists”. The KPD rejected any collaboration with the SPD against the rightwing danger and, in some cases, even went so far as to make common cause with the Nazis—for example, when it supported the referendum initiated by the Nazis in 1931 to bring down the SPD-led Prussian state government. Occasionally it called for “a united front from below”. But this was not an offer to collaborate, but an ultimatum to the SPD members to break with their party.

75. Trotsky decisively opposed this form of vulgar radicalism. He recalled that Marx and Engels had protested fiercely when Lassalle had called feudal counterrevolution and the liberal bourgeoisie “one reactionary mass”. Now Stalin and the KPD were repeating the same error. “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.” 38

76. Trotsky fought untiringly for a policy of the united front. This would have made it possible for the KPD to use the contradiction between social democracy and fascism to unite the working class, win the confidence of the social democratic workers and expose the social democratic leaders. In an article written at the end of 1931, entitled “For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism”, he explained: “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.” One must “show by deeds a complete readiness to make a bloc with the Social Democrats against the fascists” and “understand how to tear the workers away from their leaders in reality. But reality today is—the struggle against fascism.” It was necessary to “help the Social Democratic workers in action—in this new and extraordinary situation—to test the value of their organizations and leaders at this time, when it is a matter of life and death for the working class.” 39

77. The refusal of the KPD to accept such a policy led to the German catastrophe. The KPD’s social fascism policy divided the working class, demoralized KPD members and drove the petty bourgeoisie into the arms of Hitler. Trotsky drew the following political balance sheet of the KPD’s policy in May 1933: “No policy of the Communist Party could, of course, have transformed the Social Democracy into a party of the revolution. But neither was that the aim. It was necessary to exploit to the limit the

contradiction between reformism and fascism—in order to weaken fascism, at the same time weakening reformism by exposing to the workers the incapacity of the Social Democratic leadership. These two tasks fused naturally into one. The policy of the Comintern bureaucracy led to the opposite result: the capitulation of the reformists served the interests of fascism and not of Communism; the Social Democratic workers remained with their leaders; the Communist workers lost faith in themselves and in the leadership.” 40

78. Even the transition of the desperate petty bourgeois masses into the camp of fascism was not inevitable. Many would have stood on the side of the working class, if it had shown a way out of the social dead-end. The precondition for this would have been for the communist party to advance a courageous and decisive policy. The petty bourgeoisie, wrote Trotsky, “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 woe if the revolutionary party does not measure up to the situation! The daily struggle of the proletariat sharpens the instability of bourgeois society. The strikes and the political disturbances aggravate the economic situation of the country. The petty bourgeoisie could reconcile itself temporarily to the growing privations, if it came through experience to the conviction that the proletariat is in a position to lead it onto a new road. 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.” 41

79. In 1921, Lenin had described leftwing radicalism as an “infantile disorder”. Ten years later, the ultra-left policy of the KPD was no longer an infantile disorder. It was entrenched in the social position of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had soared above the working class and subordinated the sections of the Comintern to its command. “The ruling and uncontrolled position of the Soviet bureaucracy is conducive to a psychology which in many ways is directly contradictory to the psychology of a proletarian revolutionist”, wrote Trotsky. “Its own aims and combinations in domestic as well as international politics are placed by the bureaucracy above the tasks of the revolutionary education of the masses and have no connection with the tasks of international revolution.” 42 The bureaucracy was accustomed to pose ultimatums and to command. It foresaw nothing and reacted to the catastrophic consequences of its own policies with an erratic zig-zag course, which took both ultra-left and rightwing tacks. Whereas the Comintern pursued a rightwing course between 1924 and 1928 (Britain, China), it reacted to a crisis in the Soviet Union in 1928 with a sharp leftward turn, which it then imposed on the sections. It proclaimed the so-called “Third Period”, which placed the struggle for power on the agenda in every country. The theory of social fascism was a result of this turn.

XI. The decision for the Fourth International

80. The German disaster caused Trotsky to change his attitude to the KPD. He no longer called for its reform, but for the construction of a new party. Before 1933, the key to the situation had been in the hands of the KPD. “Under such conditions to oppose the party and in advance to declare it to be dead would have meant to proclaim a priori the inevitability of the victory of fascism,” explained Trotsky. “We could not

do that. We had to fully exhaust all the possibilities of the old situation.” But with the victory of fascism the situation had changed fundamentally. “It is no longer a question of making a prognosis or a theoretical criticism, but it is a question of an important historical event which will penetrate ever deeper into the consciousness of the masses, including the Communists. One must build the general perspective and the general strategy upon the inevitable consequences of these events and not upon secondary considerations.” 43 Answering the objection that the KPD was still far stronger than the Left Opposition, Trotsky responded by pointing to the fact that the development of a cadre “is not merely an organisational problem, it is a political problem: cadres are formed on the basis of a definite perspective. To again warm up the slogan of party reform means to knowingly set a utopian aim and thereby to push our own cadre toward new and ever sharper disappointments. With such a course the Left Opposition would only become the appendage of a decomposing party and would disappear from the scene together with it.” 44

81. Trotsky did not immediately apply this conclusion to the Comintern and the CPSU. He waited to see whether they would react to the German disaster and draw the lessons of it. That was not the case. The Moscow leadership defended the policy of the KPD and banned any discussion about it. Not in a single communist party did opposition to this position arise. “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 revive it”, concluded Trotsky. “In all our subsequent work it is necessary to take as our point of departure the historical collapse of the official Communist International.” At the same time, the defence of the Soviet Union depended now on the building of a new international, he stressed: “Only the creation of the Marxist International, completely independent of the Stalinist bureaucracy and counterposed politically to it, can save the USSR from collapse by binding its destiny with the destiny of the world proletarian revolution.” 45

82. Two years after Hitler’s seizure of power, the Comintern swung sharply to the right. Without ever admitting to the errors in Germany, it turned from rejecting the united front to supporting the popular front. Whereas it had so far rejected any co-operation with reformist workers’ parties, it now endorsed alliances with purely bourgeois parties in the name of the fight against fascism. Thus the Stalinist bureaucracy completely separated the fate of the Soviet Union from the international class struggle. It relied on the support of allied bourgeois governments and instructed the respective communist parties to suppress any revolutionary struggles against their new allies. It feared that successful uprisings by the European working class could give the Soviet workers new courage and endanger its own rule. In 1943 it dissolved the Comintern.

83. With the transition to the popular front, the policy of the communist parties took on an openly counter-revolutionary character. In order not to deter its bourgeois popular front partners, it suppressed all the revolutionary efforts of the working class. In France, the popular front suffocated a powerful revolutionary offensive between 1936 and 1938 and secured the political survival of the bourgeoisie, which soon thereafter turned to openly repressive measures, and—under the Vichy regime—to collaboration with the Nazis. In Spain, the popular front suppressed every independent political initiative of the workers and peasants. While Franco’s troops threatened the republic, the GPU, the Stalinist secret service, hunted down revolutionary workers behind the front, took thousands prisoner, and tortured and murdered them. Its numerous victims included the leader of the centrist POUM, Andres Nin, Trotsky’s secretary Erwin Wolf and the Austrian socialist Kurt Landau. Stalin’s counter-revolutionary policy finally helped Franco to secure victory.

84. Stalin’s counter-revolutionary course culminated in the Great Terror of the years 1937 and 38. In a preventive civil war, he liquidated all of those around whom the opposition of the working class could have

crystallized. Practically the entire leadership of the October revolution, the members of the Left Opposition, outstanding intellectuals and artists, capable engineers, as well as the leadership of the Red Army, were condemned to death during public show trials or in secret proceedings. They were then executed by being shot in the head. No other comparable political genocide has ever taken place. Nearly one million people lost their lives in the Great Terror, with Stalin’s regime responsible for the deaths of more communists than Hitler’s and Mussolini’s together. To this day, the working class has not recovered from its political impact.

To be continued

NOTES:

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

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next01.htm#s1>

37 *ibid*

38 *ibid*

39 Leon Trotsky, *For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism*, <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311208.htm>

40 Leon Trotsky, *The German Catastrophe*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330528.htm>

41 Leon Trotsky, *The Only Road*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932/onlyroad1.htm#s2>

42 Leon Trotsky, *What Next? Vital questions for the German proletariat*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next02.htm#s10>

43 Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932-33], *KPD or New Party?*, New York 1972, p. 161

44 Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932-33], *The Collapse of the KPD*, New York 1972, p. 195

45 Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932-33], *It is necessary to build Communist Parties and an International anew*, New York 1972, p. 305-6, 310



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