

Lecture to the SEP 2025 Summer School

The victory of fascism in Germany and the call for the Fourth International

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This is the first part of the lecture “The Revolution Betrayed” delivered by Johannes Stern and Jordan Shilton to the 2025 Summer School of the Socialist Equality Party (US) on the history of the Security and the Fourth International investigation. To supplement the reading of this part of the lecture, readers are encouraged to study Leon Trotsky’s foundational 1932 essay “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat,” now available on the WSWS and part of a collection of Trotsky’s writings on Germany available for purchase from Mehring Books.

Comrades,

The central task of this lecture is to examine the catastrophic victory of fascism in Germany in 1933, the role of the Stalinist Comintern and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in enabling Hitler’s seizure of power, and how these events compelled Leon Trotsky to draw the conclusion that it was necessary to build a new, Fourth International. This was not a subjective response to defeat, but an objective political reorientation grounded in Marxist analysis. Trotsky’s writings from the first half of the 1930s represent some of the most profound contributions to revolutionary strategy in the 20th century. They are inseparable from the historical experience of the German working class, which, despite its strength, traditions, and revolutionary determination, was betrayed by its leaderships.

I. Introduction: The historical context and political stakes

The crisis of capitalism that emerged after World War I had its sharpest expression in Germany. The Weimar Republic, born from the defeat of the German Revolution of 1918-19, was politically unstable and economically volatile. The burden of war reparations, hyperinflation in 1923, and the crash of 1929 had devastated broad layers of the population and radicalized the working class. Germany was the linchpin of the European class struggle. As Trotsky emphasized in his famous article “Germany, the key to the international situation,” written from his exile on Prinkipo (Turkey) in November 1931:

On this hardly peaceful political background of the world, the situation in Germany stands out sharply. The economic and political contradictions have here reached unprecedented acuteness. The solution is approaching. The moment has come when the pre-revolutionary situation must be transformed into the revolutionary—or the counter-revolutionary. On the direction in

which the solution of the German crisis develops will depend not only the fate of Germany herself (and that is already a great deal), but also the fate of Europe, the destiny of the entire world, for many years to come.

Socialist construction in the USSR, the course of the Spanish revolution, the development of the pre-revolutionary situation in England, the future of French imperialism, the fate of the revolutionary movement in China and India—all this directly and immediately rests upon the question of who will be victorious in Germany in the course of the next few months: Communism or fascism?^[1]

Germany had the largest organized working class in the world. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Communist Party (KPD) together commanded millions of votes and members. The SPD had led the workers’ movement for decades, while the KPD had emerged from the November Revolution in 1918 and the betrayal of 1914 when the SPD supported the war credits of the Kaiser. Yet this powerful movement was paralyzed in the face of the fascist danger.

II. Germany: The stronghold of the working class

Despite the economic crisis and rise of far-right violence, the German proletariat remained a formidable force.

In the last relatively free elections of November 1932, the SPD and KPD together received 13.2 million votes (37.3 percent), compared to the NSDAP’s 11.7 million (33.1 percent). On paper, the workers’ movement still had the upper hand. But the political disunity and mis-leadership proved decisive.

The SPD clung to a rigid legalism, defending the decaying Weimar institutions. Its leaders feared revolution more than fascism. The KPD, subordinated to the Stalinized Comintern, denounced the SPD as “social fascists” and refused any struggle to unify rank-and-file workers loyal to the SPD and to the KPD in a struggle against the Nazi danger. Even as Hitler’s stormtroopers terrorized workers in the streets, the KPD advanced the line that the main enemy was the SPD, not the Nazis.

Trotsky, advocating the policy of the united front, insisted that only joint action by the SPD and KPD could stop fascism. In his article “For a Worker’s United Front Against Fascism” in December 1931 he elaborated this strategy:

No common platform with the Social Democracy, or with the leaders of the German trade unions, no common publications, banners, placards! March separately, but strike together! Agree only how to strike, whom to strike, and when to strike! Such an agreement can be concluded even with the devil himself, with his grandmother, and even with Noske and Grezesinsky. On one condition, not to bind one's hands.

It is necessary, without any delay, finally to elaborate a practical system of measures—not with the aim of merely “exposing” the Social Democracy (before the Communists), but with the aim of actual struggle against fascism. The question of factory defense organizations, of unhampered activity on the part of the factory councils, the inviolability of the workers' organizations and institutions, the question of arsenals that may be seized by the fascists, the question of measures in the case of an emergency, that is, of the coordination of the actions of the Communist and the Social Democratic divisions in the struggle, etc., etc., must be dealt with in this program.

In the struggle against fascism, the factory councils occupy a tremendously important position. Here a particularly precise program of action is necessary. Every factory must become an anti-fascist bulwark, with its own commandants and its own battalions. It is necessary to have a map of the fascist barracks and all other fascist strongholds, in every city and in every district. The fascists are attempting to encircle the revolutionary strongholds. The encirclers must be encircled. On this basis, an agreement with the Social Democratic and trade-union organizations is not only permissible, but a duty. To reject this for reasons of “principle” (in reality because of bureaucratic stupidity, or what is still worse, because of cowardice) is to give direct and immediate aid to fascism.^[2]

While the KPD developed the complacent slogan “After Hitler, us!”—suggesting to Communist workers that Hitler would be unable to remain in power for long and that the socialist revolution would soon follow the rapid collapse of the Nazi regime—Trotsky stressed tirelessly that unless the working class took action, the road to dictatorship and the crushing of all working class organizations was open.

At the moment that the “normal” police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium—the turn of the fascist regime arrives.^[3]

And he explained the character of a fascist state:

When a state turns Fascist, it doesn't only mean that the forms and methods of government are changed in accordance with the patterns set by Mussolini—the changes in this sphere ultimately play a minor role—but it means, first of all for the most part, that the workers organizations are annihilated; that the proletariat is reduced to an amorphous state; and that a system of administration is created which penetrates deeply into the masses and which serves to frustrate the independent crystallization of the proletariat. Therein precisely is the gist of Fascism.^[4]

III. The role of the KPD and the Comintern

The political degeneration of the KPD, which was founded on 1 January 1919 still under the leadership of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, was a direct consequence of the Stalinist transformation of the German Communist Party and the Communist International as a whole. After the missed Revolution of 1923, Trotsky was attacked as a right-winger within the KPD because he refused to make then party leader Heinrich Brandler—who had called off the planned insurrection in the last minute—solely responsible for the October defeat.

Brandler was replaced by Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow—leaders of the KPD's left wing and allies of Communist International chairman Gregory Zinoviev—who suppressed the documents of the Left Opposition. Only when Zinoviev broke with Stalin and aligned himself with Trotsky did a fierce factional struggle erupt within the KPD.

But as a consequence, and following orders from Moscow, Fischer and Maslow were removed and expelled from the party. Their place was taken by Ernst Thälmann, who became a loyal servant of Stalin and implemented the increasingly catastrophic political line of the Stalinized Communist International in Germany.

In 1928, the Comintern adopted the theory of “social fascism,” asserting that Social Democracy was the “twin” of fascism. This led to a disastrous ultra-left policy, severing all ties with the SPD rank and file. At the center of the KPD's line was its refusal to see any difference between Social Democracy and fascism. Because both supported the capitalist order, the KPD adopted the position that essentially no distinction should be made between the two. Trotsky attacked this position sharply.

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 in “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat.” And:

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.^[5]

This difference had to be exploited. In the article “For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism,” from which I already quoted, 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.^[6]

By opposing a united front and instead delivering ultimatums to the Social Democrats and in some cases even collaborating with the Nazis against the SPD—most infamously the KPD joined the Nazis in backing a 1931 referendum to oust the SPD-led government in Prussia—the Stalinists kept the social democratic workers, who were increasingly coming into opposition to their leadership, tied to it.

Thälmann infamously promoted in his speeches a “people’s revolution” which Trotsky took up sharply:

Every issue of the paper of the fascist Strasser is embellished with the slogan of the people’s revolution as opposed to the Marxist slogan of the class revolution. It is understood that every great revolution is a people’s or a national revolution, in the sense that it unites around the revolutionary class all the virile and creative forces of the nation and reconstructs the nation around a new core. But this is not a slogan; it is an inane and charlatanism, market competition with the fascists, paid for at the price of injecting confusion into the minds of the workers.^[7]

This “confusion” spread by the KPD leadership paralyzed the working class, demoralized the membership of the KPD itself and played into the hands of the fascists who were able to exploit the mass impoverishment of broad layers of the middle class caused by the Great Depression.

Trotsky correctly stressed that the turn of the radicalized petty bourgeoisie into the camp of fascism was not a necessary process. Had the KPD really fought the Nazis with a correct and determined strategy many of them would have supported a communist revolution. In his crucial pamphlet *Germany: The Only Road*, Trotsky explained the political mechanism that pushed large sections of the petty bourgeoisie towards fascism.

It 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 skillful offensive against the enemy, by the success of its revolutionary policy.

And he continued:

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. All the bourgeois parties, including the Social Democracy, turn its thoughts in this very direction. When the social crisis takes on an intolerable acuteness, a particular party appears on the scene with the direct aim of agitating the petty bourgeoisie to a white heat and of directing its hatred and its despair against the proletariat. In Germany, this historic function is fulfilled by National Socialism, a broad current whose ideology is composed of all the putrid vapors of decomposing bourgeois society.^[8]

While Trotsky stressed that “the principal political responsibility for the growth of fascism rests, of course, on the shoulders of the Social Democracy” he stressed that “the political question, however, is not settled for us with the responsibility of the Social Democracy.” He wrote:

Ever since the beginning of the war we have denounced this party as the agency of the imperialist bourgeoisie within the ranks of the proletariat. Out of this new orientation of the revolutionary Marxists arose the Third International. Its task consisted in uniting the proletariat under the banner of the revolution and thereby securing for it the directing influence over the oppressed masses of the petty bourgeoisie in the towns and the countryside.

The postwar period, in Germany more than anywhere else, was an epoch of economic hopelessness and civil war. The international conditions as well as the domestic ones pushed the country peremptorily on the road to socialism. Every step of the Social Democracy revealed its decadence and its impotence, the reactionary import of its politics, the venality of its leaders. What other conditions are needed for the development of the Communist Party? And yet, after the first few years of significant successes, German Communism entered into an era of vacillations, zigzags, alternate turns to opportunism and adventurism. The centrist bureaucracy has systematically weakened the proletarian vanguard and prevented it from bringing the class under its leadership. Thus, it has robbed the proletariat as a whole of the possibility of leading behind it the oppressed masses of the petty bourgeoisie. The Stalinist bureaucracy bears the direct and immediate responsibility for the growth of fascism before the proletarian vanguard.^[9]

The failure of the KPD ultimately allowed Hitler to seize power without triggering a civil war. The consequences were catastrophic. Within weeks, the Communist Party—along with all other working class parties and organizations—was banned and destroyed. Tens of thousands of Socialists and Communists disappeared in Concentration Camps and were tortured and killed. The German proletariat, long regarded as the best organized in the world, experienced a historic defeat. The KPD’s bankrupt political line did not arise from mistaken theory alone. It reflected the fundamental transformation of the Comintern under Stalin. By the early 1930s, the Soviet bureaucracy’s primary concern was not world revolution but national security and diplomatic maneuvering.

IV. Was it deliberate?

I would like to take up this fundamental question a little bit more directly: was the KPD's policy simply an error, or did it express a conscious betrayal? In 1923, Trotsky had argued that the Soviet leadership and Comintern, despite their mistakes, genuinely sought revolution. Ten years later the Stalinist bureaucracy had more and more directly become a force of counterrevolution. In *What Next?* Trotsky wrote:

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. 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.^[10]

The bureaucracy was used to issuing ultimatums and giving orders. It failed to anticipate developments and responded to the disastrous consequences of its own policies with a volatile zigzag course, swinging between ultra-left and right-wing positions.

From 1924 to 1928 the Comintern followed essentially a right-wing orientation that produced catastrophic defeats. During the 1926 British general strike Stalin instructed the British Communist Party to give uncritical support to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) bureaucracy that ultimately betrayed the strike.

Between 1925 and 1927 in China, Stalin instructed the Communist Party to support the national bourgeois Kuomintang movement, based on the theory of the "Bloc of Four Classes" in the struggle against imperialism. This policy of class collaboration—an open betrayal of the theory of permanent revolution—left the Chinese working class and much of the Communist Party leadership vulnerable to the brutal massacres carried out by both the Kuomintang and its left wing in Shanghai and Wuhan.

In 1928 the Stalinist bureaucracy responded to the agrarian crisis within the Soviet Union caused by Stalin's policy of slow industrialization and his accommodation to the Kulaks by veering sharply to the left—an abrupt shift it then enforced across its sections.

This marked the beginning of the so-called "Third Period," in which the Stalinist bureaucracy declared at the outset that the struggle for power was immediately on the agenda in every country. The theory of "social fascism" was a product of this turn.

By 1933 Stalin and the bureaucracy viewed international developments through an entirely nationalist lens. They not only underestimated Hitler's threat. What mattered most to them was not the fate of the German workers, but the short-term interests of the Soviet Union as defined by the bureaucracy. The Comintern had become the foreign policy tool of the Kremlin. The German disaster confirmed its transformation into a counterrevolutionary agency.

V. The SPD: Reformism to the end

If the Stalinist KPD actively disoriented and divided the working class, the SPD tied it politically to the bourgeoisie and capitalism. The SPD leadership, thoroughly integrated into the Weimar political apparatus, regarded any revolutionary upsurge as a greater threat than fascism itself.

Even in the face of mass fascist violence, the SPD insisted on a legalistic and constitutional path, pinning its hopes on the Reichstag and judiciary and finally even far-right President General Paul von Hindenburg who played a key role in the conspiracy to hand over power to the Nazis.

Of course, this essentially counter-revolutionary role did not fall from the sky. Following its historical betrayal of 1914 and its support for German imperialism during World War I, the SPD in an alliance with right-wing Freikorps suppressed the revolutionary struggles of the German proletariat in 1918/19, culminating in the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg to preserve the bourgeois order. The result was the Weimar Republic, where the old reactionary forces continued to operate behind a democratic façade. When the global economic crisis shattered the fragile social equilibrium in 1929, the SPD once again "saved" the republic—this time by systematically dismantling its democratic framework.

Initially, the SPD aligned itself with the Brüning government, which bypassed parliament and ruled through emergency decrees. It then supported the re-election of Hindenburg as Reich President, who would appoint Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933. Rather than mobilizing its base against the growing fascist threat, the SPD placed its hopes in the police, the military, and the Reich President. Even when Hindenburg and von Papen ousted the Social Democratic-led government in Prussia by force in 1932, the SPD remained passive—choosing instead to file a constitutional complaint with the Supreme Court.

Trotsky captured the essence of their stance with biting clarity:

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.^[11]

The SPD's submissive posture not only left the working class defenseless—it also emboldened the fascists. As Trotsky sharply noted:

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.^[12]

To put it somewhat more bluntly, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that if SPD leaders had been shown the full horrors of Hitler's regime in advance—the concentration camps, book burnings, suppression of all socialist and trade union rights—they would likely have still chosen that

path over the danger of revolution. Their historical role, as Trotsky had emphasized since 1914, was the preservation of the bourgeois order under any circumstances.

But Trotsky always distinguished between the SPD leaders and the workers who followed them. Millions of workers remained loyal to the SPD out of habit, tradition, or lack of an alternative because of the increasingly misguided policies of the KPD.

VI. The Left Opposition in Germany

Many workers and intellectuals followed Trotsky's writings and understood the warnings. There was also constant and determined struggle by the Left Opposition in Germany challenging both the SPD and the KPD and fighting for a correct political line and a united front against fascism.

The origins of the Left Opposition in Germany can be traced back to the development and conflicts within the Communist Party of Germany over the missed revolution of 1923 and Trotsky's *Lessons of October* and his struggle against the increasingly nationalist politics of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

On September 1, 1926, 700 prominent members of the KPD publicly declared their support for the Russian United Opposition in an open letter. They rejected the theory of "socialism in one country" and called for an open discussion of the Russian question within the party. In April 1928, this group went on to found the Leninbund. Trotsky's followers constituted a minority within the Leninbund. The majority, led by Hugo Urbahns, were aligned with Zinoviev.

In the *Historical and International Foundations of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, we characterize the organization which retained many ultra-left tendencies that Lenin and Trotsky had previously combated within the Comintern as follows:

It [the Leninbund] 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.^[13]

By 1929–30, a decisive break between the Leninbund and the Left Opposition had become unavoidable. After Trotsky publicly criticized the group, his supporters were expelled. The core disagreements revolved around the class nature of the Soviet Union—which Urbahns and his followers defined as state-capitalist—and the international strategy of the revolutionary movement. In an open letter to the members of the Leninbund, Trotsky emphasized that the Left Opposition could only develop as an international tendency:

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.^[14]

In spring 1930, following their expulsion from the Leninbund, Trotsky's supporters formed the German Left Opposition. They launched an energetic struggle to challenge the KPD's political degeneration and to reestablish a revolutionary communist influence in the working class.

Despite operating under intense political pressure and material hardship, the new organization faced internal strife inherited from the broader crisis of the communist movement. Bureaucratic methods and factionalism plagued its ranks. Trotsky attempted to intervene through a series of personal letters and, in February 1931, addressed the matter in a letter to all sections of the International Left Opposition. He traced the group's dysfunction back to the "administrative approach of the epigones [i.e., the Stalinists] in the spheres of the principles, ideas and the methods of Marxism" since 1923, noting that the Left Opposition had to be built "on a foundation which is overcrowded with the remnants and splinters of former breakdowns."

Trotsky sharply criticized the prevailing clique mentality and warned against "toying with principles, journalistic light-mindedness, moral looseness, and pseudo 'irreconcilability' in the name of personal caprice." And he insisted the crisis could only be resolved through "active international assistance." He called for an immediate end to retaliatory expulsions, the formation of a control commission, and the preparation of a party conference under the guidance of the International Secretariat.

The internal conflicts of the German Left Opposition were further exploited by Stalinist GPU agents, most notably the Lithuanian brothers Ruvins and Abraham Sobolevicius, who operated under the pseudonyms Roman Well and Adolph Senin. Both were active in the Leipzig group, which clashed with the Berlin faction and were only later exposed as GPU agents. Senin confessed under oath in a US court in the 1950s. The brothers worked as informants and provocateurs, feeding distorted reports to Trotsky and gathering intelligence on his network, including his son Leon Sedov, who was ultimately murdered by the GPU on February 16, 1938, in Paris.

As the political crisis in Germany deepened in mid-1932, Senin and Well openly defected to Stalinism. Just ten days before Hitler took power, they published a forged issue of the newspaper *Permanent Revolution*, falsely announcing a split between the German Left Opposition and Trotsky. Stalinist media—including the *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag)—eagerly circulated this fabrication.

Trotsky addressed the affair in his 1933 article, "Serious Lessons from an Inconsequential Thing." While he already at that time suspected signs of GPU involvement, Trotsky focused on the political implications. He concluded that the Left Opposition must urgently focus on training a new generation of proletarian cadres. What he wrote on that, I believe, also sums up very directly the essence and orientation of this summer school:

The Bolshevik-Leninists must seriously pose the question of the training and education of new cadres of the proletarian youth. The Left Opposition has its own revolutionary conceptions, its own

history and tradition. Only on this basis can a serious proletarian revolutionist be educated... Hand in hand with the political struggle, systematic theoretical training must be carried on. The munition must be prepared for a whole historical epoch.^[15]

Despite internal crises, Stalinist sabotage, and state repression, the German Left Opposition was able to build an active base. It circulated Trotsky's writings, regularly published its own magazine *Permanente Revolution*, established local groups in dozens of cities and gained influence within the factories, showing that its principled program resonated powerfully among layers of the working class.

VII. Centrism and the SAP

The crisis of the German workers' movement also gave rise to centrist tendencies—those that vacillated between reform and revolution, clarity and confusion. The most prominent of these was the SAP (Socialist Workers Party), formed in 1931 as a left split from the SPD.

It emerged as a political refuge for diverse currents that had found no place in either the SPD or the KPD—left-wing Social Democrats, former USPD leaders (including Georg Ledebour), remnants of the KAPD, defectors from the Leninbund and the KPD opposition (the Brandlerites), as well as radical pacifists.

The SAP criticized the SPD's passivity and the KPD's sectarianism, but it failed to break with reformist methods or orient decisively toward the building of a revolutionary leadership. Trotsky saw in the SAP a political current expressing the pressures of the radicalizing petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. He was open to dialogue with the SAP's left wing but made no concessions on program. "Reformism gives place to the innumerable shades of Centrism, which now, in the majority of countries, dominate the workers' movement," he wrote in "Two articles on Centrism" in early 1934.

The new International cannot form itself in any other way than that of struggle against centrism. Ideological intransigence and flexible united front policy are, in these conditions, two weapons for attaining one and the same end.^[16]

In "Centrism and the Fourth International" (1934), Trotsky laid out the essential characteristics of centrism: "Theoretically centrism is amorphous and eclectic, avoids theoretical obligations and inclines (in words) to give preference to 'revolutionary practice' over theory; without understanding that only Marxist theory can give to practice a revolutionary direction." A centrist "views with hatred the revolutionary principle: *to state what is*"; he is inclined to substitute for a principled policy personal maneuvering and petty organizational diplomacy... His shilly-shallying the centrist frequently covers up by reference to the dangers of 'sectarianism'; by which he understands not abstract-propagandist passivity ... but an active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency, organizational completeness." And he does not understand "that in the present epoch a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party."^[17]

The SAP's inability to act decisively in 1933—when the entire fate of the German and international working class was at stake—proved the political bankruptcy of centrism. It neither led nor clarified, and in the end, its historical role was that of confusion and retreat. Under pressure from the

Nazi onslaught, the SAP briefly shifted to the left. Left Social Democrats Max Seydewitz and Kurt Rosenfeld were replaced as party leaders by Jacob Walcher and Paul Frölich, founding members of the KPD who had joined the KPD opposition around Brandler. In August 1933, the SAP—alongside the International Left Opposition and two Dutch parties—called for the founding of the Fourth International.

In their "Declaration of Four," the signatories asserted unequivocally "that the new International cannot tolerate any conciliation towards reformism or centrism" and that "the new International must not permit any deviation from revolutionary principles in the questions of insurrection, proletarian dictatorship, soviet form of the state, etc."^[18]

In practice, however, the SAP soon obstructed the building of the Fourth International. In its essay *Trotskyism or Revolutionary Realpolitik* it argued that founding a new International was premature. The vanguard could not leap over stages in the development of proletarian consciousness, it claimed, insisting that "the vanguard is formed not by the proclamation of some 'correct' but abstract principles, but through the permanent participation in the concrete daily struggles of the proletariat."^[19]

This attack was the SAP's response to Trotsky's "Open Letter for the Fourth International," published in spring 1935. I will return to this crucial statement later. It was addressed "to all revolutionary working-class organizations and groups" and insisted that building new parties and a new International was central to solving the problem of revolutionary leadership and perspective. In response of the skepticism and essentially opportunist arguments of the centrists Trotsky argued that the "impending war danger does not brook a delay" in the fight to unify the working class "on a world scale under the banner of the Fourth International" for "even a single day."^[20]

VIII. The call for the Fourth International

"The Nazi victory in January 1933 marked a critical turning point in the history of the Trotskyist movement," writes David North in *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century*.

Since the founding of the Left Opposition, Trotsky's political objective had been to bring about the reform of the Russian Communist Party and the Communist International (*Comintern*). This was the principled strategy that guided the International Left Opposition following Trotsky's deportation from the Soviet Union and the first four years of his exile in Prinkipo. But the defeat in Germany demanded a reconsideration of the International Left Opposition's policy of reforming the Communist International and its national sections.^[21]

In the immediate aftermath of Hitler's victory in January 1933, Trotsky had waited. He still hoped that the magnitude of the defeat would provoke a reassessment within the Comintern. But when the Executive Committee of the Communist International, in March 1933, reaffirmed the KPD's line and defended its record, Trotsky concluded that the Third International was finished as a revolutionary organization. As Trotsky emphasized, Stalinism—just like Social Democracy in 1914—had definitively crossed over into the camp of bourgeois counterrevolution.

This required drawing the necessary political conclusions. The idea of reforming the Communist parties or the Communist International was no longer viable.

As David North explains in *Leon Trotsky and the Marxism*, the “quantitative accumulation of political betrayals had produced a qualitative transformation of Stalinism itself. It had passed from bureaucratic centrism to conscious counterrevolution.”^[22]

Trotsky addressed this decisive “change of orientation” and the conclusions which had to be drawn from this in his programmatic article “To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew.”

The most dangerous thing in politics is to fall captive to one’s own formula that yesterday was appropriate, but is bereft of all content today... 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.^[23]

The call for the Fourth International was not a rhetorical gesture. It arose from the recognition that the Third International—as the Second International in 1914—had irreversibly degenerated.

IX. The Seventh Congress of the Comintern and the treachery of the Popular Front

The Seventh World Congress of the Comintern, held in July-August 1935, fully confirmed this assessment: the Comintern had become the diplomatic agency of the Soviet bureaucracy. Under the leadership of Georgi Dimitrov, the Comintern embraced the strategy of the Popular Front—a coalition not only with reformist workers’ parties but also with liberal bourgeois parties. The stated aim was not the seizure of power by the working class, but the defense of bourgeois democracy—an orientation which produced the next round of catastrophic defeats for the proletariat and ultimately paved the way for the victory of fascist governments also in France and Spain.

In his analysis of the Seventh Congress Trotsky wrote that it not only aimed at “legalizing the opportunistic turn in France,” where the Communist Party campaigned for the formation of a bourgeois government under Leon Blum which was ultimately established in 1936, but sought to “immediately transplant it to the rest of the world.”

It “proclaimed that all countries in the world, Fascist Germany as well as democratic Norway, Great Britain as well as India, Greece as well as China, are equally in need of the ‘people’s front’, and, wherever possible, of a government of the people’s front.”

The Congress “after a period of vacillation and fumbling” marked “the final entry of the Communist International into its ‘Fourth Period’ which has for its slogan, ‘Power to Daladier!’—for its banner, a tricolor—for its hymn, the ‘Marseillaise,’ drowning out the ‘Internationale’.”^[24]

This did not mean that Trotsky simply ignored the Stalinist parties, which at the time still had a mass following in the working class. It was precisely because of the rightward turn of the Communist International that inside the communist parties and on their periphery “there are accumulating to an increasing degree contradictory tendencies, which must lead to an explosion, or a series of explosions.” From this, Trotsky explained, “flows the duty for the organizations of the Fourth International to follow most attentively the internal life of the communist parties in order to support the revolutionary proletarian tendency against

the ~~leading~~ social-patriotic faction, which will henceforth become more and more enmeshed in the attempts of class collaboration.”^[25]

These issues remain of urgent relevance. Unlike the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties of the 1930s, today’s nominally “left” organizations lack any real base in the working class and cannot be considered workers’ parties in any meaningful sense.

Nonetheless, the class content and political function of the new “Popular Front” policies advocated by various pseudo-left organizations remain fundamentally the same.

While the ruling class moves once again toward fascism and world war, the pseudo-left promotes the illusion that workers must align with the supposedly more “left” or “democratic” factions of the bourgeoisie. In doing so, they become active participants in the genocidal war-drive and the counterrevolutionary offensive against the working class.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) grounds its program on the historical lessons of the 1930s. As then, the fight against fascism and war today demands the independent political mobilization of the working class—unified internationally on the basis of its shared class interests, in opposition to capitalism and all its political defenders, and in the struggle for socialism.

X. Trotsky’s Open Letter for the Fourth International and the necessity of revolutionary leadership

The decisive issue is political clarity and leadership. Trotsky explained that the task of the new International was not only to intervene where possible in the immediate struggles of the working class, but to do so on the basis of the defense and development of the entire theoretical and programmatic heritage of Marxism. In his “Open Letter for the Fourth International,” Trotsky insisted:

The new parties and the new International must be built upon a new foundation: that is the key with which to solve all other tasks. The tempo and the time of the new revolutionary construction and its consummation depend, obviously, upon the general course of the class struggle, the future victories and defeats of the proletariat. Marxists, however, are not fatalists. They do not unload upon the historical process those very tasks which the historical process has posed before them. The initiative of a conscious minority, a scientific program, bold and ceaseless agitation in the name of clearly formulated aims, merciless criticism of all ambiguity those are some of the most important factors for the victory of the proletariat. Without a fused and steeled revolutionary party a socialist revolution is inconceivable. The conditions are difficult; the obstacles are great; the tasks are colossal; but there is no reason whatever to become pessimistic or to lose courage. Despite all the defeats of the proletariat, the position of the class enemy remains a hopeless one. Capitalism is doomed. Only in the socialist revolution is there salvation for mankind.

The very sequence of the Internationals has its own internal logic, which coincides with the historic rise of the proletariat. The First International advanced the scientific program of the proletarian revolution, but it fell because it lacked a mass base. The Second International dragged from the darkness, educated, and mobilized millions of workers, but in the decisive hour it found itself betrayed by the parliamentary and the trade union bureaucracy corrupted by rising capitalism. The Third International set for the first time the example of the victorious

proletarian revolution, but it found itself ground between the millstones of the bureaucracy in the isolated Soviet state and the reformist bureaucracy of the West. Today, under the conditions of decisive capitalist collapse, the Fourth International, standing upon the shoulders of its predecessors, enriched by the experience of their victories and defeats, will mobilize the toilers of the Occident and the Orient for the victorious assault upon the strongholds of world capital.^[26]

This is what the Fourth International, today only represented by the ICFI, has done since: preserving historical continuity, developing the Marxist perspective, educating cadres, and preparing for the resurgence of the revolutionary movement. Trotsky's fight to found the Fourth International in the midst of the horrors of fascism and the mass murder by the Stalinist bureaucracy was not an act of despair. It was a declaration of confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the working class, and in the necessity of preparing the leadership in advance. We carry forward that task today. To educate the working class, to expose the betrayals of the past and present, and to build the leadership capable of leading the world socialist revolution. This is the central task of this school and the intensified offensive for Trotskyism that must flow from it.

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