

The Rise and Fall of the Second International



Delegates of the first congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, 1898. Wikimedia Commons

In the aftermath of the Paris Commune's blood-soaked suppression, Marx's International Workingmen's Association dissolved amid factional disputes between socialists and anarchists. For the next quarter century, socialists were deprived of their highest form of organization.

But on Bastille Day, 1889, one hundred years after the French Revolution, workers' leaders reformed the International. A massive red banner emblazoned with the golden words "Workers of the World, Unite!" hung in an overfilled Paris ballroom. Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, welcomed representatives from twenty-four countries to the opening congress of the Second International, extending a special welcome to the many German delegates and celebrating the absence of nationalism:

We gather here not under the banner of the tricolor or any other national colors, we gather here under the banner of the red flag, the flag of the international proletariat. Here you are not in capitalist France, in the Paris of the bourgeoisie. Here in this room you are in one of the capitals of the international proletariat, of international socialism.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the parties organized in the Second International had become thriving mass organizations linked to rapidly growing trade union movements — ticking red time bombs in the heart of capitalist Europe.

But twenty-five years after its founding, almost all of these parties would betray their mission, lining up behind their national elites to support World War I and rip the promise of international solidarity to shreds.

The Second International did not have to fall. Specific political decisions led these parties to undermine their own revolutionary potential. We should learn from their experience.

An International Program

The Second International lasted from 1889 to 1914. Socialist parties all over the world sent representatives to its regular congresses and participated in shared projects. The International also included parties from across Europe, Turkey, India, Japan, the United States, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.

The movement's leaders envisioned a beautiful new world, but, unlike the utopian socialists of the past, they

had the means of implementing it. They moved forward with a relentless commitment to making their alternative a reality. Having discovered Marxism, a burning curiosity about nature and society drove this generation to explore every aspect of human history from their fresh perspective.

They produced brilliant work: Kautsky's [exploration of Christianity](#), Lafargue's historical-philosophical [defense of laziness](#), and Plekhanov's theories of [human agency in history](#). The general himself, Friedrich Engels, took the helm in those early years. His vast correspondence offered both theoretical and practical advice to Marxists organizing all over Europe.

Varying social, economic, and political contexts shaped national workers' movements. Belgium, Germany, and Austria had the biggest and most robust parties, while those in Eastern Europe — Russia and Poland — were forced underground. The British and American parties took the least inspiration from revolutionary struggles and Marxism and tended to stay on the International's right.

While industrial workers remained the movement's primary base, agrarian day laborers and smallholding peasants made up a sizable chunk of Italy's and France's socialist parties. Those nations' trade unions remained largely suspicious of parliament, which produced strong syndicalist currents.

Almost all the parties in the International emerged from the unification of several worker, socialist, or anarchist groups. Karl Marx's theory and practice appeared in every party, but it did not always play a dominant role.

The continental parties all had their own specific challenges. In France, the socialist movement constantly split along sectarian lines; in Austria and Russia, party members had to grapple with the national question early on; the Italians confronted nearly insurmountable regional differences.

In Germany, a large, landowning class still controlled the state. Nevertheless, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) became the Second International's largest party and guiding light. The German social democrats took the lead on strategy within the International, and the debates and processes happening in Germany tended to echo across the other parties.

The Birth of the SPD

In the decade following the Second International's founding, Germany passed a series of antisocialist laws as well as measures designed to win over the working classes in hopes of curbing the SPD's influence. A loophole allowed them to campaign for elections but nothing else.

But the movement's exile press and socialist-friendly taverns kept the SPD alive. In fact, for many German workers, taverns became virtually synonymous with social democracy, a feature the SPD shared with the Austrian and Italian movements. A prominent Austrian socialist even argued that "the beer table" was a more effective recruitment and consciousness-raising tool than newspapers and mass meetings. By the 1890s, German socialism was leaping from victory to victory, permeating every aspect of working-class life.

A German worker could be born into a social-democratic household, join an SPD youth organization, then enter the social-democratic trade union that organized their workplace. After work they might attend a lecture at a social-democratic educational society or conspire with fellow workers at a party tavern before picking up groceries through a social-democratic consumer society. In old age, workers knew that their unions would cover their funeral arrangements. The SPD had truly become a cradle-to-the-grave movement.

The party spread socialism not only through its massive press empire, but also through the party school, regular mass festivals, and local branch meetings and party congresses. It organized gymnastics associations and a host of clubs, for singing, cycling, rowing, swimming, sailing, and football. Grassroots workers' associations promoted public health, free theater, chess, naturalism, and anti-religious "proletarian free-thinking." German social democracy gave workers access to a comprehensive life-world.

This social-cultural milieu transmitted the values of solidarity, the ability to self-organize, and political direction to hundreds of thousands of German workers. The promise of the socialist future — *Zukunftsstaat* — bound them together and animated them. This vision differentiated the SPD from the period's liberal parties.

By the early 1900s, the SPD had become the largest single party in the German empire. The whole spectrum of ruling-class parties decried the growing workers' movement as an almost unstoppable "red tide." The SPD's enemies universally called it the "party of overthrow," *Umsturzpartei*.

Contrary to Ferdinand Lasalle's state-aid schemes, the SPD built a mass party of workers on the foundation of independent political organization. The party's chief theoretician, Karl Kautsky, developed Marx's historical materialism and brilliantly applied it to organizational questions. The "Pope of Marxism's" influence throughout the International cannot be underestimated.

The Great Revisionist Controversy

The SPD's principles and political strategy helped determine how the party grew and developed on the ground. Strategy became a site of major contestation, as most clearly expressed in the "great revisionist controversy" between 1898 and 1903, which centered around Eduard Bernstein's push toward electoralism.

The debate touched a nerve in the Second International. The ensuing battle pitted the growing reformist current — Filippo Turati in Italy, Jean Jaurès in France, Engelbert Pernerstorfer in Austria, and certain Mensheviks in Russia — against the revolutionaries, who included not only Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and August Bebel, but also Georg Plekhanov in Russia and, to some extent, Jules Guesde in France.

A former close collaborator with Engels, Eduard Bernstein had been a prominent SPD leader during the dark days of the antisocialist laws. Writing in the middle of the 1895–1900 economic boom, however, he came to believe that capitalism's development had discredited Marx's pronouncements about the system's inevitable collapse. He called for a strategic shift that emphasized the ethical imperative for socialism over class struggle, concluding that advanced capitalism offered the prosperity necessary to legislate in socialism. The new conditions meant that the social democrats could abandon their revolutionary position and instead focus on winning incremental reforms through electoral and trade union organizing.

Bernstein based his revisionism, which came to be known as "reformism," on the belief that the liberal-democratic state stood above classes. If the state serves as a neutral arbiter, then growing power in parliament will equal growing power for the working class. This analysis produces a primarily electoral strategy, after all a legislative majority was considered the means to bring about socialism. The reformist strategy substituted for workers' self-organized activity.

Indeed, the SPD had enjoyed a string of election victories, and their stunning success encouraged party leaders to focus on this aspect of their work. A large part of the scandal around Bernstein came from the fact that he openly said what had already become the party's practice.

Against Bernstein's parliamentary road to socialism, Kautsky argued that the SPD's increasing power would generate reaction from and suppression by the bourgeoisie, making a final blow — the revolution — necessary before the working class could seize state power. Pushing beyond Kautsky's line of argument, [Rosa Luxemburg](#) understood disruptive activity as the driving motor of reforms in the here and now.

Kautsky and Bebel aimed to reunify the party by defeating the revisionist theory on ideological grounds. They thought that if they could win the battle of ideas, they could isolate and constrain the revisionists.

In the end, the party executive officially condemned Bernstein's ideas, but it did nothing to reorient the SPD's practical activity, which had already begun to turn toward electoralism. Kautsky foolishly claimed victory.

Following its electoral success in 1903, the SPD embarked on a centralization and reorganization process conducive to creating a "smoothly operating electoral machine." This effort required hiring a mass of paid staffers to fulfill the new tasks. The existence of this administrative layer in and of itself did not make the party more conservative: it was the almost exclusively electoral purposes to which they were put that ensured this outcome.

The Union Connection

Throughout this period, the SPD developed close ties with the Free Trade Unions. The unions' leading personnel were all active party members, and the party relied on them to mobilize votes among the wide layers of nonsocialist workers.

As the movement grew, so did union treasuries. In 1905, the Free Trade Unions had almost fifty times the income of the SPD — about 25,000,000 marks. The unions not only supported workers during strikes, but also helped mitigate the costs of legal battles, relocation, unemployment, sickness, disability, and death. To manage all of these responsibilities, the bureaucratic ranks grew steadily, rising from just over one hundred in 1902 to over two thousand by 1914. Accordingly, the ratio of staffers to rank-and-file members fell from 1:6,600 in 1902 to 1:870 just twelve years later.

The union leaders soon became the chief bulwark of conservatism. This administrative layer did not need to fight the boss to earn higher wages — the organization's continued existence ensured their livelihood.

Dependent on stable economic conditions and good-faith negotiations with employers, the bureaucracy fundamentally aligned with Bernstein's emphasis on the peaceful development of capitalism. Against the party's official rhetoric, staffers prioritized union and party stability over social democracy's revolutionary aims and the mass mobilizations required to achieve them.

While the German SPD plodded forward, a storm was brewing in the east. In 1905, a wave of mass political strikes spread across Russia and Poland, creating the first workers' political councils, or soviets. Strike activity in Germany began to rise in the wake of this outbreak, and the SPD once again plunged into debate. The trade

unions declared that they would not even discuss mass political strike, causing uproar among the SPD's left wing. The debate culminated in the party's 1906 Mannheim Congress.

Just before the congress, Rosa Luxemburg dropped a theoretical bombshell that would draw the battle lines within the party — and within the International — for years to come.

[The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions](#) reported on Luxemburg's experience in the Polish revolution, unapologetically arguing for revolutionary rank-and-file mass action over the heads of the unions' and party's growing bureaucracy. Like Kautsky, she believed the unions should be subordinated to the party's revolutionary goals, but she called on the party to assume political leadership in the revolutionary mass strike. This principle of political leadership capable of learning from mass worker action reverberated within the Second International, and indeed Vladimir Lenin had forcefully argued for it in the Russian party. Unfortunately, the die had already been cast in Germany. The leaderships of the party and the trade unions met months before the party congress and agreed to a secret pact that gave the union leaders veto power over all important party policies. This curbed radical influence within the party, preventing it from taking on the role Luxemburg described.

For three years following the Mannheim agreement, two parallel and intertwined developments — the expansion of trade union power over the party and the creation of a massive party bureaucracy — helped to set a new course for the SPD. Carl Schorske has described the informal but powerful party-union dynamics in [his classic study](#):

As long as the power of the party could be measured only at the polls, its leaders were compelled to rely on masses of fellow-travelers, a large proportion of whom were politically indifferent trade-unionists. The fear that the trade-union leaders might withhold electoral support from the party made the executive acutely sensitive to the trade unionists' demands.

These local conditions dictated how the SPD would behave during the debates on revisionism and the mass strike. Working-class mobilizations, such as mass political strikes, risked the party machine's stability, just as work stoppages endangered union bureaucrats. Ironically, however, when the party executive sought to prevent such actions in favor of peaceful electoral progress, they undermined the very basis for their power and the guarantee of their continued existence.

Electioneering came with the insistence that politicians could hand socialism down from their state offices. The party's priorities had shifted. No longer did it fight for workers' self-activity, with parliament serving to amplify those possibilities. Instead, mass mobilization was subordinated to electoral needs, to the relationships between party officials and bourgeois politicians, and to secret negotiations in the Reichstag's smoky halls. This was the state of the SPD on the eve of the Great War. No iron law of mass parties dictated this result. Rather, it came directly out of a series of political choices.

Reformism's Logical End

Reformism had also been gaining ground throughout the Second International, though not always for the same reasons as in Germany. All of the parties experienced internal strife and centrifugal pulls, often resulting in compromises that forestalled taking action beyond spreading propaganda and winning elections.

At three separate congresses in the early twentieth century, the Second International passed resolutions against war and militarism. As late as 1912, the delegates resolved that socialists should "exert every effort to prevent war." But the International couldn't hold member parties accountable to these decisions, nor could they carry their resolutions out by ordering a general strike or other mass mobilization.

For years, the national parties had analyzed the ruling class's shifting alliances and its preparations for conflict. Then suddenly, in the summer of 1914, the Great War was upon them. Their response revealed just how far their practice had retreated from their radical rhetoric.

In France, the staunchly antiwar leader of the socialist party, Jean Jaurès, was assassinated, striking fear into the party and union leadership, who then voted unanimously to support the no-strike "union sacrée" to defend the nation. The Belgian Labor Party abandoned a planned pacifist demonstration and voted for war credits. The British Labour Party made a similarly dramatic reversal, supporting war credits and subsequently joining the government. While Austrian and Hungarian socialists could not vote in parliament, they made up for it with a surge in nationalist propaganda.

One after another, the Second International's parties declared their support for the ruling class as it led their people to the slaughter of World War I. All of the parties justified themselves by calling it a defensive war, necessary to safeguard democracy. All chose their own nation over the international solidarity they had proclaimed twenty-five years earlier.

Aside from small groupings, the Bolshevik Party was the only major force in the International that took an unequivocal stand against the war and its ruling class. For the Bolsheviks, and the Mensheviks that joined them, this position represented the logical conclusion of their longstanding efforts to foster working class self-activity, which necessarily entailed international solidarity with other workers.

In 1914, as Germany geared up for war, it asked the Reichstag to consider how to fund the effort. On August 2, the Free Trade Union agreed to participate in government preparations for war, eventually rejecting trade union "offensives" and establishing a "class truce." Two days later, the SPD delegation voted unanimously for war credits, shocking Lenin and the international left wing. The revolutionary activists immediately recognized the vote's true meaning: it dealt the powerful Second International, the living hope of Engels and the bane of the European ruling classes, its death blow.

The class truce committed the SPD to a resolutely reformist course once and for all, enforcing state discipline on the party itself. Reformism's logic had been taken to its logical conclusion, completely subordinating the party machine to the state.

But this reform-from-above policy, and the SPD apparatus wholly invested in it, failed to secure any concessions from the German ruling class. It would eventually take mass revolutionary action to end the war and announce the German Revolution in 1918.

A Lasting Legacy

The SPD's turn to the right came from the party's decision to get socialists elected rather than build worker militancy. This strategy massively expanded the SPD bureaucracy and forced the party to rely on conservative unions for a voter base, even at the expense of rank-and-file actions and mass strikes. A mass workers' party could instead have encouraged and led workers' self-activity, as Luxemburg argued and as the Bolsheviks successfully put into practice.

The Second International was the crucible for the most important debates in the history of the socialist movement. In its heyday, it assembled teeming mass socialist parties that shaped and gave expression to a flourishing working-class life.

But revolutionary internationalist politics could not tread water in the contested field of social democracy forever. When the either/or political choice inevitably confronted them, the insurgent social-democratic parties invariably allowed their attachments to positions of influence to eclipse their political project. Socialists have been trying to salvage the gems among the wreckage of the Second International ever since.