

Lecture nine: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International

Part 2

By Peter Schwarz
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The following is the second part of the lecture “The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International.” It was delivered by Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International and a member of the WSWS Editorial Board, at the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS summer school held August 14 to August 20, 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The lecture will be presented in three parts. Part one was posted October 11.

This is the ninth lecture given at the school. The first, entitled “The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century” was posted in four parts, from August 29 to September 1. The second, “Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century,” was posted in three parts on September 2, 4 and 5. The third, “The origins of Bolshevism and What Is To Be Done?” was posted in seven parts from September 6 to September 13. The fourth, “Marxism, history and the science of perspective,” was posted in six parts from September 14 to September 20. These lectures were authored by World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board Chairman David North.

The fifth lecture, “World War I: The breakdown of capitalism,” was delivered by Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia and a member of the WSWS Editorial Board. It was posted in five parts, from September 21 to September 26. The sixth, “Socialism in one country or permanent revolution” was delivered by Bill Van Auken and posted in three parts, from September 27 to September 29. The seventh, “Marxism, art and the Soviet debate over ‘proletarian culture,’ ” was given by David Walsh, the arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site, and posted in four parts from September 30 to October 4. The eighth, “The 1920s—the road to depression and fascism,” was given by Nick Beams and posted in five parts from October 5-10.

It was not the masses as such, as Horkheimer and Adorno claim, who constituted the social base of fascism, and certainly not the working class, whose development is intimately bound up with modern industry and technology. It was very specific social layers: those sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariat who had been left behind and ruined by the development of capitalism, whose existence had been destroyed or who feared pauperization.

It was the artisans, the peddlers and the civil employees hit by the postwar chaos no less cruelly than the workers; it was the peasantry ruined by the economic crisis in agriculture; it was the small proprietors perpetually facing bankruptcy, their university sons without posts, their daughters without dowries or suitors; it was the lower and middle commanding ranks of the old army—as Trotsky wrote in the article *What is National Socialism?*

He summed up: “The national ‘renaissance’ leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history. Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath. Impotent before big capital, the petty bourgeoisie hopes in the future to regain its social dignity through the ruin of the workers.”

But while the Nazis based themselves on the petty bourgeoisie and mobilized it against the working class, their policies corresponded in no way to the social needs of the petty bourgeoisie. Once Hitler’s party had attained power, it raised “itself over the nation as the worst form of imperialism,” as Trotsky pointed out.

He wrote: “German fascism, like Italian fascism, raised itself to power on the backs of the petty bourgeoisie, which it turned into a battering ram against the organizations of the working class and the institutions of democracy. But fascism in power is least of all the rule of the petty bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital.” (*What is National Socialism?*)

In order to understand the trajectory of fascism, it is necessary to look at the crisis of world imperialism and its impact on German imperialism—and not at the defects of enlightened thought or the impact of mass culture on the working class, as do Horkheimer and Adorno. Again it is Trotsky who summed up in a brilliant way what Nick Beams has explained in detail in his lecture on the 1920s:

“Capitalism in Russia proved to be the weakest link in the chain of imperialism, because of its extreme backwardness. In the present crisis, German capitalism reveals itself as the weakest link for the diametrically opposite reason: precisely because it is the most advanced capitalist system in the conditions of the European impasse. As the productive forces of Germany become more and more highly geared, the more dynamic power they gather, the more they are strangled within the state system of Europe—a system that is akin to the ‘system’ of cages within an impoverished provincial zoo. At every turn in the conjuncture of events German capitalism is thrown up against those problems which it had attempted to solve by means of war.” (*What Next?*)

For the bourgeoisie there was only one way out of this crisis. It had to achieve what it had failed to achieve in the First World War. It had to reorganize Europe by military force, subject it to German domination and to conquer new “Lebensraum” in the East. The war was not a result of Hitler’s fantasies and megalomania, but of the objective needs of German imperialism. But in order to conduct war, the imperialist bourgeoisie had first of all to defeat the “enemy within”—the powerful and well-organized

German working class.

The dishonesty of Horkheimer and Adorno is shown most clearly in their complete disregard of the fact that the working class in its overwhelming majority was opposed to fascism. Their remarks on what they call “the subjects”—the “self-destructive affinity” of “the technologically educated masses” for “nationalist paranoia,” the reversion of “the human capacity for experience” to “that of amphibians”—has more in common with the picture created by Nazi propaganda (e.g., by the films of Leni Riefenstahl) than with the social reality of Germany.

It is an irrefutable political fact that Hitler’s movement found hardly any support amongst workers before it took power in January 1933. In the last more or less democratic election in November 1932, the two big workers’ parties—the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Communists (KPD)—received 13.2 million votes, 1.5 million more than the Nazis, who received 11.7 million votes. In particular, “the technologically educated masses,” i.e., the workers in the big factories, almost unanimously supported the SPD and the KPD.

The central task of the Nazis was precisely to smash the organized working class. This is why the Nazis, who had been scorned by most sections of the bourgeoisie in their initial stage of development, won the support of all the major sections of the German elite as the crisis deepened in the 1930s—the big industrialists, who pledged support for Hitler at a Düsseldorf conference in January 1932, and the general staff of the army, who played a crucial role in establishing him as chancellor in January 1933.

The extent of brutality espoused by the Nazis was in direct proportion to the high cultural and organizational level of the German working class. It was not enough to arrest and imprison the revolutionary leaders—that could have been done by a police or military dictatorship. It was necessary to destroy the result of the decades-long work of Marxist education and organization which had molded the working class in Germany.

It was not an accident that the works of Heinrich Heine, Stefan Zweig, Heinrich Mann, Sigmund Freud and many others were publicly burned, and not just secretly removed from libraries and bookshops. The Nazis felt it necessary to organize a public demonstration against culture, which they associated instinctively with the working class, social progress and socialism. In this respect, Hitler and Goebbels had a much clearer understanding of the connection between the working class and culture than Horkheimer and Adorno.

“Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force, and of police terror,” Trotsky wrote. “Fascism is a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society. The task of fascism lies not only in destroying the Communist vanguard but in holding the entire class in a state of forced disunity. To this end the physical annihilation of the most revolutionary section of the workers does not suffice. It is also necessary to smash all independent and voluntary organizations, to demolish all the defensive bulwarks of the proletariat, and to uproot whatever has been achieved during three-quarters of a century by the Social Democracy and the trade unions. For, in the last analysis, the Communist Party also bases itself on these achievements.” (*What Next?*)

The ultimate victims of this policy were the European Jews. In the initial stages, anti-Semitism, which has a history going back to the Middle Ages, was used by the Nazis to mobilize backward layers of the population and as a diversion from growing class tensions. Once Hitler was in power, anti-Semitic pogroms were organized whenever popular pressure on the regime was mounting. After the war had started, all limitations to the most extreme anti-Semitic forces were removed and they developed according to their own logic.

Underlying the holocaust was a combination of irrational and entirely rational motives: *Arisierung*, the expropriation of wealthy Jews, provided

considerable means for the enrichment of the Nazis, other sections of the bourgeoisie and the German state. The extinction of millions of poor Jews in the East was part of wider policy of genocide, aimed at providing space for German settlers in the East.

This is a complex question, which can hardly be dealt with in this lecture. One thing however is obvious: The fate of European Jews was entirely bound up with the fate of the working class. Once the German working class was defeated, there was no social force left that could have defended the European Jews against the genocidal policies of the Nazis.

Once the Nazis were in power, the imperialist nature of their policies emerged into the open. Hitler disregarded the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty and initiated a massive program of armament. A network of motorways was built that would allow the German army to move very swiftly from one end of the country to another. The massive amounts of money poured into these projects as well as the smashing up of the workers’ organizations led to a temporary recovery of the economy that allowed Hitler to consolidate his dictatorship. But in the long term, the massive public spending undermined the economy to an extent that war was the only option to prevent an immediate collapse.

As the historian Tim Mason wrote: “The only ‘solution’ open to this regime of the structural tensions and crises produced by the dictatorship and rearmament was more dictatorship and more rearmament, then expansion, then war and terror, then plunder and enslavement. The stark, ever-present alternative was collapse and chaos, and so all solutions were temporary, hectic, hand-to-mouth affairs, increasingly barbaric improvisations around a brutal theme.”

Many of Hitler’s international opponents, above all the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, appraised him completely wrongly in this respect. They thought that under massive economic pressure he would be amenable to compromise. After the Munich agreement, which conceded the Sudetenland and, with it, the entire system of defences of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, Chamberlain thought that he had secured a lasting peace. The opposite was the case. For Hitler, the conquest of the Sudetenland was just another step towards war. Driven into a corner by an economic impasse, the only way to save his regime was to act in an ever more aggressive way.

There are obvious parallels to the present. Tim Mason’s remarks on the Hitler regime could also be applied to the Bush administration: The only “solution” open to this regime to the structural tensions and crises produced by war is more war. It would be an illusion to believe that the Bush administration—or the American elite as a whole—faced with a major crisis in Iraq and an untenable economic situation will just withdraw the troops and return to more normal conditions. This would not only undermine US imperialism in the Middle East and internationally, but at home as well. So the only solution is more war and more attacks on democratic rights.

There are also definite parallels between the crisis preceding Hitler’s rise to power and the present situation in Germany. The decision of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to call an early election is the outcome of a deep political and economic impasse. In foreign policy, German ambitions for a greater role as an imperialist power have been thwarted by the failure of the European constitution and the collapse of the plans for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Economically, massive attacks on the working class have failed to reduce the figure of 5 million unemployed and to revive the economy. And on the domestic front there is massive popular hostility to the attacks on welfare and workers’ rights.

The elections were meant to be a liberating act to set in place a government that is strong enough to implement unpopular measures. In calling them, Schröder violated a provision of the constitution that was introduced to avoid the kind of instability that characterized the final years of the Weimar Republic—a ban on the self-dissolution of parliament.

It is, however, clear that the election, whatever its result, will not

resolve the political crisis. It could well be that neither the present coalition nor a coalition of the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats will have a majority. The ruling elite is increasingly aware that a change of government by itself is not sufficient to resolve the pressing political and economic tasks posed by the international situation. In order to break the broad and deeply rooted resistance to social inequality and welfare cuts, new methods of rule are required which represent a fundamental break with the postwar traditions based on social and political consent.

To be continued

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