

3 *Confusion in the War*

The outbreak of the war in Europe, August 4, 1914, had a bewildering impact on radicals here. Socialists and other opponents of capitalism nurtured the belief that wars were plotted by capitalists and hatched by munitions-makers, and should—and could—be prevented by the organized might of the class-conscious working class. The antiwar stand of European labor, proclaimed again and again at international congresses, had planted in their minds the comforting hope that the great bodies of labor in Western Europe were a bulwark against “capitalist” wars.

The ease with which Germany and Austria could embark upon the war without encountering the slightest resistance from their powerful Socialist parties and trade unions was a rude disillusionment. Particularly painful was the acquiescence of the German Social Democracy which was looked upon here as a model mass party based on Marxist teachings, a party enjoying unbroken unity with the millions in the trade unions, a party with a large and able Reichstag fraction, a wide net of newspapers, publications and co-operatives. (Few were aware of the fact that after the severe setback the party suffered in the elections of 1907, the actual policymaking had passed into the hands of the trade union leaders, who in every labor party were on the conservative side.)

The Germans and Austrians were not alone in supporting the war effort of their governments. The French and Belgian Socialists did likewise, arguing that it was a war of defense. Georgi Plekhanov, internationally known Russian Marxist, also called upon the

Russian workers to defend their country. The Italian Socialists, however, voted against Italian entrance into the war in 1915, and continued their opposition afterward. Only Benito Mussolini, previously an extreme Socialist, and a small number of his followers turned war patriots.

The radical rank and file here and elsewhere were the victims of their own wishful thinking. They had never realized that the bold antiwar resolutions, beginning with the famous one of the Congress of the Second International, in Stuttgart, 1907, were patched up affairs and full of holes. The majority yielded to the militant antiwar minority in the phrasing of the resolutions; actually, the parties were only obligated to consultations with each other on the eve of war.

President Wilson's proclamation urging neutrality even in thought was heeded by the radicals to a degree never anticipated by the President. They were utterly opposed to the war, even after American involvement in it.

THE REASONS FOR OPPOSING THE WAR

The intransigent Socialist opposition to war can be explained by the following factors:

1. Unlike the European Socialist parties, the American Socialist Party was not burdened with the responsibility for the livelihood of millions of wage earners or for thousands of civil servants. Thus it was free to preach the Marxist doctrine on war.
2. The influence of the many humanitarians and pacifists who joined the party precisely for its unequivocal denunciation of war.
3. The spell cast by German Social Democracy on leading American Socialists of the Morris Hillquit and Algernon Lee school. Some of these leaders, German by birth, also felt a lingering affection for Germany and its *kulture*. As to practical politicians such as Victor L. Berger and Emil Seidel, no public man in Wisconsin could have been expected to support America's participation in the war.

(The German language federation, consisting of the younger elements, brought over here, October 9, 1915, the Finnish Socialist, Alexandra Kollantai, a friend of Lenin, to speak against the

war. At one of her meetings to report on the Zimmerwald conference, Hillquit rose to criticize Kollantai's condemnation of the German party, saying, "We do not know all the facts." *8 [She came here again in 1916]

4. The enormous weight of the language federations, who had no reason for favoring the cause of the Allies, or, for that matter, their enemies either.

ZIMMERWALD PRO AND CON

The conference in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, September 1915, was the first sign of antiwar stirrings among European labor. Thirty-one delegates representing groupings in 11 countries were there. Lenin, Zinoviev, Trotsky; Karl Radek (of the Polish Left) and Julius Martov (of the Mensheviks) participated. It was followed by a second conference, in Kienthal, Switzerland, April 1916. Zimmerwald issued a manifesto against the war, but failed to come forward with any concrete program, the delegates having failed to agree on any action.

An interesting sidelight on the division—or confusion—prevailing at Zimmerwald was the appraisal of the Bundist theoretician, Vladimir Kosowski, then living in Switzerland. Kosowski was scornful of the conference—and contemptuous of Lenin. "Too many splitters were there," he wrote. "Zimmerwald was afraid to touch ideological questions because they would have blown up the conference. That is why it lacked a declaration of principles. The manifesto was merely a general call to fight for peace and a hint that the *burgfrieden* had to be severed. . . .

"There were elements that wished to create a new international. . . . However, Lenin's resolution proposing that all "social patriots" be declared traitors . . . and to begin a struggle to stop the war was not even considered." *9

Kosowski considered Lenin "a splitter on principle, who believed that an operation was a cure-all for any conflict in the labor movement."

The great majority of Jewish Socialists did not share Kosowski's disparaging attitude. Abraham Liessin, editor of the *Zukunft*, saw in Zimmerwald a "ray of light dawning on the blood-drenched earth." And Kosowski's party as well as the SP endorsed the call of

Zimmerwald. The Jewish SP federation here approved Zimmerwald with reservations.*10 But Ab. Cahan, editor of the *Forward*, opposed Zimmerwald, claiming that it did not represent the moods of the majority of the Socialists. Mockingly, he said, "It is as effective as reciting a chapter of the Psalms of King David." *11

ETHNICAL GROUPS AGAINST BOTH CAMPS

None of the ethnical communities from the Russian or Austrian empires could have been suspected of harboring any sympathy for either of the warring camps. On the contrary, in common with their kin overseas, they considered the war as nothing but a disaster. Their only hope for national liberation lay in the defeat of their "mother" country. (Some Polish politicians here actively campaigned for Austria-Hungary on the vague promises from Vienna that the Hapsburg monarchy would create an independent Polish kingdom.)

The Jewish group had no reason to support the Allies' cause either. Jews had always been losers in wars and were often made the scapegoats for defeats. The outbreak of hostilities turned Eastern Europe, an area thickly inhabited by Jews, into a battleground, cutting off communications with the greatest part of the Jewish people. Plans for bringing over parents, wives, children and other relatives had to be given up.

Overwhelming hatred of the Czarist government obscured Jewish vision to the menace of victorious Germany. By and large, Jewish sympathies inclined toward the Central powers. Curiously, the affection felt for the dull monarch Franz Joseph by many of the ordinary men and women from Austria played a part in swinging Jewish sympathies. As early arrivals, the Austrians were well represented in all institutions and the daily press, doing their full share in setting the tone of public expression.

Only a small group of intellectuals from various camps withstood this current, openly declaring themselves for the Allies. They were mostly grouped around *The Day*.

THE ST. LOUIS PLATFORM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As America was entering the war, many Socialists and radicals, the Jewish in particular, were torn by conflicting emotions. Staunch

opponents of the imperialist war, they feared arrogant German militarism and hoped for a victory of the Allies for the sake of democratic England and France. But such a victory would have strengthened Czarist Russia. On the other hand, they did not like to see Germany completely defeated, for the sake of the German Social Democracy, which was still the hope and pride of Socialism. As a leading Jewish Socialist later noted, "Our thinking and moods were not crystal clear, but who could expect clarity in a time of anxiety."

But the SP attitude remained unbending. The high mark was reached in the platform adopted at the special party convention in St. Louis, April 1917, a day after Congress declared war on Germany. It was a highly doctrinaire document, reminiscent of the Daniel De Leon era, unrestrained in language and shrill in tone. Here are two short excerpts:

We brand the declaration of war by our government as a crime against the people of the United States and the citizens of the world.

In all modern history there has been no war more unjustifiable than the war in which we are about to engage.*¹²

Parenthetically, it was Charles E. Ruthenberg and L. E. Katterfeld, Communist leaders three years later, who kept hammering in the resolution committee for an extreme antiwar stand.

The SP was little hurt by the defection of a small number of pro-war Socialists, that included some of the old Marxists, men like John Spargo, A. M. Simons, W. J. Ghent, W. E. Walling, Max S. Hayes, AFL Socialist; and Charles Edward Russell, a middle-class humanitarian. Together with Samuel Gompers, who threw himself enthusiastically into the war effort, this group formed the North American Alliance for Labor Democracy, which conducted propaganda in support of Wilson's war policies. A handful of prominent Jewish radicals were active in the Alliance: Dr. Nachman Syrkin, spokesman for the Labor Zionists; William Edlin, an old member of the SP and editor of *The Day*; Rose Pastor Stokes, and a few others. But they were swimming against the current and their followers were numbered.

The antiwar Socialists, for their part, joined pacifist groups and some Irish leaders in organizing the People's Council of America for Democracy and Peace, which staged demonstrations for an immedi-

ate negotiated peace. Dr. Judah L. Magnes, an outstanding humanitarian, was a guiding spirit to the People's Council; so was Morris Hillquit.

Amazingly, the downfall of the Czar, March 1917, provided both the antiwar and the pro-war camps with additional arguments. The former stressed that the new Russia had to have immediate peace to consolidate the new freedom; the latter argued, with equal fervor, that the new Russian democracy was badly in need of military support to save it from being crushed by German militarism.

However, a year later, when the German army began its advance deeper into Russia—by then Soviet Russia—many Socialists demanded a revision of the party's antiwar policy toward supporting the war effort. Wilson's famous Fourteen Points contributed greatly to that dent in the Socialist attitude. This change of spirit was noticed particularly in the Jewish community, where Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, an influential thinker, and even Sol Yanofsky, editor of the anarchist weekly, gradually came over to viewing Wilson's program as the only one that held out a democratic solution for Europe's multiple troubles and a promise for a lasting peace.

PERSECUTIONS; MEYER LONDON'S TRAVAILS

The St. Louis platform isolated the party from the trade union movement. The AFL and the independent unions, at the Conference of Labor and Management, called by Gompers on the eve of the war declaration, pledged their unreserved support in the conduct of the war, agreeing not to take advantage of the war prosperity to disturb production by strikes for higher wages; management promising not to oppose union activities in their plants.

By far the heaviest blow to the party was the persecution of its leaders, reprisals against Socialist publications, and acts of intimidation and violence by local vigilante committees. Other labor groups opposing the war suffered likewise. A special target for persecution was the IWW in the Northwest, whose strikes during the war laid them open to charges of sabotage. In the East, the two leading anarchists, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, were arrested June 15, 1917, and convicted under the Espionage Act for opposing conscription.

The most conspicuous Socialist victim of the war hysteria was

Eugene V. Debs, convicted for ten years for a speech he delivered June 16, 1918, in Canton, Ohio. Other Socialist leaders were later sentenced, too, but the Supreme Court reversed their verdicts.

The highly effective election campaigns waged by the SP in the fall of 1917, emphasizing an immediate peace, and the exciting Hillquit mayoralty campaign in New York City, which also promised cheap milk, and was dubbed the Peace and Milk campaign, gave ample evidence that the antiwar slogan had a mass appeal. For the first time, a Socialist nominee appeared to be a serious contender for the office of mayor of the largest city. Hillquit polled 145,332 votes, nearly a five-fold gain over the previous Socialist mayoralty candidates. Seven Socialist aldermen, ten assemblymen, and a justice of the Municipal Court, Jacob Panken, were elected in New York. The votes came largely from Jewish neighborhoods. The Socialists greatly improved their vote also in Chicago and in other cities.*

The sole Socialist congressman, Meyer London, was placed in an untenable position. London was deeply apprehensive of a militaristic Germany, and once America was in the war he felt it his duty not to weaken the country's armed strength. His vote against the war with Germany and his advocacy of a negotiated peace aroused the ire of his colleagues in the House of Representatives; they called him a member of a pro-Kaiser party. But his vote for Champ Clark as Speaker and his "present" on the seven billion dollar war loan called down upon him the wrath of the Socialist rank and file. His refusal to heed the repeated demands of the party's NEC to introduce a bill for the repeal of the conscription law brought numerous demands for his forced resignation and expulsion. London was a lonely man.

(London also antagonized the party chiefs by his cable, sent April 18, 1917, to N. G. Tschiedse, leading Menshevik and president of the Provisional Russian government, asking him to deny rumors that the Russian Socialists favored a separate peace with Germany. Hillquit immediately cabled Tschiedse denying that London spoke for the American party.) *13

The SP leadership was caught in a crossfire of criticism. The rising sentiment for a victorious conclusion of the war based on Wilson's Fourteen Points had penetrated the party itself, requiring

* For a description of the Hillquit campaign, see Melech Epstein, *op. cit.*, 1914-1952, pp. 77-80.

a retreat from the St. Louis platform. (The New York Socialist alderman, early in 1918, endorsed the Liberty Bonds.) On the other hand, those whose rabid opposition to war led them into the budding Left Wing insisted on the full implementation of that platform. The party top, essentially cautious and moderate men who had never intended to go beyond a mere antiwar declaration, had now to steer a middle course between the two extremes.

The hedging and hesitating of the party satisfied neither side. But the antiwar Socialists were more numerous, articulate and aggressive. Encouraged by revolutionary happenings abroad, they soon constituted a new force that gravely altered the course of Socialism in the United States.

FALL OF CZARS CAUSES SMALL TREK BACK TO RUSSIA

The Jewish community felt immense relief at the fall of the Czar. The regime of pogroms was gone at last. The *Forward* ran jubilant banner headlines: JEWISH TROUBLES AT AN END, FULL RIGHTS FOR ALL OPPRESSED NATIONALITIES, NEW LIGHT RISES OVER RUSSIA.*14 The caption over Editor Cahan's article offered the traditional "*Mazel Tov* to our Jewish People; *Mazel Tov* to the Entire World." The joyful event was celebrated in cafe and home. Especially elated were those who had participated in the revolutionary movement in one way or another. Proud reminiscences of personal exploits in the underground brought on a nostalgia for those dangerous but thrilling days of their youth.

Celebrations were held in many cities. The one in New York took place in Madison Square Garden, May 20, 1917. Hillquit, Ab. Cahan, Baruch Charney-Vladek and Dr. Anna Ingerman were the speakers. They tried to answer the question uppermost in the minds of radicals: "Where are the Socialist parties, the backbone of the Russian Revolution; why don't they occupy a prominent place in the Provisional government?" The speakers could only reassure their perplexed listeners that the Socialist movement would reassert itself in the course of further developments.

As was to be expected, a small trek back to Russia sprang up among the radicals. A committee representing all political tendencies was formed, and those confirmed by it as political immigrants were provided with free passage by the Russian Consulate on in-

structions from home. Russians made up the largest group. The Union of Russian Workers, a quasi-syndicalist body, with branches in the Eastern and Midwestern industrial cities, numbering about 9,000, lost half of its membership in the trek. Bill Shatoff's Russian anarchist group, Bread and Freedom, in Chicago, went back to Russia almost in a body.

The movement back to Russia did not by-pass the Jewish radicals. Each grouping had its returnees. Prominent among them were Ber Borochoy, Alexander Khashin, Labor Zionists; Yasha Secoder, Moishe Katz, territorialist-Socialists; A. Litwak, Max Goldfarb and Shachno Epstein, Bundists. Had the Provisional government remained in office a little longer, the trickle back to Russia might have turned into a stream. As it was, a few hundred Jews, mostly intellectuals and semi-intellectuals, returned to Russia.

4 *The Left Wing*

The American Left Wing, similar to its counterparts elsewhere, rose out of disillusionment and impatience with the pace of social change. It derived its most compelling impulse from the Bolshevik Revolution. A rebellious mood, its origins rooted in the tradition of American radicalism, that in all probability would have settled into a vague oppositional left tendency within the existing movement, was turned under the dazzling example of a "dream come true" into the carrier of Communism in the United States.

The war in Europe uprooted in the minds of many Socialists the belief in the stability of the social-economic system. Shaken also was their deep-seated trust in the internationalism of the moderates. The longer the war lasted the deeper grew their angry impatience. Hopes pinned on the Russian Provisional government to take the initiative in ending the bloodshed were dashed by the ill-fated offensive begun by Alexander Kerensky in the summer of 1917 on the Austrian front.

At the lowest ebb of radical spirit, the proclamation of a Soviet Socialist Republic in Russia came as a renewal of faith. The explosive simplicity of this act was fascinating. Most of the syndicalists and anarchists, the latter avowed enemies of any state, were also captivated by the new Soviet Republic. Some of the anarchist groups even added the word *Soviet* to their name. Particularly attractive was the Bolshevik slogan, "All power to the Soviets;" the Soviets (councils), a body of workers, peasants and soldiers, appeared as a decentralized democratic regime, based on the popular will. And when the Soviets were threatened from within and from