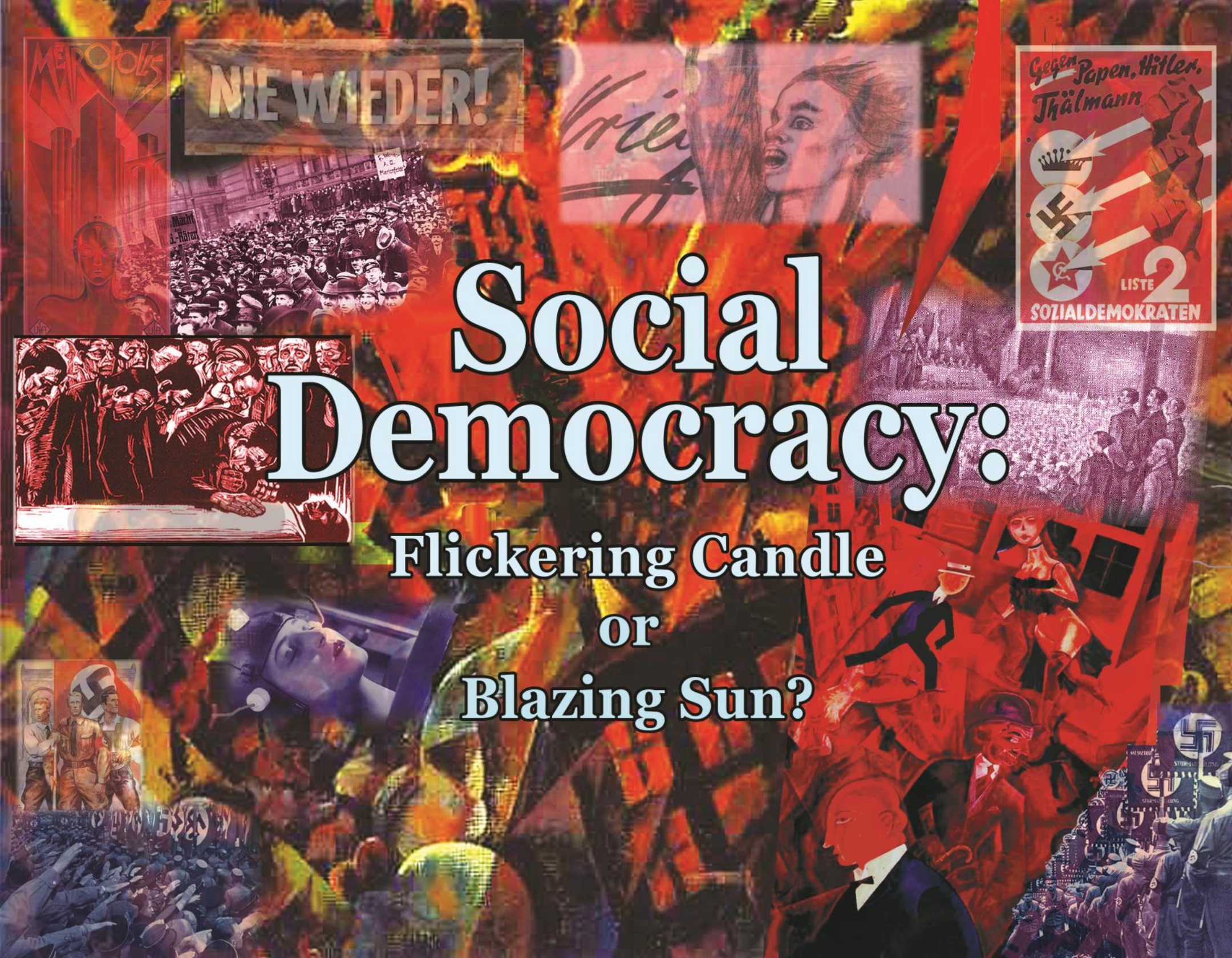


Social Democracy:

Flickering Candle or Blazing Sun?

The Bridge

After Ben Okri's
"The Void"

What does a bridge hold — a land divided
or the space between? When history
resounds through the hollow and
the separation is wrenched into a
plundering storm, a bridge won't
bring the irreconciling peoples
together as one.

But it might remind them
into what emptiness they all
can fall. And there is no end
to that fall, not now or for
all of history to come.

Perhaps the madness will
make them create a kind
of bridge that has never
been built before

The Storm

Homage to German expressionist painter Ludwig Meidner

We were children when the Great War began, and the weather
that fall was not good. Who's been in a storm that twists
a wooden fence and turns a good road to a ribbon of mud?

I can remember when the water rose above the town bridge
like an avenging mountain. Smoke from the mill made clouds
that became ravens flying overhead, blocking out the sun.

We were children then, and learned that people too
can be blown about

Social Democracy:
Flickering Candle or Blazing Sun?

Raymond Barglow
Berkeley California
2025

"One Planet, One Chance" Hamburg Germany

Statue of Karl Marx, thoughtful and patient, undergoing relocation in Berlin

"Social democracy" names a progressive political movement that was born in Europe and then embraced elsewhere, including the United States during the "New Deal" when Roosevelt was President.

Social democracy means democratic self-determination: everyone having a real voice in their workplaces, communities, and society.

This book is chiefly about two countries, Germany and Austria, whose past illustrates the hopes and achievements of social democracy, as well as the shortfalls and failures. At the end of World War I in 1918, revolutions occurred in both countries, enabling the formation of social democratic republics that enacted a wide range of reforms. Social democracy was crushed by fascism in the 1930s but following World War II became a powerful force again, not only in Europe but worldwide.

This historical review seems to me relevant to the current situation in the United States.
The election defeat of 2024 in the United States occasioned much soul-searching and essential debate within left-liberal ranks. The challenge before us now is to bring people of different backgrounds and persuasions together. Doing so will help us form common purpose and move toward an economy that works for everyone and an environmentally sustainable world.

At its best, social democracy has been an impassioned movement for human liberation, contributing to such improvements as health care and public education for all, affordable housing, trade union strength and retirement security, social welfare programs, racial and gender equity.

At times social democracy has extended self-determination into the workplace also, so that workers become actors in shaping the aims and conditions of their own labor.

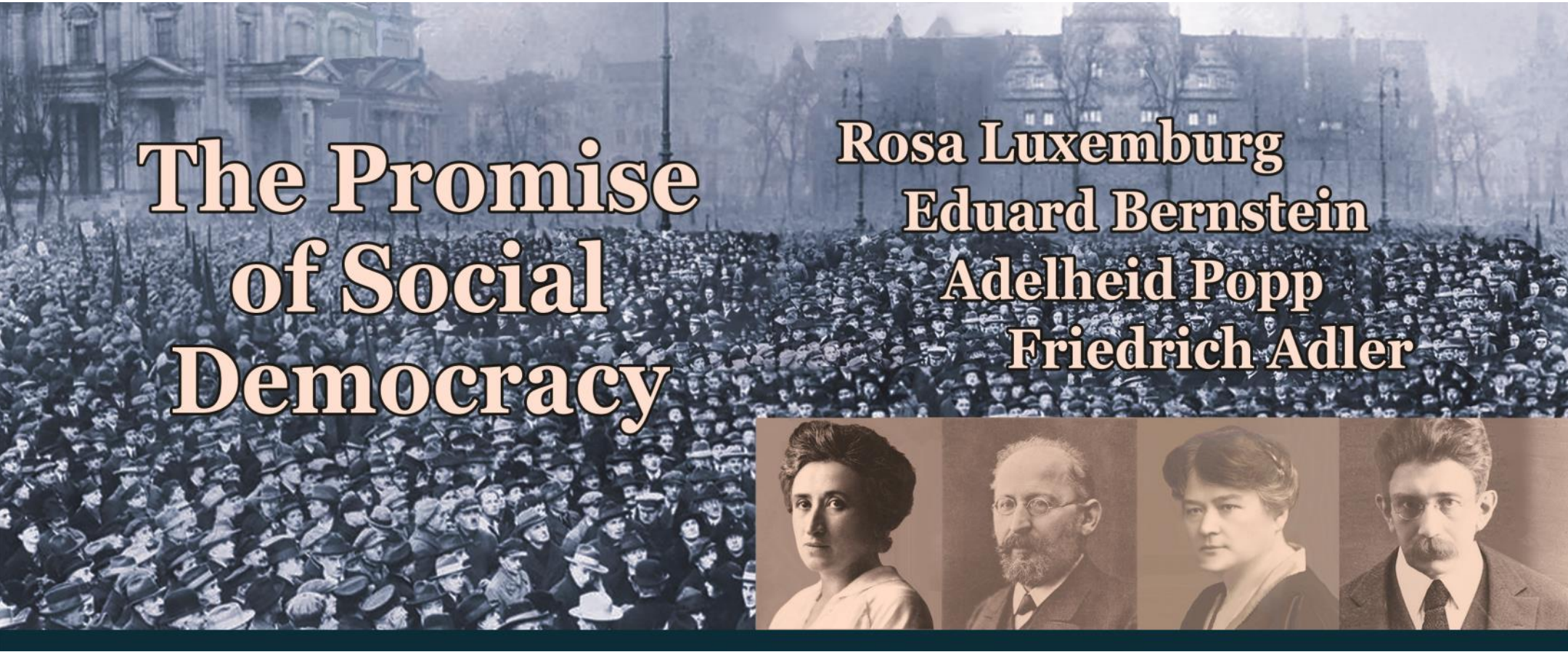
These advances in the first half of the 20th century came about, paradoxically, during an era blighted by catastrophic war, economic collapse, colonialism, and genocide. Although social democrats in Germany and Austria clearly recognized the danger of fascism, the broad left remained disunited and suffered crushing defeats, failing to avert Europe's "dark times," as historian Hannah Arendt calls them. In a collection of essays about 20th-century writers and activists, including Rosa Luxemburg and Berthold Brecht, she asks whether their light was the "uncertain, flickering … light of a candle or that of a blazing sun." Indeed their legacy remains undetermined, as social democracy today struggles to find its way.

HAS SOCIAL DEMOCRACY A FUTURE?

The problems that the world faces today—among them, economic poverty and despair, climate change, disease, racism, war, a population risen above 8 billion and an international refugee crisis—will not be solved by unfettered capitalism that, at the expense of every other value, continues to pile up wealth for the one percent.

Will we be able to agree upon and follow a path to equitable, environmentally aware solutions? In the United States, to take just one example, we will need an ideological convergence that hasn't been seen in this country since the 1930s. This book looks into internal conflicts that have played a role in shipwrecking social democratic purpose in the past, in the hope that this exploration will cast light on our situation today.

Women! Equal Rights—Equal Duties
Vote social democratic!
Social Democratic Party of Germany. 1919.



GERMANY

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) and Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) engaged in a debate within the Social Democratic Party that shaped the course of German history in the 20th century. Their respective strategic visions—reformist (Bernstein) and revolutionary (Luxemburg)—continue today to vex and divide progressive political movements worldwide. For Bernstein, a better society could be achieved by working within the existing political order. Luxemburg, on the other hand, held that only a social movement that is independent of the ruling institutions, including mainstream political parties, can open the door to a better future for humankind. She viewed the concessions that German social democracy made to capitalism as unethical and unnecessary.

AUSTRIA

This debate about strategy has played a role in the history of social democracy in Austria, as well. That history was as path-breaking and tumultuous as what happened in Germany. Adelheid Popp (1869-1939) embraced the gradualist approach advocated by Bernstein and his German comrades. Friedrich Adler (1870-1960)—the son of Victor Adler, founder of the Austrian Social Democratic Party—knew Rosa Luxemburg and visited her in Berlin. Early on, he shared her revolutionary approach, although he was not as critical of reform campaigns as she was. Following the First World War and his own near-death experience, he renewed his commitments to peace, Austria's Social Democratic Party, and the international trade union movement.

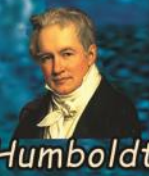
"The Strike"

The German Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or SPD) developed out of labor conflict in the late 19th century. Working conditions in Germany's industrializing economy were often harsh and grim. In Robert Koehler's painting (left), *The Strike* (Munich, 1886), workers confront a factory owner in front of his home. "The distance between the owner's elegant brick villa … and the factory in the background has been aggressively foreshortened by the artist. This allows Koehler to better emphasize the workers who stream out of the factory to come support the shop-floor representative, who … confronts the factory employer…. The tenseness of the situation is expressed by the representative's stance and his red shirt, not to mention the foreground figure who arms himself with a rock. The employer's stiff posture, reinforced by his black suit and top hat, suggests that he is not inclined towards compromise; even his own servant, standing behind him, seems fearful of what will come after the heated exchange of words." (*German History in Documents and Images*)

Besieged by workers, as in Koehler's painting, an owner might be inclined to appeal to state authority to restore "order." When in the late 19th century violent intervention of police and troops on the side of the employers became commonplace, workers realized that they needed to organize politically as well as in the workplace, so they were naturally drawn to the cause of social democracy.

Early Evolution of German Social Democracy


Lessing


Humboldt

The German Englightenment 1720-1790

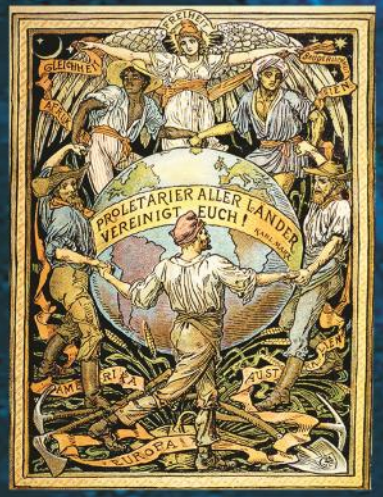

Otto-Peters

Social Democratic Workers Party 1869

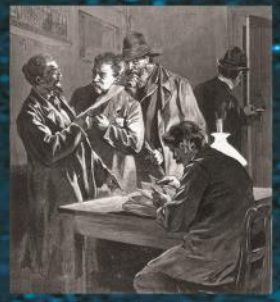

Bernstein

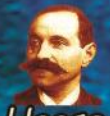
Social Democratic Party (SPD) 1890

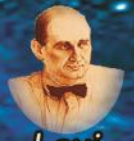
Weimar Republic 1919-1933




Luxemburg & Zetkin


When their party is banned, from 1878 to 1890, Social Democrats meet in secret.


Haase

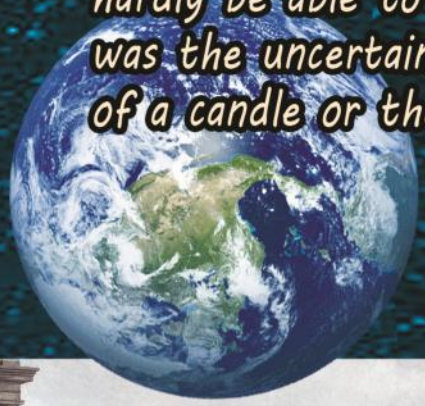

Levi


Zietz


Sender

Eyes so used to darkness as ours will hardly be able to tell whether their light was the uncertain, flickering light of a candle or that of a blazing sun.

-- Hannah Arendt




Robert Koehler, The Strike, 1886

The Party newspaper proclaims electoral victories in 1890.

German Social Democracy

When Germany's legal ban on social democracy and trade unionism was lifted in January 1890, the Social Democratic Party became at once very popular. After the election in February 1890, the headline of the Party newspaper announced "1,341,587 Social Democratic Voters — Gain of 567,405." The banner held by the woman in the image below reads: "Ours the world, in spite of all that," quoting Freiligrath's poem "Trotz Alledem" in support of the revolution of 1848. Revolutionary leader Karl Liebknecht supposedly sang this song just before he was executed in 1919.


Der Sozialdemokrat

Organ der Sozialdemokratie deutſcher Zunge.

20 Mandate im erſten Wahlgang, 16 in der Stichwahl.

1,341,587 ſozialdemokratiſche Wähler — 567,405 Zuwachs

Unser die Welt, trotz alledem!

The Social Democratic Erfurt Program of 1891 proclaimed that "With the expansion of global commerce, and of production for the world market, the position of the worker in every country becomes increasingly dependent on the position of workers in other countries."

From the beginning, the Social Democratic Party played a role in the cultural as well as the political lives of its members. The Party organized reading groups, cycling clubs, choirs, chess clubs, gymnastic associations and the like. To get to your vacation destination, you might take a bus or train that the Party had chartered. Social democracy became virtually a way of life.

"Workers of All Lands, Unite!" Social democracy speaks to the longing of the human heart for freedom, meaning, and connection. We can share the earth without seeking power over it or over one another.

From the Enlightenment to German Social Democracy

Two new theories became influential in the 2nd half of the 19th century in Europe: Charles Darwin's account of the biological evolution of species, and Karl Marx's account of class society. German social democrats accepted some of Marx's premises but cast others aside.

Their views were ethically as well as economically based, drawing upon ideals that had been proclaimed during the 18th-century European Enlightenment, represented in Germany by people like Gotthold Lessing and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) made the case in his essays and drama for freedom of thought and the value of cultural and religious diversity. His plays "Nathan the Wise" and "The Jews" eloquently condemn antisemitism.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was an educator, philosopher, linguist, and diplomat. He was instrumental in reforming the Prussian educational system, from elementary school through the university. Humboldt advocated free and universal education as a right of all citizens.

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was a brilliant economist, but is known most of all for her uncompromising advocacy of the causes of justice, peace, and democracy. Open dissent and debate are, for her, the social democratic path forward: "Freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks otherwise."

Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) was critical of the view that internal contradictions would cause capitalism to crash and be replaced by socialism. Rather, the path to a classless society would be a gradual one, evolving out of capitalism. Bernstein served as a Social Democratic Party representative to the Reichstag (Germany's parliament) from 1902 to 1918, and again from 1920 to 1928.

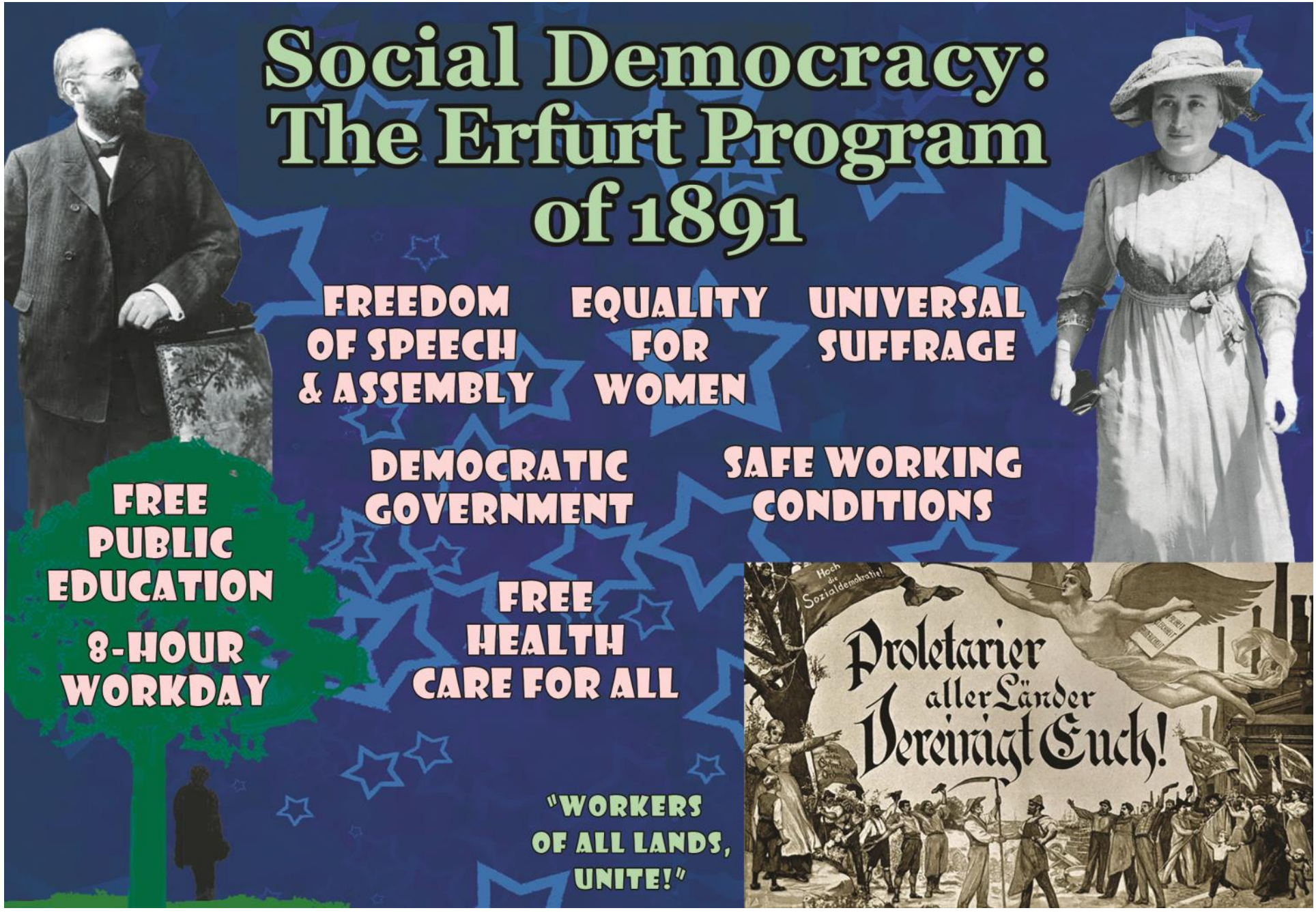
Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) was a close friend and political comrade of Rosa Luxemburg. She was an activist in the German labor movement and, from 1892 to 1917, the chief editor of *Die Gleichheit* ("Equality"), a Social Democratic newspaper addressing women's issues. She served in the Reichstag from 1920 until 1933.

Hugo Haase (1863-1919). Haase became the first chairman of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany. "Social democracy was for him," writes historian Carl Schorske, "perhaps less a political movement than a vehicle for moral protest and the assertion of humanistic principles." Haase was murdered in 1919.

Paul Levi (1883–1930) was Rosa Luxemburg's attorney and close friend. He agreed with her analysis of the Russian Revolution, criticizing Lenin's centralization of power and the creation of a single party state. Levi belonged to the German Communist Party for a time but was expelled because of his support for the Weimar Republic.

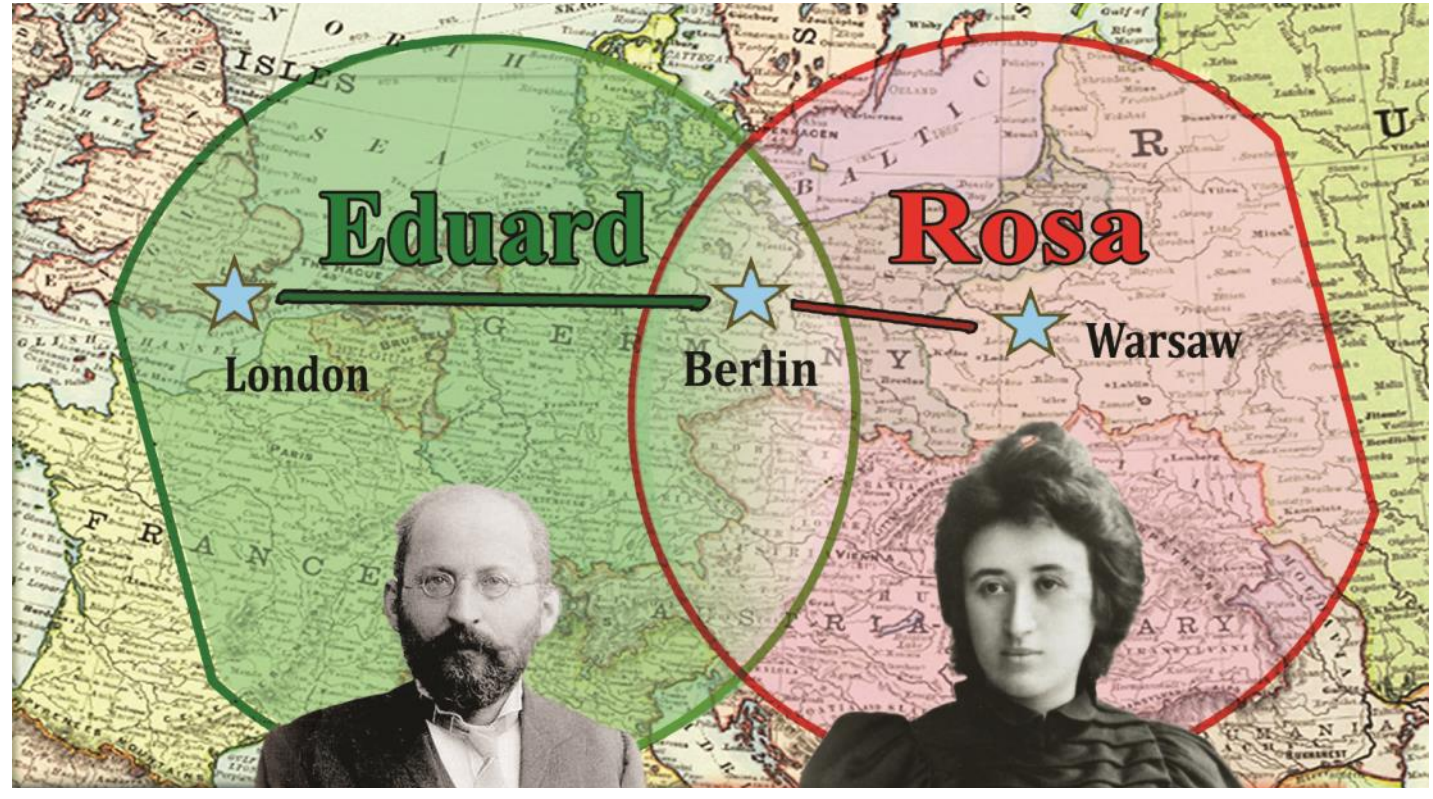
Luise Zietz (1865-1916) was a leader of the women's movement inside the Social Democratic Party. She also served as an SPD deputy in the Reichstag. Her approach to women's issues and social transformation was more moderate than that of Luxemburg and Zetkin.

Tony Sender (1888–1964). During the revolution in 1918, she served on the executive committee of the Council of Workers and Soldiers in Frankfurt. Thereafter she became an SPD representative to the Reichstag and edited the party-sponsored women's magazine "Frauenwelt." After the Nazi takeover in 1933, she emigrated to America.


Social Democracy:
The Erfurt Program
of 1891
FREEDOM OF SPEECH & ASSEMBLY
EQUALITY FOR WOMEN
UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT
SAFE WORKING CONDITIONS
FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION
8-HOUR WORKDAY
FREE HEALTH CARE FOR ALL
"WORKERS OF ALL LANDS, UNITE!"
Hoch die Sozialdemokratie!
Proletarier aller Länder Vereinigt Euch!

The Erfurt Program

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was founded with the intention of combatting "every kind of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a class, a party, a sex, or a race." The Party's principles are presented in the Erfurt Program of 1891. The premise here is that government should intervene to lessen suffering, oppose injustice, and advance the common good. The Program expresses hope for worldwide solidarity among workers: "The emancipation of the working class is a task in which the workers of all civilized countries are equally involved."



How were the promises made in the Erfurt Program to be kept? Two of the leaders in the German Social Democratic Party, Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein, arrived at different ideas about that, which might be paraphrased as follows:

BERNSTEIN: I was born in Berlin in 1850, and I joined a socialist party when I was 22. A few years later I had to leave Germany because of laws forbidding socialism. While living in England, I saw that it was possible—gradually and peacefully—to win certain political reforms, including voting rights, higher wages, better working conditions in factories, the right to organize a trade union. It seemed to me that the evolutionary model of social change in England could work in Germany also. And I wanted to help make that happen.

LUXEMBURG: I was born in Poland in 1871, which would make me a couple of decades younger than Herr Bernstein, and I certainly didn't perceive the world in the way he did. In Poland, any attempt at social or political reform was violently crushed. At age 18, threatened with arrest for my political activities, I had to leave the country. I came to believe that a revolution would be required to free not only Poland but Germany also. As for Herr Bernstein, his reformism came from mistakenly viewing Germany through tinted English spectacles.

Bernstein lived for over a decade in London, at a time when socialism and labor liberalism were not clearly distinguished. Although he was friends with both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, it was an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, reading of Marxist theory that Bernstein found most compelling. In the company of George Bernard Shaw, he attended meetings of the Independent Labour Party that had been founded in 1893 in Bradford England. The party's spirited optimism is shown in this mural on the side of a theater in Bradford.

The key to the success of the ILP was that it was a "big tent," open to people of diverse political persuasions. You could be a Marxist, an evangelical Methodist, a Fabian gradualist, even a Burkean conservative, and still be welcome in the Party. This model of openness and diversity is one that Bernstein would support upon his return to Germany.

It became clear to Bernstein that Marx and Engels' anticipation of the decline and fall of capitalism was not coming true. He perceived as well that improvements in workers' rights and political freedom could be gradually achieved. He came to believe that capitalism could be reformed, and might even be made to evolve into socialism. In Germany as in England, evolution, not revolution, would move humanity forward.

Eduard Bernstein, although he was appalled by the exploitation and misery that capitalism causes, was known to his colleagues for his belief in the power of compromise and reconciliation, even across the boundaries of social class. "Despite the existence of sharp divisions and hostility between political parties," Bernstein said, "it would be a mistake to rigidly separate parties or classes by 'Chinese Walls.'" In the Reichstag he patiently mediated conflicts among his colleagues, seeking common ground to advance progressive causes and fight fascism.

Shaw with students at an Independent Labour Party summer school

Rosa Luxemburg's experience growing up in Poland was very different from Bernstein's in England. In 1863, a Polish uprising against Russian domination had been brutally crushed. Thousands died in battle, and thousands were deported to Siberia. Whole villages and towns were burned down. The brutality of Russian soldiers was condemned throughout Europe.

"Poland 1863," by Jan Matejko. In the aftermath of the failed uprising, captives await deportation to Siberia. Soldiers supervise a blacksmith who makes shackles to place on a woman's wrists. She represents Poland.

Rosa Luxemburg's biographer J.P. Nettl notes a widespread sense among Poles that "only the overthrow of Tsarism could end the unsatisfactory system, that reform or persuasion was hopeless because the government was not amenable to agreed change." As a teenager Luxemburg joined a left-wing party and helped to organize a general strike. This led to the violent suppression of the party, including the execution of four of its leaders. In Eastern Europe, Luxemburg believed, only workers' revolution held the potential to end domination by Russia.

In Germany too, it seemed to her, establishing a just and peaceful social order would require radical transformation, not reformist politics as usual.

Luxemburg's keen sensitivity to human suffering and identification with victims and outcasts, her unflagging faith in the capacity of ordinary people to govern themselves and shape their own destinies, were evident to everyone who knew her. Her commitment to these values was compelling—she described herself as capable of "setting a prairie on fire."

There may be an additional layer of explanation for the different political paths taken by Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein. Both of them had grown up in Jewish families, and although neither was a religious believer, they may have been culturally influenced by divisions internal to Judaism. Over the centuries, some Jews had responded to hatred and persecution by embracing universal values and humanism—like Moses Mendelssohn or the philosopher Baruch Spinoza whose family had fled from Portugal to Holland to escape the Inquisition. Such a wide-minded perspective—in keeping with a philosophical tradition that stretches from Ancient Greece through the European Enlightenment—sometimes motivated Jews to try to reform the societies in which they were living. Going further, some Jews, witnessing injustices to which they and others were subjected, took up revolutionary forms of resistance, such as a messianic interpretation of the Kabbalah: *Tikkun olam* (healing the world) calls for social transformation.

In the early 20th century, many German Jews were very interested in politics, and that's not surprising. Their lives depended on the rights and liberties that a protective liberal state could grant.

As well, Jewish Torah teaches alliance with all of those who are weak and oppressed, since "you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, because you also were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Most German Jews joined middle-of-the-road political parties. But some embraced the cause of social democracy, and were, of course, drawn into the debates that divided the Social Democratic movement.

World War I

"From Munich via Metz to Paris." German soldiers on their way to the Western front in August, assured by the Kaiser that "You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees."

Army mobilization in Germany, 1914. The left was blind-sided by the massive outburst of enthusiasm and joy.

Luxemburg saw the war as serving only ruling class interests, and sought to organize an international anti-war movement.

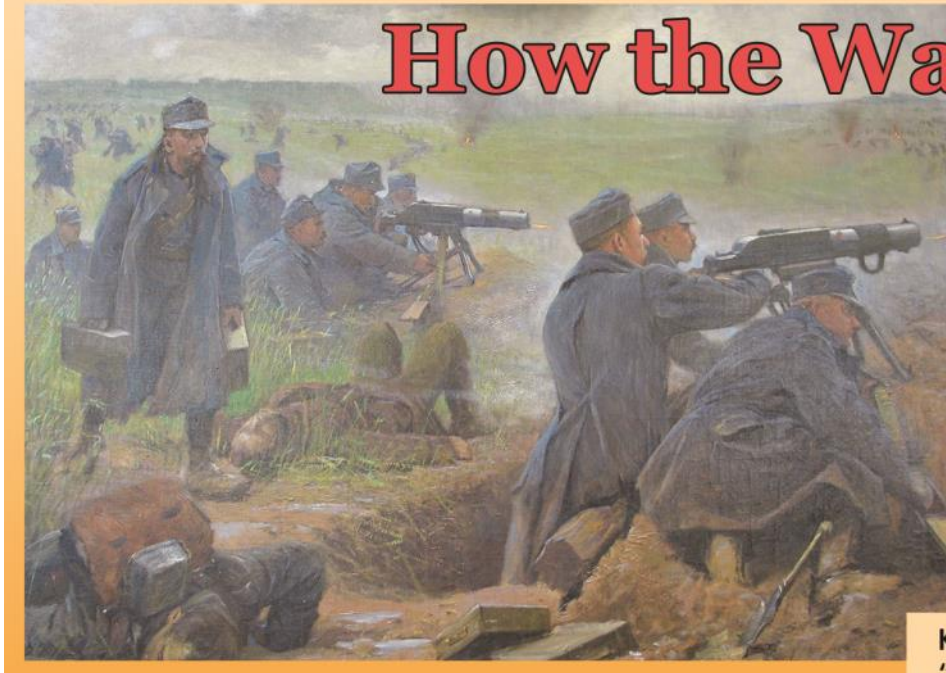
Bernstein had conflicting feelings about the war initially, but soon became strongly opposed too.

Franz Marc, *The Wolves*. 1913

Although European social democratic parties gained respect and influence in the early years of the 20th century, the forces of militarism and war proved more powerful. Leading up to World War I, the European social democratic peace movement was defeated. On both sides of the conflict, newspapers, songs, movies, billboards, post-cards, even postage stamps extolled the war as righteous and glorious. In Germany, there was resistance to this message, especially among unionized and politicized workers, and householders struggling to feed their families. Still, millions of Germans were quite willing to join with one another in making sacrifices for the war. My own Jewish grandfather, for example, who came from Dresden, served proudly in the Kaiser's army. In certain ways the war was appealing; the tribulations made life more dramatic and meaningful for many.

One Reich One People One God

How the War Went



Rosa Luxemburg went to prison, convicted of encouraging men to refuse to fight.

Eduard Bernstein wrote an anti-war manifesto and spoke out aginst the war.

"Victorious Sun in the East" Postcard 1915

Karl Friedrich Gsur, "Battle of a Machine Gunners Unit" Eastern front, 1915

An elderly German woman, waiting in line outside a grocery, collapses.

Dead German soldiers

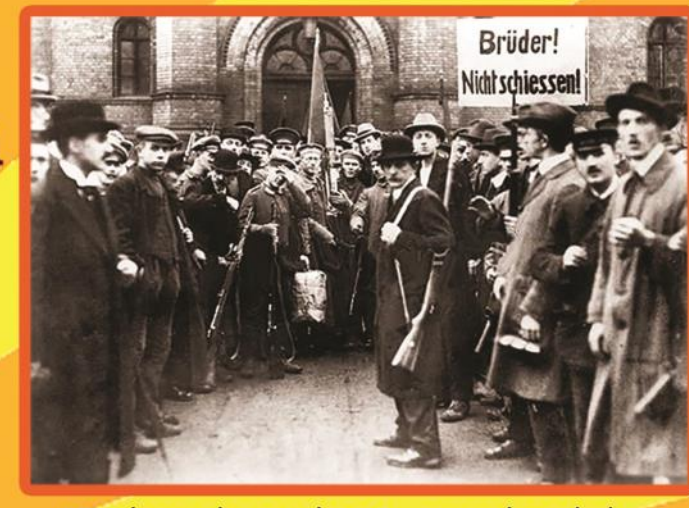
LUXEMBURG: "Early victories on the Eastern front increased the enthusiasm in Germany for the war. But then, one military defeat followed upon another, and now, mass slaughter has become the tiresome and monotonous business of the day. The cannon fodder loaded onto trains in August and September is moldering in the killing fields of Belgium, the Vosges, and Masurian Lakes where the profits are springing up like weeds. Cities become piles of ruins; villages become cemeteries; countries, deserts; churches, horsestalls; populations are beggared. This is what the Great War has come to."

German Revolution

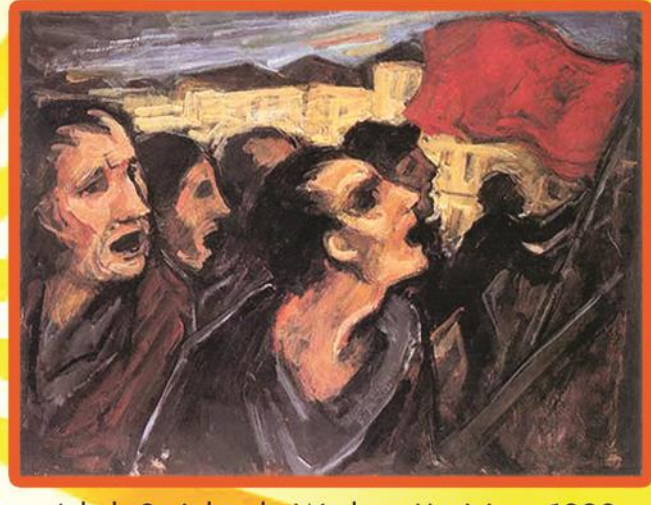
Karl Liebknecht, co-founder with Luxemburg of the revolutionary Spartacus League, speaks to an audience in Berlin.

Rosa Luxemburg, November 1918:

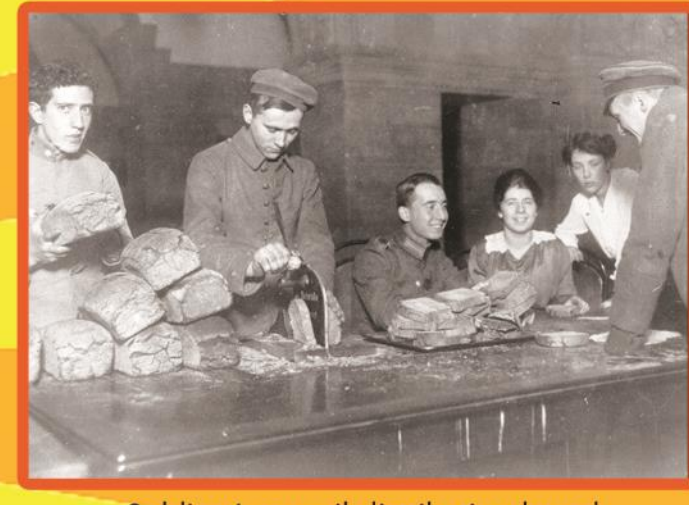
"The revolution in Germany has come! Workers' and soldiers' councils have been formed everywhere."



"Brothers, do not shoot" – appeal made by the popular movement to soldiers



Jakob Steinhardt, Workers Uprising, 1920



Soldiers' council distributing bread

Philipp Scheidmann announces the birth of the Republic from the balcony of the Reichstag in Berlin.

Who Shall Govern?

Germany's humiliating defeat in the war led to the end of the German monarchy. But what authority would replace it? On November 9, 1918 at 2 PM, when it had become clear that Kaiser Wilhelm had abdicated, Social Democrat Philipp Scheidmann announced from the balcony of the Reichstag in Berlin that "the people have triumphed," and that the "German Republic" has been established.

Two hours after Scheidmann's pronouncement, Karl Liebknecht, holding to a different vision of Germany's future, spoke from the yard of the Berlin City Palace and said that "the rule of capitalism, which has turned Europe into a cemetery, is broken." Liebknecht hailed the arrival of socialism in Germany.

Karl Liebknecht and his like-minded comrades, including Rosa Luxemburg, argued that the workers' and soldiers' councils that had formed spontaneously at the end of the war were fully capable of governing the nation. Indeed, in many German cities and towns these councils cooperated with the existing local administrations to remedy food shortages, restore the rule of law, and accommodate soldiers who were gradually returning home. Were they not showing that they could wield political power responsibly?

Eduard Bernstein disagreed with this call for council rule, pointing out that it didn't even have strong working class support. "All power to the councils" wasn't an achievable aim in the new Weimar Republic, Bernstein believed, given an economy devastated by four years of war and facing the consequences of military defeat, including the punitive Versailles Treaty. Together with his social democratic comrades, Bernstein favored instead working within the constitutional framework of the Republic to advance the aims of democracy, workers' rights, and peace.

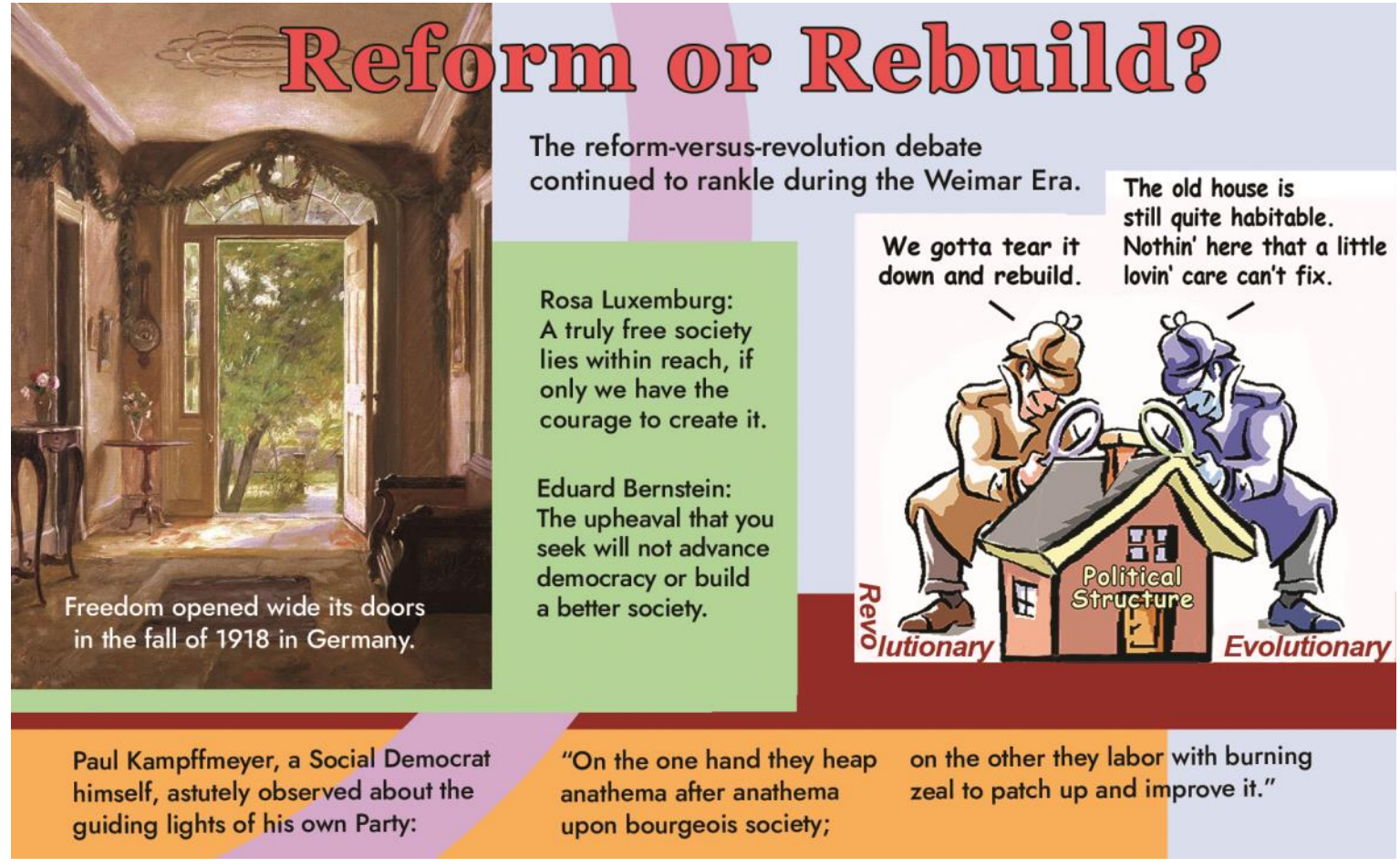
For Liebknecht and Luxemburg, this moderate vision fell too far short of socialist transformation, and in January 1919, the revolutionary Spartacus League, which they had founded, would lead an uprising aiming to "complete" the German revolution.

Karl Liebknecht proclaims the replacement of capitalism by socialism.

The war was over, the monarchy fallen. But what would the path forward be? From the birth of the Weimar Republic in 1918, its legitimacy was disputed within the ranks of German Social Democrats:

LUXEMBURG: From the beginning I've agreed with the party's gradualist strategy—doing otherwise would have been a reckless betrayal of the masses. But now, our slogan must be: "All power to the workers' and soldiers' councils."

BERNSTEIN: Frau Luxemburg, such a total transformation is today not a realistic option in Germany. Yes, the recent war has ripped German capitalism open at the seams. But the winners of the war—Great Britain, France, America—they will not stand by while you try to sew Germany back together along socialist lines. At Versailles, these countries have imposed the harshest terms imaginable upon us.



And their guns are prepared to speak again, throttling any takeover attempt on the part of the revolutionary left. The price that you and your comrades will pay, for your misunderstanding of our situation, will be a high one.

LUXEMBURG: Once again, Herr Bernstein, you counsel despair and defeat. If we do not take the initiative here in a revolutionary way, the forces of reaction will seize the day and take over.

That civil war between reformers and revolutionaries might prove disastrous is the message of Max Pechstein's poster (1919) showing a baby and this warning:

"Don't strangle young Freedom through disorder and fratricide. Else your children will go hungry."

The child carries the red banner of revolution and freedom.

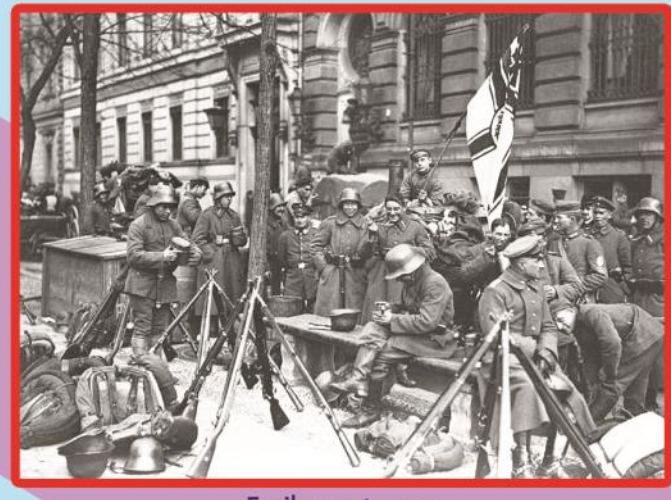
Workers' and soldiers' councils rally, December 1918

Protect the young German republic
Vote SPD.
Wissell Slate!

Street warfare in Berlin, January 1919

Insurrection January 1919

In January 1919, the Spartacus League, believing that the German revolution remained incomplete, led an insurrection in Berlin against the newly inaugurated Weimar Republic.



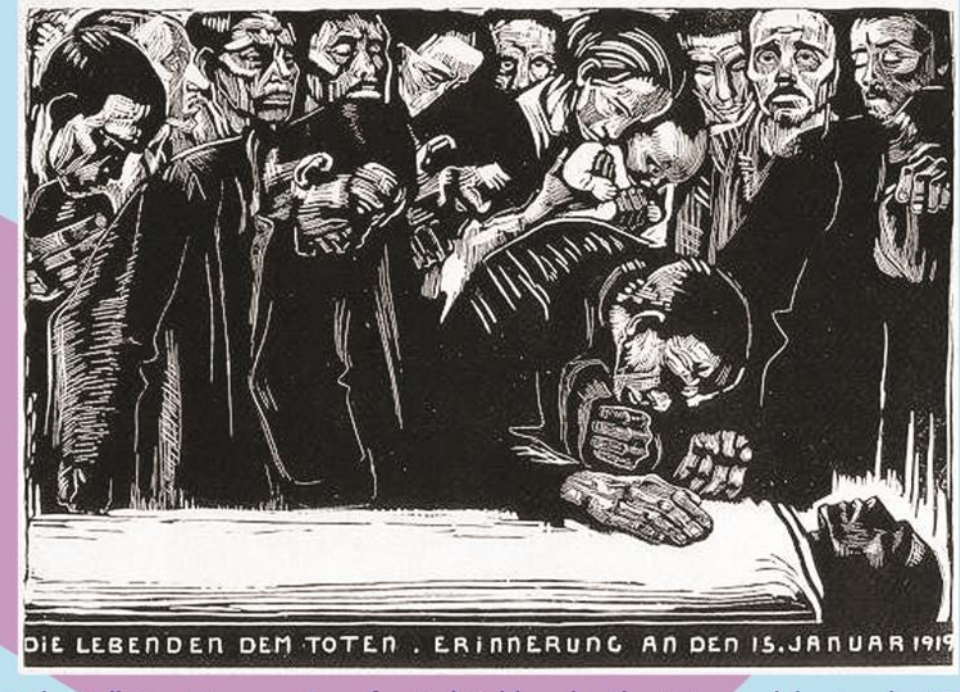
Freikorps troops

Luxemburg herself had viewed the revolt as premature and had argued against it. But she could not convince her comrades, who overestimated the revolutionary support of the masses.

On January 15, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, unarmed, were brutally murdered by right-wing paramilitary Freikorps soldiers in Berlin.

By the time the fighting ceased, over twelve thousand people had been killed or wounded.

(A few years later, many Freikorps soldiers became Nazi stormtroopers.)



Kathe Kollwitz, "Memory Page for Karl Liebknecht, The Living and the Dead," 1921

Although Rosa Luxemburg believed that the new German republic was betraying the socialist cause, she opposed the decision of her own Spartacus League to lead a revolutionary insurrection, on the grounds that it was premature and lacked sufficient popular support. Yet she endorsed the uprising when the League, against her counsel, decided to carry it out. The uprising was crushed by the social democratic government, through the intervention of police and military forces. The extreme and unnecessary violence of the response to the uprising was condemned by many social democrats, including Eduard Bernstein.

LUXEMBURG: Herr Bernstein, do I perceive a certain gleam in your eyes when you take pride in surviving the fire that consumed those of us who gave our lives? Yes, our movement was imperfect. And you, you have the truth on your side. Why? Because history is written by you, the living, and you can paint and repaint the past as you wish. Yes, a floundering, powerless Weimar Republic survived, but at what cost to the social transformation that we so desperately needed and that you, by your compromises and cowardice, helped to weaken and destroy.

BERNSTEIN: I am regretful too, Rosa. But what better solution was available to us? The forces that had just won a war against us—they were not going to just stand by while the left "transforms" Germany, as you say. A violent uprising against the Republic was bound to fail. Today, I sit in the Reichstag, in the company of some people I don't agree with. But we work together. That's the only way to bring about the changes that we all want to see.

Reichstag 1921: Commemoration of the revolution. The banner above the archways reads: "Unity and Justice and Freedom."

The Left Divided

Communist Party Poster:
"Betrayed by the S.P.D.
Vote Communist!"

Social Democratic Party Poster: "Against Papen, Hitler, Thälmann." Papen was a militarist aristocrat who colluded with the Nazis. Thälmann led the Communist Party.

Communist Party poster:
"KPD Slate 3
Down with this System"

Although facing catastrophic circumstances—massive unemployment, hyperinflation, and the burdens of debt and reparations—social democrats did make headway in the 1920s in enacting substantive reforms, including more humane working conditions in factories, workers' participation in enterprise management, an 8-hour working day, low-income housing, and free education for all. Within the ranks of SPD-led political coalitions, though, factions quarreled, magnifying their differences, and the Social Democratic Party proved incapable of uniting the left. The Communist Party (KPD) went so far as to call for the overthrow of the Weimar Republic, claiming that the state was essentially owned and controlled by a wealthy elite. Indeed the SPD made substantial concessions to forces on their right, on the assumption that they had to do so in order to wield any power at all.

The Communists declared in the late 1920s that social democracy amounted to "social fascism," which meant that they regarded social democracy as the main enemy, standing in the way of proletarian revolution. Instead of allying to resist the growing fascist movement, left fought against left, which—together with the Great Depression—led to the demise of the Republic.

Only in 1945, when the 2nd world war ended, were social democratic forces in Europe able to regroup and get back to work on behalf of progressive causes that they had championed from the beginning.

I imagine Eduard Bernstein & Rosa Luxemburg returning to visit us today.
What would they make of our world?

Eduard? Still belongs to the Social Democratic Party and has invited a friend in the Green Party to dinner this evening to discuss building an alliance to get social democracy back on track.

Rosa? Belongs to the Left Party, and at a meeting this afternoon, she will denounce the customary subterfuges used to justify militarism and obscure the economic interests that it serves.

Austrian Social Democracy:
Adelheid Popp & Friedrich Adler

Founding of the Party. Austria's history in the late-19th and early-20th centuries was no less transformative than what occurred in Germany. Industrialization brought people from the countryside into cities where they found jobs in an increasingly capitalist economy. Workers often experienced the new conditions of their labor as harsh and cruel. They sought to organize and bargain collectively, but the obstacles were formidable. In Vienna, for example, protesting workers encountered not only the resistance of the owning class but also the repressive apparatus of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg monarchy, whose police and laws were deployed to defeat their unionization drives and their strikes.

Vienna's residents had come to the city in large numbers from the diverse provinces of the monarchy—Hungary, Bohemia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and regions of Poland, Romania, and Italy—and consequently differences of language, education, religion, and custom also stood in the way of successful working-class collaboration. On top of that, strategies for social change were at loggerheads. Moderates made concrete demands: decent wages, prohibition of child labor, the right to form a union, free public education, an eight-hour day, universal suffrage. But such reforms were dismissed as insufficient by radicals like Johann Rismann, who argued that only the overthrow of capitalism could put an end to workplace exploitation: "As long as today's economic institutions exist, our political rights will be a zero, a plaything that those in power can deal with as they please and lure the masses."

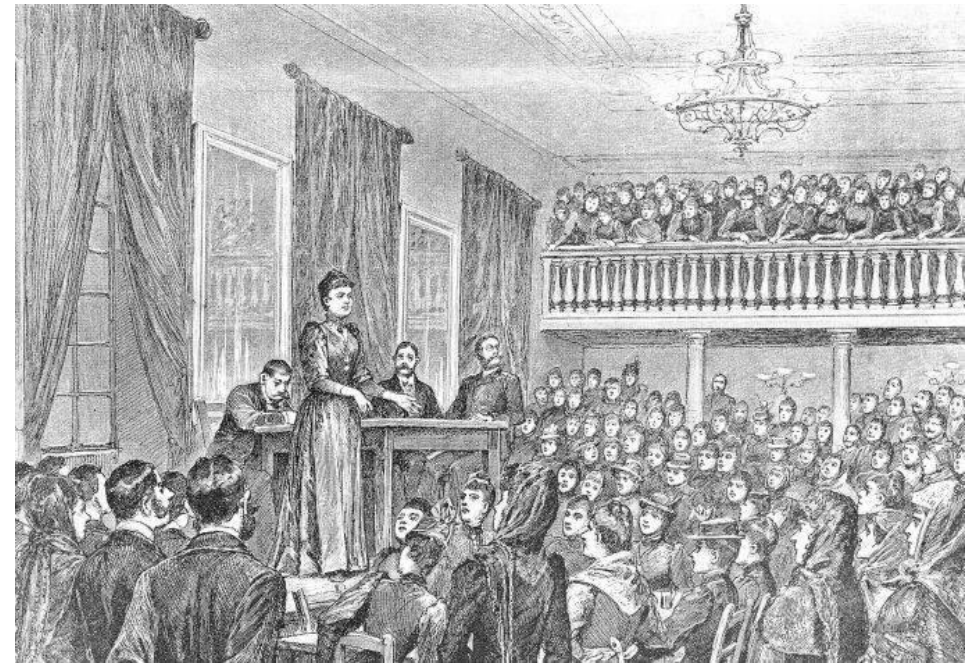
The Social Democratic Workers Party of Austria was inaugurated at a three-day working class congress that convened in the town of Hainfeld on December 30, 1888. The meeting was organized by a Viennese physician, Victor Adler, who convinced contending factions to accept a common program that stated the principles of Austrian social democracy: international solidarity, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, trade union protection, public education, separation of church and state, and free and fair elections.

Victor Adler's son Friedrich was 10 years old in 1888. He would go on to provide controversial leadership in the party his father had founded.

Victor Adler
Hainfeld, 1888

Among the leaders of the Austrian social democratic movement was Adelheid Popp, born into an impoverished weavers family in 1869. At age 40, she published an autobiography, "The Story of a Young Woman Worker," that chronicles her life experiences, first as a maid and seamstress and then as an industrial worker in Viennese factories. The book was read by a large audience in Austria, received international recognition as well, and still finds readers today.

Adelheid Popp explains in her autobiography the arduous path that led her to the doorstep of Austria's Social Democratic Workers Party. Once she had joined, she embraced the cause wholeheartedly and spoke to large audiences everywhere in Austria and abroad too.



The "unmeasured bitterness" that Adelheid Popp experienced as a young woman may have heightened the militancy of her activism, but not in a doctrinaire direction. She welcomed into the women's movement people with very diverse backgrounds, including relatively privileged women of the upper classes who believed in the cause. And she brought that same spirit of reconciliation into the Social Democratic Party as a whole. "Every yoke is broken, every chain torn away," she said, "when those who bear the yoke, who moan under the clanking of chains, stand together for common action."

This broad approach to social change put her at odds with Marxist feminists like Clara Zetkin—Rosa Luxemburg's comrade in Germany—who advocated a more class-based and uncompromising path forward for the women's movement. These clashing strategies were the subject of intense debate at the first International Conference of Socialist Women in 1907.

Clara Zetkin

International Conference of Socialist Women, Stuttgart, 1907

Adelheid Popp

Austrian and German Women were engaged at this time in a suffrage campaign to win the right to vote for all men. This concept was anathema to Zetkin, who insisted that women should participate in such a campaign only on the condition that the demand include female suffrage too. Popp and her Austrian colleagues agreed, of course, that women needed and deserved the right to vote. But thinking strategically, they divided the struggle into two steps: suffrage for men, to be followed by the same right for women. They argued that the first step, voting rights for all men, would help elect progressive men to Parliament, who would get behind the causes dear to women, including *their* right to vote and also putting a halt to other injustices suffered by women. They pointed out as well that the struggle to enfranchise men was bringing thousands of working class women into the movement, which was raising consciousness and encouraging women's activism. These developments, Popp held, would build support for taking the next step: universal suffrage.

Partly because of the unifying role that women played in coalition building, the bitter division between moderates and radicals that split the German left proved to be less explosive in Austria. Women mobilized the Austrian Social Democratic Workers Party in support of equal wages for women, better and healthier working conditions, prenatal care for mothers, reform of family law, and abortion rights. And they viewed these efforts as belonging to the wider struggle for *human* emancipation. As it turns out, universal suffrage was not won until the fall of the Habsburg monarchy a decade later, but the women's movement paved the way.

Adelheid Popp, together with others like-minded about Austrian social democracy, recognized that a divided left delivers victory to the right. Subsequent decades would show the terrible correctness of that insight.

Nothing said above is meant to discourage debate within the broad center-left about strategy and aims. The challenge—one that is psychological as well as political—has always been to find common ground while respecting and appreciating difference.

In 1919, women representatives were for the first time elected to the Austrian Parliament. Among them, Adelheid Popp at the lower left. Are the men nearby wondering what to make of this new phenomenon?

Popp founded the Social Democratic "Working Women's Paper" in 1892 and served as its editor until 1934. At times, its articles were censored by state authority, and the paper protested this repression by putting a blank space on the front page with an explanation to the readers: "Here a half-page has been censored." Popp was brought before the Austrian judicial system in 1895, accused of publishing an article that was an "assault on marriage and the family." She defended the article passionately in court but was found guilty and went to prison for two weeks.


Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung

Sozialdemokratisches Organ für Frauen und Mädchen

Nr. 15. Wien, Dienstag den 27. Juli 1915 24. Jahrgang.

Ein Jahr.

Hier wurde eine halbe Seite konfisziert

Friedrich Adler

When Adelheid Popp or Victor Adler spoke in public on behalf of social democratic causes, their appeal was emotional, but relied above all on the capacity of working people to think for themselves and be moved by the better argument. This optimistic approach to political persuasion found favor also with Victor's son Friedrich. In his youth he had taken an interest in the natural sciences and he came to believe that, at the end of the day, evidence and reason can win a debate, whether it takes place in a scientific laboratory or in a political meeting hall. That confidence would, beginning in the fall of 1916, be harshly tested by his extraordinary life experience. Because his life and circumstances cast light on the trajectory of Austrian social democracy in the first half of the 20th century, we'll spend some time reviewing his journey. The following account draws on an essay written by historian Douglas D. Alder, "Friedrich Adler: Evolution of a Revolutionary."

Friedrich Adler is known in European history chiefly for his war-protest assassination of the Austrian prime minister, Count Karl Stürgkh, during World War I. Though he was further to the left than his famous father, Friedrich too was committed to "united front" politics. He became a member of Parliament and party leader and theoretician, working out of the Social Democratic Party headquarters in Vienna.

As a young man, Friedrich abandoned a hard-won start as a physicist to become a party official and aide to his father Victor, who led Austrian social democracy from 1889 to 1918. The ever proper but sometimes discordant relationship between these two men, who looked very similar and respected each other deeply, was a powerful test of wills. Beyond being a classic father-son confrontation, their clash was pivotal in Austrian socialism.

Friedrich Adler's father Victor, a physician who had taken up politics, became a living legend to the working class. The family dining table in this secular Jewish home was a place where Friedrich heard about proletarian demonstrations, confrontations with the police and his father's continuing courtroom defense of arrested demonstrators. These, he said, "gave me the impression that it was my natural duty to oppose the police and power of the day.... I saw the daily activity of my father, whom I greatly admired, who kept fighting against political oppression."

The Adler family in Vienna, 1910, with Friedrich in the back. His mother Emma was a journalist, biographer, and translator.

Young Adler was considered to be a sensitive and physically infirm child, and his parents wished to shield him from the anxieties and harshness of political life. He was nevertheless allowed a child's portion of participation, folding the party newspapers and sitting in the gallery at party conventions.

But Victor did not want Friedrich to enter politics. He was convinced that the bright but frail boy could not endure the pressure. (Friedrich's mother, uncle, and sister had all suffered emotional breakdowns.) In keeping with the wishes of his father, Friedrich went to Zürich and worked conscientiously at the science that he and his father had agreed would be his field of study. In the evenings, though, Friedrich pursued his political interests. He debated with anarchists and supporters of Lenin, opposing them in favor of a socialism more like his father's. He favored the collaborative politics found in the Second International rather than the factionalism of the Bolsheviks. He engaged his scientific friends in on-going ideological dialogues.

One of these friends was Albert Einstein, Jewish classmate and socialist comrade. They shared an interest in both science and socialism, and their friendship endured long beyond their school years. A second friendship was even more intense and consequential. Katharina Germanischkaja was a Russian Jew who had come to Zürich to study physics because Jews were denied admission to Russian universities. Friedrich invited her into his political circles, believing that her bright mind could contribute to the struggle.

Then another pivotal event occurred: in 1911 Friedrich unexpectedly received an invitation to return to Vienna for a major party appointment. The leadership wanted a journalist to edit a party periodical, prepare campaign literature, and serve in Parliament. Friedrich accepted without hesitation. His father acquiesced in the appointment, surrendering his twenty-year-old plan for turning his son away from political activism.

Friedrich Adler flourished between 1911 and 1914 and repaired his relationship with his father. For three years they met almost daily for lunch in the family apartment where political conversation was the main fare. Victor admitted in a letter to Kautsky, "Our rising generation is better than we could possibly have expected."

Cafe Odeon in Zürich, frequented by political activists, scientists, and artists such as Adler, Einstein, Lenin, Trotsky, James Joyce, and Toscanini

Katharina and Friedrich

In the summer of 1914, however, Austria's and the world's social democratic hopes were abruptly shut down. On 28 June, 1914 the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Serbia. Austria declared war, and by the 4th of August, Germany, France, and Britain had joined the fight. Opposition to the war was disallowed in Austria; the government administration in Vienna, directed by Prime Minister Karl Graf Stürgkh, suspended Parliament, refused to call new elections, and censored the press. SPD leaders like Victor didn't call for a vigorous and public antiwar response because they believed that any such action would be quickly suppressed and severely punished. Friedrich, on the other hand, believed that social democrats, in Austria and internationally, had lost their way, abandoning their long-standing pacifism, their class solidarity, and their conscience.

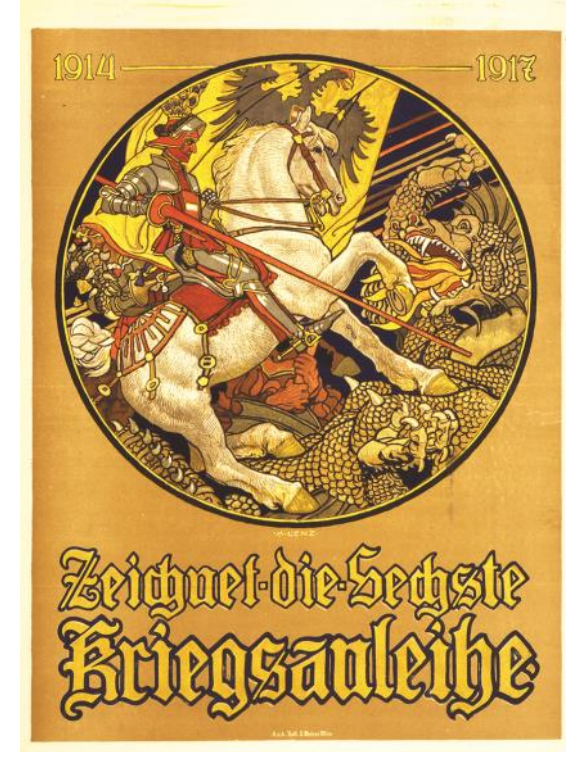
Friedrich saw that socialist workers could become flag-wavers too, swept away by patriotic sentiment and rampaging militarism. They marched behind colorful banners and even sang socialist songs as they marched to the Eastern front. Friedrich conceded that Party leaders who did not join in the hysteria might lose popular support in the present moment, but he wanted the Party directorate to mount at least a token protest against the war.

Victor Adler viewed the situation differently. He explained that although he detested the Habsburg rulers, he had even less sympathy for the Czar, Russia's cruel dictator. If and when Parliament was reconvened, he said, the Social Democratic representatives would have to approve funds for the war even though doing so went against their pacifist principles. This war, he conjectured, might put an end to Russian autocracy.

Austrian soldiers on their way to the front

Friedrich Adler resigned from the Party and penned a fiery attack on the leadership. He argued that the war would kill democracy and devastate the working class, regardless of which side—Czarist militarism or Prussian militarism—won. During the first years of the war, Friedrich felt very alone. Party officials spoke out against him, calling him unpatriotic, even fanatical. There were forebodings of emotional collapse that Friedrich's family had worried about when he was a child. When the Party convention met in 1915, Friedrich's fiery invective against the Party's war policy drew the support of only 10% of the delegates. He received no support from party leaders, including Victor Adler.

In the darkness of the war years, Friedrich Adler decided that an act of radical resistance could amplify antiwar sentiment and help to unlock the shackles that bound the masses of people to a war they were beginning to hate. Although he continued to favor mass protest over individual action, he decided to assassinate the Prime Minister Count Stürgkh.



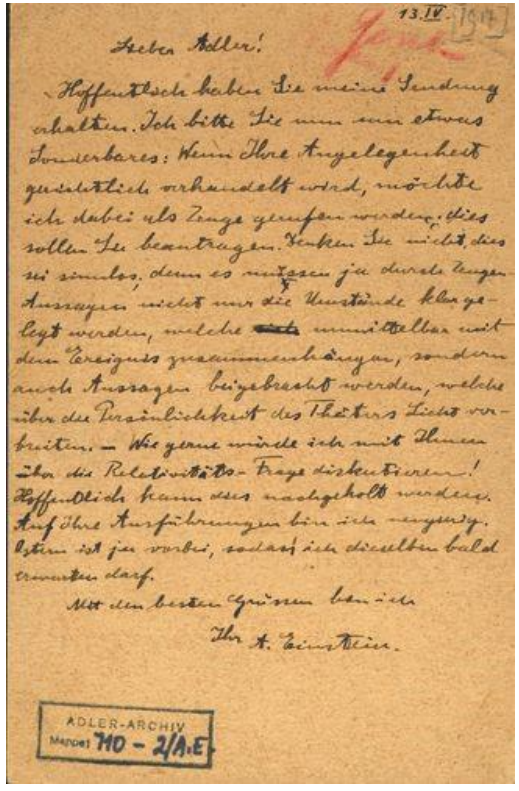
Austrian "Buy War Bonds" poster

Friedrich had been told that the Count lunched every day at the Hotel Meissel and Schaden near the Hofburg Palace. So, on Saturday, the 21st of October, 1916, Friedrich went there for lunch, patiently waited a few tables away until they both had finished dining—waited also until a woman sitting at a table nearby had left the room, so that she would not be endangered—and then walked over to Stürgkh and fired four shots at him with a pistol. Within a few hours Friedrich Adler was in prison and Stürgkh was dead.

Nothing and no one had warned Victor Adler that something like this might happen. Friedrich's feat was a solitary act. Yet within a few hours Victor had to write an editorial stating the official Social Democratic Party response. If the Social Democrats were implicated in this assassination, the government could use that to strike against, perhaps even eliminate, the Party. So Victor condemned his son's act as the product of a deranged mind.

Friedrich Adler Arrested. From the "Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung," October 1916

Friedrich immediately repudiated his father's account, saying that he had acted rationally and with justification. "When I carried the assassination out I did so with the knowledge that thereby my life would end. I have not for one second regretted my action." Both his father and the government wanted Friedrich declared insane, but for different reasons. Victor saw this as a way to save Friedrich's life, while the state aimed to discredit his act. This meant that both the state prosecution and the defense (hired by Victor) intended to block expression of Friedrich's political message.


13.IV.

Lieber Adler!

Hoffentlich haben Sie meine Sendung erhalten. Ich bitte Sie nun um etwas Sonderbares: Wenn Ihre Angelegenheit gerichtlich verhandelt wird, möchte ich dabei als Zeuge genannt werden; dies sollen Sie beantragen. Denken Sie nicht, dies sei sinnlos, denn es nützen ja durch Zeugenaussagen nicht nur die Umstände klargelegt werden, welche unmittelbar mit dem Ereignis zusammenhängen, sondern auch Aussagen beigebracht werden, welche über die Persönlichkeit des Täters Licht verbreiten. — Wie gerne würde ich mit Ihnen über die Relativitäts-Frage diskutieren! Hoffentlich kann dies nachgeholt werden. Auf Ihre Ausführungen bin ich neugierig. Ostern ist ja vorbei, sodaß ich dieselben bald erwarten darf.

Mit den besten Grüssen bin ich

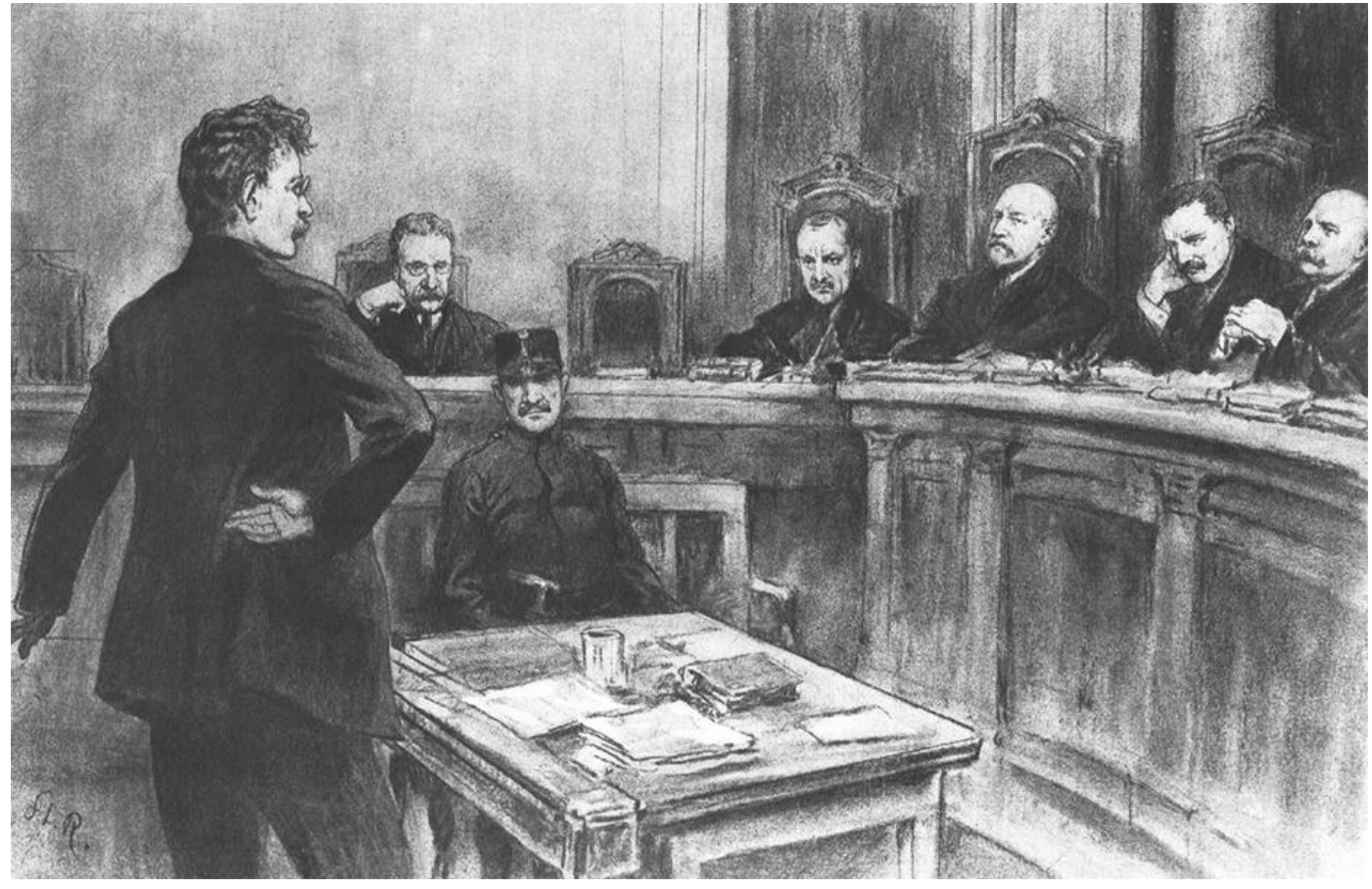
Ihr A. Einstein.

ADLER-ARCHIV
Mappe 710 - 2/A.E

letter from Albert Einstein to Friedrich Adler, offering to testify on his behalf. April 13, 1917

Beginning with his first day of police interrogation, Friedrich was entirely open and truthful. He explained the assassination in detail and the motivation leading up to it. He patiently led his police interrogators through the complexities of social democratic theory and his analysis of Austria's wartime situation. A panel of psychiatrists interviewed him and concluded that "none of his political views appeared to indicate madness... He has the mind of a fanatic but is never senseless or illogical.... he considers himself not as a martyr but as someone who has done his duty."

The days in jail were not tiresome for Friedrich. He felt no remorse for his deed nor fear for his future. He returned to his scientific studies, putting in fourteen-hour days with a library of books which his family brought him. He was calm and creative.



Friedrich Adler in court. From the "Interessante Blatt," 24 May, 1917.

On May 18,1917, Friedrich Adler went to trial, which became a cause celebre. Friedrich had first to deal with his own defense attorneys, which he did by simply rejecting their assistance and making his own case in court, aimed at discrediting the government instead of saving his life. The assassin was allowed six hours to testify and he used the time wisely. With his father in the court room, he argued that:

"Every citizen has not only the right to use force, in a situation like mine, but even the obligation to intercede at that moment when all constitutional approaches fail.... At issue is not law, but moral duty.... We live in a time when the killing fields are covered with hundreds of thousands of dead and tens of thousands of people lie beneath the sea.... I am guilty to the same degree as every military officer who has killed or given the order to kill —no less and no more!"

The case that Friedrich made received considerable support from the Austrian public during and after the trial. He was satisfied: he had been heard and was ready for the gallows. As expected, the court found him guilty and condemned him to death.

There are many ironic twists in history, however. Austria's Kaiser Karl, aware that he might be held responsible at the end of the war (which was not going well for Austria), decided to talk the matter over with Victor. The Kaiser first waived the death penalty for Friedrich and then pardoned him on November 1, 1918. Victor's son stepped out of prison a folk hero, and became once again a leader in the Austrian social democratic movement.

Some on the left argued that the Austrian Social Democratic Party had disgraced itself by supporting the war and no longer deserved support. Some workers and soldiers even asked that Friedrich lead a Bolshevik-style revolution. He urged them instead to rally behind the new Austrian Republic and the Social Democratic Party that Victor Adler had done so much to build. In subsequent decades Friedrich not only helped to advance social democratic causes in Austria but became well-known also for his work on behalf of international labor movement solidarity. During the Second World War, at considerable risk to himself, he helped Jewish refugees escape from Hitler, and he remained politically active until his death in Switzerland in 1960.
Austrian social democracy flourished in the second half of the 20th century, although marred by a failure to confront the country's fascist past.

In agreement with his father and other founders of social democracy, Friedrich Adler believed that the movement had to be global. The 482 representatives to the 1904 International Socialist Congress in Amsterdam came from 24 nations and 4 continents.

Social democrats held that the main conflict in modern societies is between social classes, not between one nation and another. The 1904 Congress passed a resolution urging peaceful resolution of international conflict. The delegates recognized that militarism could not solve the problems that humans fundamentally face in living together. That recognition would be trampled in the dust during the following half century, when two world wars ravaged Europe and other parts of the world.

1904 International Socialist Congress in Amsterdam. Luxemburg stands in the middle, dressed in white, with Bernstein just in front of her to the left and Victor Adler behind her to the right.

The Angel of History

"A Klee drawing named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

— Walter Benjamin, "Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History"
1940

Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish literary critic and philosopher, had purchased Klee's water-color of an angel in Munich for the equivalent of about thirty dollars. His interpretation of the image is not an optimistic one: so-called "historical progress" is a foolish illusion. At the age of forty-eight, he had lived through World War I and its aftermath. Now, in the second year of yet another war, the course of history had been commandeered by fascism, a "catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin."

This bleak sense of inevitability is contradicted, however, elsewhere in Benjamin's commentary, where he speaks of "fanning the spark of hope" and a "leap in the open air of history." And there is a tension that animates the image itself: the eyes of the angel point to one side, while the rest of the body twists just a bit in the opposite direction (or so it seems to me), suggesting arrested motion. Hope is not extinguished, there remains at least the possibility of movement toward a better future.

There had been such hope in the years of the Weimar Republic that replaced the monarchy in Germany at the end of the First World War. Had the Republic been able to survive the aggression unleashed against it by the right, and by the extreme left also, it might have inaugurated a liberating historical journey. For in spite of its dire circumstances, including the punitive Versailles Treaty, the Weimar Republic's initiatives were dramatic: legally required collective bargaining agreements and unemployment compensation, free public education, a constitution establishing parliamentary democracy and affirming basic human rights. The Republic built railways, bridges, and roads, along with housing for over two million Germans. The Works Councils Act enacted in 1920 gave workers a voice in determining the conditions of their own labor.

Weimar Republic, 1919: The posters urge women to vote social democratic and to support universal access to free, non-religious public education.

In Austria too, the Social Democratic Party (SDAPÖ) fought to advance the interests of the working class. Following the First World War, the Party received strong support in cities, although it had a hard time competing in the countryside. Still, a wide range of social reforms was achieved. Until the fascists took over in 1934, Social Democrats governed in Vienna and succeeded in building 60,000 communal housing units, establishing free medical care, and giving strong support to labor. "Red Vienna," as it was called, became a world-famous center of achievement in science and the arts. Psychoanalysis was born and flourished in Vienna, and its practitioners opened a clinic that provided free mental care to children as well as adults.

Fascism in Europe sought to kill social democracy, but social democracy refused to die! Progressive policies found new advocates following World War II when forces on the left regrouped and were elected to power in Germany, Austria, Nordic countries, and elsewhere. And although European social democracy certainly didn't put an end to inequities and oppression, it did take steps in the right direction.

Here in the United States, the New Deal in the 1930s established social security and supported trade unions, public education, and low-cost housing. In the 1950s and 1960s the Civil Rights Movement combined with other struggles for human dignity to "keep hope alive."

At the heart of social democracy has always been a commitment to fight for the working class—ordinary people trying to reach a better life in an unfair system. Labor unions, religious communities, and the Democratic Party have, at their best, sought to unite people of diverse interests and backgrounds behind a shared vision of the common good. This "big tent" approach is needed today too.

The path has never been easy. During the 20th century, human ideals of democracy and justice suffered defeat upon catastrophic defeat. To be sure, history is not marching us to the peaceable kingdom. Yet, despite the failures and irreparable losses, doesn't the past also demonstrate a lot of human goodness and cooperation? History is waiting for us to create the relationships—across the generations, across boundaries of every kind—that will permit Benjamin's angel at last to take wing.

Family Notes

Among those affected by the travails of the Weimar era in Germany was my uncle Ralph Zucker, a medical student in Leipzig who became despondent and killed himself in 1927.

Ten years later, fleeing the Nazis, my Jewish parents immigrated to the United States. They left behind many dear friends and relatives who were killed in the Holocaust.

I live in Berkeley, CA and write about science, literature, and politics. Berkeley is also the home of my two brothers, Peter and Michael. Peter's wife Margret Schaefer helped me write this book.

Raymond Barglow
2025

1937. (left to right) My uncle Gutmann, his brother-in-law Isaak Stejnberg and sister Tatiana, their son Monjusz alongside Peter, then my mother Hilde and grandfather Nahum, with my father David in front. Only my parents and Peter, who left Europe soon after this photo was taken, survived.

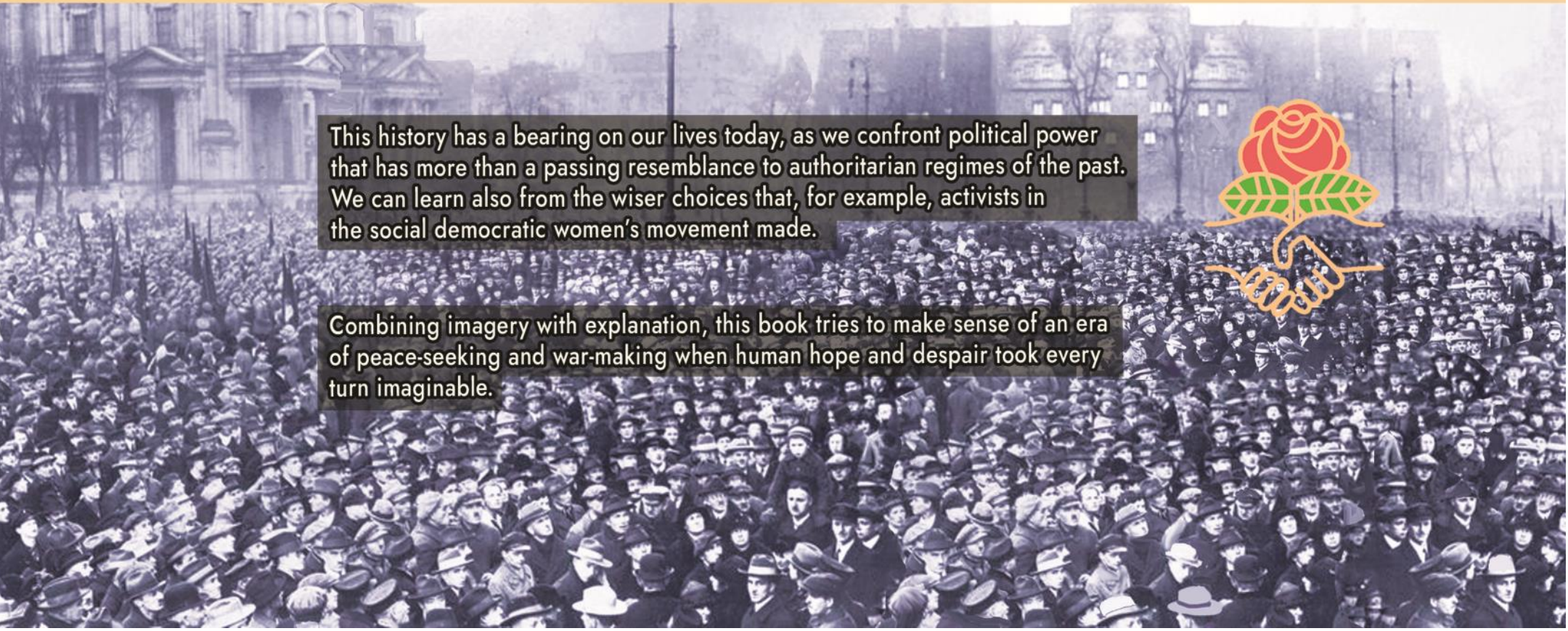
Monjusz and Peter

Thanks to Pamela Montanaro for gathering information on this page.

Eduard Bernstein: This book does a good job of representing the revolutionary times we lived through—the first world war and the birth of democracy in Germany and Austria. We had to find our way through a war-torn landscape that tested our beliefs and our humanity. As the book explains, the predicaments that the new republic faced were incredibly difficult ones, yet we found solutions and would have fought back successfully against the rise of fascism, had our ranks been united!

Rosa Luxemburg: Once again I find that I have to disagree with Herr Bernstein! The paradoxes and puzzles that we in the Social Democratic Party faced weren't anywhere near as difficult to negotiate as he makes out. What really held us back, as this book makes clear, was the attachment—sometimes criminal and sometimes just sentimental—of people like him to the class system that ravaged the lives of working people. What Herr Bernstein calls "solutions" were unnecessary and unprincipled compromises!

The two (imagined) book reviews above express a disagreement that divided German social democracy against itself. This split proved irreconcilable and contributed to the tragic defeat of the left in Germany, and in Austria too.



This history has a bearing on our lives today, as we confront political power that has more than a passing resemblance to authoritarian regimes of the past. We can learn also from the wiser choices that, for example, activists in the social democratic women's movement made.

Combining imagery with explanation, this book tries to make sense of an era of peace-seeking and war-making when human hope and despair took every turn imaginable.