

One hundred years since the death of Franz Mehring

Peter Schwarz
6 February 2019

One hundred years ago, on January 28, 1919, Franz Mehring, one of the leading Marxist theoreticians of his time, died at the age of 72. The sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International named their respective publishing houses--Mehring Verlag and Mehring Books--after him.

Franz Mehring was the most important historian of the German workers movement. He authored a four-volume history of German Social Democracy, a history of Germany from the end of the Middle Ages, and the first comprehensive biography of Karl Marx, which appeared on the 100th anniversary of the birth of the founder of scientific socialism, one year prior to Mehring's death. It was translated into numerous languages and remains a key text that is well worth reading.

A history of German literature, which Mehring repeatedly sought to complete, was abandoned only because other more pressing tasks intervened. However, his essays on literary questions, which make up two volumes of his collected works, provide an overview of 18th and 19th century German literature.

Mehring possessed a comprehensive knowledge of history and literature, and played an indispensable role in educating hundreds of thousands of workers in the fundamentals of Marxism, the traditions of their movement, Prussian history and classical German literature. He thereby immunised them against nationalist myths, militarism and the cult of Prussia that predominated in so-called educated bourgeois circles.

Mehring's (far from complete) collected works, which were published by Dietz Verlag in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) during the 1980s, comprise 15 volumes. He wrote for several Social Democratic publications, including *Vorwärts*, the party's central organ, and *Die Neue Zeit*, its internationally recognised theoretical flagship. From 1902 to 1907, he was editor-in-chief of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, which offered a platform for Rosa Luxemburg and other representatives of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) left wing. His own articles concentrated on contemporary political, historical, philosophical and cultural issues, and often assumed the form of a polemic.

Until 1895, Mehring also led the Freie Volksbühne (Free People's Stage) association in Berlin, which was founded as the first cultural-political mass organisation for workers, with the aim of giving impoverished workers access to education and cultural life. Alongside classics like those of Goethe and Schiller, the Volksbühne performed works by socially critical authors of the day, including Henrik Ibsen and Gerhart Hauptmann.

In 1902, Mehring published part of the literary estate of Marx and Engels, a pioneering step in the study of the history of socialism that was to be later pursued in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. From 1906 until 1911, he taught at the SPD's main party school in Berlin.

In contrast to Georgi Plekhanov, Karl Kautsky and other Marxist theoreticians of the day, who turned to the right with the approach of the war and opposed the proletarian revolution in Russia in 1917, Mehring radicalised with age. Already in 1905, he enthusiastically welcomed the

Russian Revolution of that year and supported Rosa Luxemburg in the debate over the mass strike that erupted in the SPD. In 1917, he gave his unconditional backing to Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

In Germany, Mehring emerged as one of the leaders of the revolutionary left wing of the SPD. Already at the 1903 party congress in Dresden he was sharply denounced by the party's right wing after he declared his support for the Marxist opponents of Eduard Bernstein in the revisionism debate. However, party leaders August Bebel and Karl Kautsky were still prepared to defend him at this stage.

When the SPD backed the world war in 1914 and concluded a labour truce with the ruling class, Mehring collaborated with Luxemburg in publishing *Die Internationale*, which opposed the war from a revolutionary internationalist standpoint. On 1 January, 1916, he was one of 20 delegates to take part in the first national congress of the Spartacus Group.

Although he was already 70 years old and ill, Mehring was taken into military detention for four months in August 1916 due to his opposition to the war. He was elected to the Prussian state parliament in March 1917. He won the Berlin constituency of Karl Liebknecht, who was not allowed to stand due to a conviction. As a member of the Spartacus League, Mehring was heavily involved in the preparations for the founding congress of the German Communist Party, which took place over New Year 1919 in the midst of revolutionary struggles in Berlin. However, Mehring was prevented by illness from participating.

Two weeks later, he suffered the blow of learning how his two closest comrades, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, had been brutally murdered by the right-wing extremist Freikorps, with the SPD government's seal of approval. He survived Luxemburg and Liebknecht by only two weeks.

The Lessing Legend

Franz Mehring joined the SPD only in 1891, at the age of 45. He was born on February 27, 1846 in the small town of Schlawe in the Prussian province of Pomerania, now the town of Slawno in Poland. His father, an ex-military officer, was a high-ranking tax official and ensured that Mehring had a good education. He studied classical philology in Leipzig and Berlin and worked as a journalist for various daily and weekly newspapers in the 1870s and 1880s. During this time, Mehring was politically a bourgeois democrat. He wavered between national liberalism and social democracy, against which he regularly polemicised.

In 1875, he authored a polemic against the reactionary Prussian court historian Heinrich von Treitschke that was well received in the SPD. Two years later, he published the book *German Social Democracy: History and Lessons*, which met with bitter criticism from the SPD. In the book,

Mehring sharply criticised Marx and the founders of the SPD, August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht and Ferdinand Lassalle, and accused the SPD of inciting hatred towards the fatherland. He received his doctorate from the University of Leipzig in 1882 on the basis of a work with the same title.

It speaks to Mehring's intellectual integrity that in the course of the intense conflict with Marxism and the SPD, he ultimately accepted their superiority, became a Marxist and joined the SPD.

The first work Mehring wrote as a Marxist was *The Lessing Legend*. He originally intended to review a newly published biography of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing—18th century German philosopher, dramatist and art critic—by Erich Schmidt in three or four articles. In the course of the writing, however, the polemic grew to 20 articles, which were published in the literary supplement of *Die Neue Zeit* from January to June 1892. They were carefully edited before being published in book form.

The book, with the subtitle “On the history and critique of Prussian despotism and classical literature,” sought to oppose the attempt to co-opt one of the most significant poets of the German Enlightenment and present him as a supporter of Prussian absolutism. The central tenet of the “Lessing legend” was the attempt to portray the author of *Nathan the Wise* and *Minna von Barnhelm* not merely as a contemporary of Frederick the Great, but also as his intellectual comrade in arms, so as to give Prussian despotism a progressive and Enlightenment aura.

Mehring exposed this legend by making use of his thorough knowledge of the facts, which thoroughly embarrassed his bourgeois opponent. He demonstrated that Lessing did not admire the Prussian king and consider him an intellectual comrade in arms, but hated him and rebelled against the feudal social order. He presented a comprehensive examination of Prussian history that left no trace of the Prussian cult intact.

Friedrich Engels praised the book in a letter to Mehring on July 14, 1893, writing that it was “by far the best presentation in existence of the genesis of the Prussian state, in fact, I can say the only good one, correctly developing the connections in most matters down to their details.” He continued: “One can only regret that it was unable to incorporate all of the further developments, Bismarck included...” The exposure of “the monarchical-patriotic legends” is one of the most effective means “of overcoming the monarchy as a shield of class rule,” Engels concluded. [1]

Mehring based himself very consciously on the Marxist method, and even added a treatise on historical materialism to the first edition of *The Lessing Legend*. In the foreword to that edition, Mehring wrote that he had attempted to “make even clearer the fundamental division between enlightened despotism and classical literature in the Germany of the 18th century.” He wrote further that the more the Friedrichian state emerged “as the historical product of the class struggle of princes and Junkers from east of the Elbe, the more sharply our classical literature emerged as the emancipatory struggle of the German bourgeoisie.”

In the first chapter, Mehring noted that Lessing's character stood “in the starkest contrast to the character of the German bourgeoisie today.” Lessing was the “most free and genuine” of the intellectual pioneers of the German bourgeoisie. “Honest and valiant, with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, tremendous contempt for all worldly goods, a hatred of all oppressors and love for the oppressed, his irreconcilable dislike of the world's great leaders, readiness to fight against all forms of injustice, modest yet proud stand in the bitter struggle against the miserable social and political conditions”—all of this made up Lessing's character and found a reflection in his writings.

By contrast, the typical traits of the German bourgeoisie today, Mehring continued, were its “timidity and two-faced character, an insatiable thirst for profit, a love of hunting for profit and, above all, of profit itself, bowing to its superiors and trampling on those below, an ineradicable Byzantinism, deafening silence in the face of glaring injustice, and ever more vainglorious and feeble position in contemporary social and political

struggles.”

Mehring identified as the root cause of this the betrayal of the 1848 revolution, when the bourgeoisie allied with the Prussian state against the working class. The German bourgeoisie already recognised in 1848, wrote Mehring, that it would never be able to come to power through its own initiative. The bourgeoisie declared itself ready “to share the bayonets with the Prussian state.” For its part, the Prussian state acknowledged that “it had to modernise a little.” This was the compromise upon which the new German Reich emerged.

This is what Mehring identifies as the source of the Lessing legend. The bourgeoisie faced the devilishly difficult task of “reconciling its present reality with its ideal past, of transforming the era of our classical education into the era of Frederick the Great.”

Other great German thinkers and poets, like Winckelmann and Herder, fled their homeland. “The only sacrificial lamb who could be slaughtered for the bourgeoisie's ideological requirements,” wrote Mehring, was Lessing, who chose to continue living in Prussia. King Frederick to be sure did not care about Lessing and did mistreat him, but, “In that night of fortunate ignorance, in which all cats appeared grey, both men's tendencies towards ‘intellectual liberation’ were seen as the same.”

The Lessing Legend went through numerous editions and played a crucial role in arming the German working class against the pressure of the Prussia and Bismarck cults, which the bourgeoisie and educated petty-bourgeoisie fully embraced, and which exercised considerable influence over the SPD, particularly among the party and trade union functionaries. As Engels had advised, Mehring developed the themes in *The Lessing Legend* in a series of articles and books on German history.

Due to its many polemical arguments over points of detail, and the comprehensive knowledge of German history and literature it displays, *The Lessing Legend* is not an easy read for the contemporary reader. Nonetheless, it is well worth studying. The book provides a number of insights into historical and political questions that are once again highly relevant today. With the return of German militarism, the Prussian cult is enjoying a revival. The reconstruction of prestigious Prussian buildings, notwithstanding their historical baggage, such as the Berlin City Castle and the Garnisonkirche in Potsdam, testifies to this.

As its favourite Prussian historian, the German media has crowned Christopher Clark, who is considered to be not historically compromised, due to his Australian origins. In his 2006 bestseller on the rise and fall of Prussia, Clark paints a very flattering picture of Prussian despotism. He makes no mention of Franz Mehring, and only refers to Lessing in a footnote, without dealing with his significance.

Against neo-Kantianism and Nietzsche

Mehring's theoretical work was not confined to historical issues. He also combated all attempts to undermine the SPD's Marxist foundations with idealist and irrationalist conceptions.

After Bismarck's failure to destroy the SPD by means of the anti-socialist laws, which were lifted in 1890, the ruling class intensified its efforts to ideologically tame the party and integrate it into the state institutions. Neo-Kantianism flourished at the universities. In opposition to the class struggle, it posited a supra-class and supra-historical ethic, and sought to divert the SPD from the dangerous path of socialist revolution into the harmless pursuit of gradual reforms.

Mehring polemicalised repeatedly in *Die Neue Zeit* against the neo-Kantians and their master. One of his most outstanding articles appeared on February 17, 1904 and was titled “Kant and Marx.” [2] He accused neo-Kantianism, “which seeks to graft Marx onto Kant or Kant onto Marx,” of

“having no other effect than to once again obscure the hard-fought insights into its historical tasks achieved by the German working class.”

In the eulogies published on the 100th anniversary of his death, Mehring continued, Kant had been proclaimed the philosopher of liberalism. That makes “at least some sense,” he wrote, “as all of the half-heartedness displayed by German liberalism over the past century had already found exemplary expression in Kant.” In the final analysis, Kant’s philosophy could be explained by the fact that “he never goes beyond philistinism.”

Mehring would frequently return to the theme of Kantianism as the philosophy of German philistines, which found its continuation in Arthur Schopenhauer. Neo-Kantianism, he explained, was “in its objective essence nothing more than the attempt to shatter historical materialism.” Its proponents “suffer from a lack of a sense of history, which one comprehends when one has it, but never learns to comprehend when one doesn’t have it.”

Mehring also went into battle against Friedrich Nietzsche, who had considerable influence within the SPD among those who tended towards anarchism. The three fashionable philosophers of the German bourgeoisie—Schopenhauer, (Eduard von) Hartmann, and Nietzsche—wrote Mehring in the 1897 edition of *Die Neue Zeit*, “are rooted with every fibre of their being in the different stages of economic development that their class has passed through over the last 50 years.” [3]

Schopenhauer “retained his pride as a philosopher, however pathetic the pre-March philistine may have been.” By contrast, Hartmann’s philosophy of the unconscious signified “giving up bourgeois class consciousness entirely, which was the price the philistine had to pay to secure the gracious protection of the Prussian bayonets.” And Nietzsche was “the philosopher of big capital, which has been strengthened to such an extent that it can do without the assistance of Prussian bayonets.”

The revolutionary-sounding phraseology occasionally found in Nietzsche cannot conceal the fact that “he combats the proletarian class struggle from the same elevated intellectual position as the first and best stock market trader,” added Mehring. He then quoted at length from an article by Nietzsche in which Nietzsche combated socialism with the same reactionary arguments employed by the reactionary historian Heinrich von Treitschke. For example, Nietzsche warned against measuring “the suffering and privations of the lower classes of the people ... according to the scale of their perceptions.” Nietzsche elaborated, “In reality, the suffering and privations increase with the culture of the individual: the lowest classes are the dullest, improving their conditions means increasing their capacity to suffer.”

Russian Revolution

The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 marked a turning point for the international socialist movement. In 1905, the practical significance of the conflict between Marxism and revisionism, which had been largely fought out on the theoretical plane until then, came to the fore. In the debate over the mass strike, the trade union leaders and the right wing of the SPD leadership made it explicitly clear that they would oppose all mass revolutionary working class movements. Rosa Luxemburg was prevented from appearing at trade union meetings.

After the victory of the October Revolution in 1917, the organisational break between the Social Democratic defenders of the state and revolutionary communists was not only unavoidable, but overdue.

Mehring immediately recognised the epochal significance of the 1905 revolution and welcomed it with enthusiasm. In a country that was previously seen as a bastion of reaction and backwardness, the working class had emerged as a powerful revolutionary force.

On November 1, 1905, Mehring compared the Russian revolution *Die Neue Zeit* with the French revolution of 1789. “What distinguishes the great Russian Revolution from the great French Revolution is its leadership by the class-conscious proletariat,” wrote Mehring. “The weakness of the European revolution of 1848 is the strength of the Russian Revolution in 1905. Its bearer is a proletariat, which has understood the ‘revolution in permanence,’ which the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* [published by Marx] preached at the time to deaf ears.” [4]

Mehring did not go so far as Leon Trotsky, who developed his theory of permanent revolution from the revolution of 1905 and drew the conclusion that the working class had to take power in Russia and transform the bourgeois revolution into a proletarian revolution. However, he left no doubt that the future success of the revolution would be dependent upon the working class maintaining the initiative.

“It is not in its power to skip over stages of historical development and transform the Tsarist repressive state into a socialist community all at once,” wrote Mehring. “But it can shorten and pave the path of its emancipatory struggle if it maintains the revolutionary power it has secured and refuses to give it up to the bourgeoisie’s deceitful mirages, while always intervening anew to accelerate the historical, by which we mean revolutionary, development ... This is precisely the ‘revolution in permanence’ with which the Russian working class must answer the bourgeoisie’s cry for ‘peace at all costs’.”

Mehring stressed the international significance of the Russian Revolution, and informed the German working class that “The cause of your Russian brothers is also yours.” In the mass strike debate, Mehring unconditionally aligned himself with Rosa Luxemburg.

After the Bolsheviks conquered power in Russia, the German bourgeoisie unleashed a wave of anti-Bolshevik hysteria that found support not only from the SPD, but also from sections of the Independent Social Democrats (USPD). Karl Kautsky in particular agitated publicly against the Bolsheviks’ “terrorism.” Mehring vehemently defended them against this accusation.

In the article “Marx and the Bolsheviks,” [5] Mehring denounced Kautsky and cited Lenin, who had written three years earlier of Kautsky: “The international working class cannot fulfill its world historic revolutionary task without an irreconcilable struggle against such renegacy, this lack of character, this groveling at the feet of opportunism, this unprecedented theoretical distortion of Marxism.” He defended the Bolsheviks against Kautsky’s absurd assertion that Marx understood the “dictatorship of the proletariat” to mean the introduction of universal suffrage.

In June 1918, Mehring published a four-part article in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* titled “The Bolsheviks and us.” He firmly rejected the accusation that it was a reckless adventure and contradicted basic conceptions of Marxism “that the Bolsheviks want to build a socialist society in a country that is 90 percent peasant and only 10 percent industrial workers.”

He wrote: “That may be so, but if Marx could state his opinion on this, he would probably repeat the well-known phrase: ‘Well, then I am no Marxist.’ He never saw his task in measuring new revolutions according to old formulae, but observed every new revolution to see if it supplied new insights that could assist the emancipatory struggle of the proletariat, caring little if this meant that one or another formula had to be scrapped.” [6]

Mehring unyieldingly pursued the path that he began in 1891 with his embrace of Marxism to the end. The last words of this commemoration can be left to Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote of Mehring on his 70th birthday on February 27, 1916, in the midst of the bloody slaughter of the war:

“And as soon as the socialist spirit once again grips the German proletariat, its first move will be to reach for your writings, the fruits of

your life's work, whose value is imperishable and from which emanates the breath of a strong and noble world outlook. Today, when bourgeois intellectuals are betraying and leaving us in packs to return to the fleshpots of the rulers, we can watch them go with a contemptuous smile: Just go!

"After all, we have taken from the German bourgeoisie the best it had to offer in spirit, talent and character: Franz Mehring." [7]

**

End Notes

[1] MEW [The Collected Works of Marx and Engels], Vol. 39, pp. 98-99

[2] Franz Mehring, "Kant und Marx," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 13, p. 57 and p. 66

[3] Franz Mehring, "Nietzsche gegen den Sozialismus," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 13, p. 164 and p. 169

[4] Franz Mehring, "Die Revolution in Permanenz," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 15, pp. 84-88

[5] Franz Mehring, "Marx und die Bolschewiki," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 15, pp. 778-780

[6] Franz Mehring, "Die Bolschewiki und wir," *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 31 May, 1 June, 10 June and 17 June, 1918

[7] Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Vol. 5, Berlin 1987, p. 104



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)