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

Part 3

By Peter Schwarz
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The following is the third and concluding 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. Parts one and two were posted October 11 and October 12.

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.

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to descend from the field of sociology and economics to the field of politics. While National Socialism had deep economic and social roots, its rise and success were by no means inevitable. They were the result of the failure of the workers’ organizations or, to put it more precisely, the betrayal of their leaders.

Without explaining the role of Social Democracy and Stalinism it is impossible to draw the lessons of National Socialism. It is significant that Horkheimer and Adorno do not mention this once and keep clear of a discussion of Stalinism in all their other works. While putting great emphasis on “thought” and “criticism,” they adopt an entirely objectivist standpoint when it comes to the real significance of the subjective factor.

As we have seen in previous lectures, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) sided with the bourgeois order in 1914 and became the main prop of the bourgeois state in the Weimar Republic. After World War I, it organized the suppression of the proletarian revolution and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In the final years of Weimar, it supported the government of Heinrich Brüning which attacked the working class based on emergency decrees. For Trotsky it was clear that the SPD bore the main responsibility for the rise of fascism, and that it would rather support the seizure of power by the fascists than a proletarian uprising.

It was different, however, with the Communist Party. The KPD had been founded in 1919 as an answer to the betrayals of the SPD. In its ranks were the most revolutionary elements of the working class. And it defended—at least in words—revolutionary aims. But it had a perspective and a political line which completely misjudged the political situation, disoriented and paralysed the working class, and finally allowed Hitler to take power without meeting any organized working class resistance—and this despite the fact that both the Social Democrats and the Communists had their own armed detachments who were more than willing to fight the Nazis.

The failure of the KPD was a result of the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International. The German Communist Party, after loosing its most outstanding leader, Rosa Luxemburg, only days after its founding congress in January 1919, had gone through a series of crises in the revolutionary upheavals of the early 1920s, and then through several purges of its leadership by the Stalinist faction in Moscow. At the beginning of the 1930s, the leadership under Ernst Thälmann was a pliant tool in the hands of the Moscow bureaucracy.

Stalin did not deliberately strive for a victory of Hitler and a defeat of the German Communist Party. But with all internal democracy suppressed, the line of the Comintern was motivated by the most narrow factional interests of Stalin’s bureaucratic clique and guided by the doctrine of “socialism in a single country.”

Unlike in Britain, where the Communist Party sided with the trade union bureaucracy, and China, where the CP sided with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang, the policy of the KPD in Germany took a left-wing form. The KPD refused to make any distinction between fascism and Social Democracy, which it labelled social fascism, and rejected the policy of the United Front, developed by the initial congresses of the Comintern under the leadership of Lenin.

Trotsky demonstrated that this ultra-left line was a form of bureaucratic centrism. It was a mechanical reproduction of the left line adopted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in its struggle against the Kulaks. At its sixth congress in the summer of 1928, the Communist International
decided that a “third period” had begun which put the struggle for power on the agenda in every single country of the world. It rejected tactics like the united front, worked out by the initial congresses of the Communist International to win over to the Communist parties the majority of the working class, and, in particular, the social democratic workers.

In the summer of 1929, the German Communist Party adopted this ultra-left line. It described the Social Democrats as social fascists and formed its own trade unions, separate from the social democratic ones. However, the radical shouting and swearing against the Social Democrats concealed a pessimism and passivity, most clearly expressed in the slogan: “Nach Hitler kommen wir”—after Hitler, it will be our turn.

At the heart of the line of the KPD was its refusal to make any distinction between Social Democracy and fascism. From the fact that both supported the bourgeois order, the Stalinists concluded that there was no distinction between the two. Trotsky rejected this emphatically.

“It is absolutely correct to place on the Social Democrats the responsibility for the emergency legislation of Brüning as well as for the impending danger of fascist savagery. It is absolute balderdash to identify Social Democracy with fascism,” he wrote. “The Social Democracy, which is today the chief representative of the parliamentary-bourgeois regime, derives its support from the workers. Fascism is supported by the petty bourgeoisie. The Social Democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can have no influence. Fascism cannot entrench itself in power without annihilating the workers’ organizations. Parliament is the main arena of the Social Democracy. The system of fascism is based upon the destruction of parliamentarianism. For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion; it has recourse to one or the other, depending upon the historical conditions. But for both the Social Democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance; more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.” (What Next?)

This contradiction had to be utilized. In the article “For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism” Trotsky explained: “The thousands upon thousands of Noskes, Welses, and Hilferdings [leaders of the SPD] prefer, in the last analysis, fascism to Communism. But for that they must once and for all tear themselves loose from the workers. Today this is not yet the case. Today the Social Democracy as a whole, with all its internal antagonisms, is forced into sharp conflict with the fascists. It is our task to take advantage of this conflict and not to unite the antagonists against us. The front must now be directed against fascism. And this common front of direct struggle against fascism, embracing the entire proletariat, must be utilized in the struggle against the Social Democracy, directed as a flank attack, but no less effective for all that.”

By rejecting a united front with the SPD, by delivering ultimatum after ultimatum to the SPD and—in some instances—working with the Nazis against the SPD, the Communist Party pushed the social democratic workers, who were very critical of their leaders, back into their arms. It paralyzed the working class and demoralized its own members.

At the same time, it strengthened the fascists. As Trotsky demonstrated again and again, the passage of the radicalized petty bourgeoisie into the camp of fascism is not a necessary process. Had the KPD fought the Nazis with a decisive and energetic policy and not with empty phrases, many of them would have joined its ranks. In the article “Vital Questions for the German Proletariat” Trotsky described the mechanism that drives the petty bourgeoisie into the arms of fascism.

The petty bourgeoisie, he wrote, “is quite capable of linking its fate with that of the proletariat. For that, only one thing is needed: the petty bourgeoisie must acquire faith in the ability of the proletariat to lead society onto a new road. The proletariat can inspire this faith only by its strength, by the firmness of its actions, by a skilful offensive against the enemy, by the success of its revolutionary policy... But if the revolutionary party, in spite of a class struggle becoming incessantly more accented, proves time and again to be incapable of uniting the working class behind it. If it vacillates, becomes confused, contradicts itself, then the petty bourgeoisie loses patience and begins to look upon the revolutionary workers as those responsible for its own misery.”

The failure of the KPD finally enabled Hitler to take power without provoking a civil war. Within a few weeks, the Communist Party was banned and destroyed. The German proletariat, for many decades the best organized in the world, had suffered a devastating defeat.

Trotsky’s struggle was aimed at changing the line of the KPD and the Comintern. Despite his own expulsion from the Communist International and the vicious persecution of his followers by the Stalinists, the Trotskyists still considered themselves as a Left Opposition within the Communist Party. Against those advocating a break with the KPD, Trotsky argued that the degree of degeneration of a revolutionary party cannot be established on the basis of symptoms alone; the living verification of events is indispensable. The catastrophic defeat of the German Communist Party was such a living verification. It demonstrated that the KPD was dead for the purpose of revolution.

Trotsky still hesitated to say the same about the Communist International. He waited to see if any section would react to the German catastrophe and criticize the Stalinist clique. But this did not happen.

“The Moscow leadership has not only proclaimed as infallible the policy which guaranteed victory to Hitler, but has also prohibited all discussion of what had occurred,” Trotsky wrote. “And this shameful interdiction was not violated, nor overthrown. No national congresses; no international congress; no discussions at party meetings; no discussion in the press! An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of the bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it. To say this openly and publicly is our direct duty toward the proletariat and its future. In all our subsequent work it is necessary to take as our point of departure the historical collapse of the official Communist International.” (To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew)

The conclusion Trotsky drew from the collapse of the Communist International was that it was necessary to build the Fourth International, which was founded in 1938.

Concluded

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