

# A Contribution to a Discussion:

# Leninism, The Comintern And Putschism

No one seeking an explanation for the decline of American socialism can afford to point an accusing finger at the notorious "objective situation" and permit his investigation to end there. That would be too pat, too convenient. To be sure, the unique features of American life preclude, today, as they have in the recent past, a powerful socialist movement in the European sense. But, after all objective factors are considered and weighed, we must still admit that the socialist movement has not nearly approached the limits of its potential influence. In fact the term, "socialist movement" has been reduced to little more than a literary expression and an aspiration.

In Comrade Shachtman's article, "American Communism: A Re-Examination of the Past," an attempt is made to probe beneath surface explanations for this plight of American socialism. One root cause unearthed is the socialist's addiction to political purity which promotes "splitting" as a way of organizational life. Thus, in place of a united, democratic organization in which different socialist currents can co-exist and exchange views without factional recriminations, this splitting principle has helped to sow and harvest a crop of sects and shadow "parties"—at least one preoccupied with raiding all others, and all of them isolated from the organized labor movement.

That serious damage has been done by orthodox purists is more than Shachtman's personal view. It is an opinion commonly held in the Independent Socialist League. Comrade Shachtman, however, buttresses this commonly shared opinion with an interpretation of early Communist history which is mainly a *personal* contribution to a much needed discussion on how and why the revolutionary movement, so powerful in the past, failed to fulfill its promise.

Above all, his analysis of the Comintern in its earliest days is a personal opinion as it conflicts with many ISL traditions, sharply diverging from or contradicting much that has been assumed and written about this period in our literature. This is no crime. In itself it is not an argument against what Shachtman has to say that is new—at least new for Comrade Shachtman. But for the sake of the record—which is important—and for the benefit of a fruitful discussion—which is needed—it must be acknowledged that many of his new views and interpretations represent a rupture with the historic past of the ISL; not with everything in the past but with enough to make it disorienting to those who accept his re-evaluation of the Comintern and disturbing to those who do not.

Why disorienting to those who accept Shachtman's review of the past? Simply because every socialist tendency or

## AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The following review of Max Shachtman's article, "American Communism: A Reexamination of the Past" (published in the Fall 1957 issue of the *New Internationalist*) was written about seven months ago. It was submitted for a scheduled issue of the *New Internationalist* that was not to appear because of the specific conditions under which unity between the Independent Socialist League and the Socialist Party was finally consummated.

That it has taken me this time to get my discussion into print is only evidence of the technical and financial obstacles encountered in publishing it as a personal project. Given the importance of comrade Shachtman's "Reexamination," however, a six month delay is better than dropping the discussion altogether. While comrade Shachtman might have the last word in such a discussion, if he wanted it, it would be unpardonable and misleading for the record to show that this "Reexamination" by the last National Chairman of the Independent Socialist League was the last and only published word in a discussion he introduced.

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movement must have its traditions which are based upon history, language, attitudes and even, when properly understood, its Promethean spirits and legends. If it turns out that the European revolutionary movement (i.e., the Third International) in the immediate post War I period, from which we have drawn moral sustenance for so many years, whose problems have been sympathetically presented in lectures and articles, with whose struggles we have identified, whose idiom has become part of our vocabulary and whose leading figures have become authentic heroes for us, was wrong in virtually everything it said and did (except its devotion to class struggle principles) then confusion is invited. And confusion could give way to intellectual chaos if traditions are effaced and nothing offered in their stead.

This importance of tradition can hardly be gainsaid if, as I have already suggested, it is not confused with the unthinking, sentimental, sterile religiosity typified by orthodox "Trotskyists" or the equally holy, traditional exhortations of anti-Leninists exorcising the Bolshevik devil.

## The Comintern and the American Left

Comrade Shachtman's article is divided into two sections: the first is concerned with the early American Communist Party; the second is primarily a re-evaluation of the nature and role of the Communist International in its formative years. The two sections are related in the obvious sense that the American Communist Party owes its formation primarily to the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution and the organization of the Comintern. More than that, the American CP, without significant antecedents in the American labor movement and without roots in the mass organization of the working class at the time of its formation fawned on the Comintern organization, seeking a substitute source in Moscow to sustain its moral prestige and political authority in the United States. It was inescapable, then, that the American Communist party would be among the first parties in the International to be Stalinized.

While acknowledging the connection between the early pitfalls of American Communism and the Communist International, I do object to the *kind* of use Shachtman makes of the relationship. It is evident that a weighty polemic is delivered against the vulnerable Communist Left Wing in America in order to soften up the reader for a briefer but far more important polemic against the conceptions and activities of the early Communist International, not merely as they applied to America, but as they were developed in general and executed in Europe. The method is as follows: first, reveal the absurdities that could be found galore in the American Communist Left Wing, prove that it had no roots in American life, as can easily be done, show how it defamed its opponents, crawled to Moscow for answers to questions neither really understood, etc.; the second step is to show how Moscow seemed to encourage many of these absurdities with its theory of the independent revolutionary party and took the willing

American party into a form of receivership facilitating its Stalinization; the conclusion is that the Comintern was wrong not only for welcoming a split in the American socialist movement but for pressing for the formation of Communist parties throughout Europe.

I am aware that Shachtman tries to substantiate his case against the Comintern with some arguments and a little evidence that are not taken from the peculiar history of the American Communist Left. But the distribution of the evidence, the sheer physical weight of his debate with the early American Communists, once it is related to the Comintern as Shachtman relates it, is tantamount to tarring the Comintern with its American brush. This is impermissible—even if one recognizes that the American brush was often wielded by the Comintern itself.

Class relations were totally different in America as compared to Europe after the first war. Here, capitalism emerged more powerful, even if more troubled, than when it entered the war; in Europe, capitalism wobbled on the brink of disaster. (Not that American capitalism could have easily sustained itself were its European counterpart inundated by a revolutionary tide.) This difference between the two continents should have been fundamental to the tactical considerations of the Comintern. Unfortunately, Moscow was not sufficiently "exceptionalist." It condoned left wing splits in the United States as readily as it encouraged splits in Germany; it put forward the same conditions for American socialists as it did for the German Independents. Its "Twenty-One Conditions" described Europe and America as entering a civil war phase! It ordered European communist parties to build cells in the military and instructed the two rival American communist parties to do the same although the only cells they could build were in each other's party.

However, if you were to extend the examples of the initial foolishness of the Comintern vis-a-vis the American Communist parties to book length proportion it would hardly prove a thing about the Comintern tactic of building independent revolutionary parties in Europe. The Comintern with its inflexibility could have been wrong in the U. S., but its theories and strategy justified for Europe.

### Ignorant of American Labor Movement

It should be mentioned, however, for the sake of a fair and balanced picture of the Third International's role in America that no leading figure in the Comintern organization understood very much of the American labor movement. Trotsky was an authority on France, Radek knew Germany, but neither Trotsky, Radek, Lenin, Bukharin nor Zinoviev knew much about American socialism and labor; this despite the fact that Trotsky lived here for several months as did Bukharin and Kollontai. It is small wonder, then, that Zinoviev—knowing little of conditions here and getting his information from American Communists who knew or understood as little as he did—could make the following statement in a major report:

But one must not forget that *in the ranks of the Second International there are still some large organizations, supported by the workers and serving as a powerful support to the bourgeoisie. We are speaking of the English Labor Party, the moderate English Trade Unions, and the old Trade Unions of America under the leadership of Mr. Gompers. . . . At the present moment this "Labor Party" is the only considerable Labor party remaining in the Second International. The same must be said of the American Trade Unions, headed by Gompers, a well-known agent of the bourgeoisie. These two important labor organizations are the real basis of the Second International; . . . [Emphasis added].*

Such grotesque misconceptions of American labor by leading world Communists can be produced by the bushel. I am not illustrating the C.I.'s ignorance to excuse or condone Comintern mistakes with regard to America; I am more interested in understanding their origin and significance.

### Strategy Based on European Conditions

It should be clear that the strategy of the Comintern—and of the Bolsheviks before the Third International was formed—was based on its understanding of *European* conditions. It was predicated on the belief that Europe was on the verge of revolutionary upheavals. It was necessary, the Com-

internists reasoned, to provide the revolutionary millions with a party that was uncompromising in its revolutionary will, capable of winning the esteem of the revolutionary masses, influencing the wavering, and providing the working class with direction and leadership.

Before the war's end the Leninist concept of the vanguard party was only that—a concept. Now, it gained a special urgency. If there was a revolutionary situation but no revolutionary party and if it was true that the latter was necessary to climax successfully the former, then Communist Parties had to be formed out of existing working class parties which had either betrayed the workers through their support of the imperialist war or else exhibited the half-heartedness and confusion, which, in Leninist terminology, is known as "centrism."

What is distressing in Comrade Shachtman's article is the skimpiness of his evaluation (or re-evaluation) of the Cominternists' analysis of the crisis in Europe. Were they correct or mistaken in judging Europe to be rife with actual and imminent revolutionary situations? Was it correct or incorrect to look, above all, upon Germany—the key to all Europe—as a nation where the bourgeoisie could no longer rule in the old way; where, in fact, its only chance for survival was in its collaboration with German Social-Democracy; where the overwhelming majority of the working class—and possibly an absolute majority in the nation—was fired by a revolutionary enthusiasm that might have moved it to achievements even more dramatic and far reaching than the formation of a bourgeois republic, provided a determined revolutionary socialist organization existed?

Shachtman does point out that after the ebb of the European revolution the Comintern admitted that it had "misjudged the situation in Europe." It could hardly have admitted anything else. It anticipated successful proletarian revolutions and there were none. But the question merits repetition: what of the revolutionary situations at the time, before they were either crushed or had spent themselves? "There were, of course," Shachtman concedes many "revolutionary situations" in Europe throughout the Twenties and Thirties." At least one is entitled to an explanation for his qualifying quotation marks around "revolutionary situations."

### What Has Changed: the Viewer or the Facts?

The last time Shachtman discussed in detail the European scene after the first world war he drew a picture that has no resemblance to his discussion in this article. In a lengthy reply to someone who had just left the movement upon discovering the virtues of reformism and the sins of Leninism, Shachtman had the following to say:

Against what was Lenin, and the early Comintern, fighting in the Second Congress theses? Against the Kautskyans and reformists of the world who were committing a double sin against socialism: first, in their advocacy of the purely parliamentary road to working-class power, in general; and second, in their advocacy of this view *above all in those days*. And what were they? *They were the days when an unprecedented revolutionary crisis was sweeping over all of Europe; when civil war between proletariat and bourgeoisie raged in one country after another; when power lay in the streets, very often, and bourgeois parliamentarism had collapsed to the point where it could be propped up only by the degraded social-patriots in the labor movement; when the idea of the Soviet form of government was in the mind of millions of militant European workers (even in far, far-off Seattle and Winnipeg—yes, American Seattle!—Soviets, workers' and soldiers' councils were being spontaneously established!) and the watchword of Soviet power was on their lips; when parliaments were the last trench of the bourgeoisie.*

The issue was not, as so often in our own day, the defense of bourgeois democracy from fascist totalitarianism, but the social-democratic defense of parliamentarism and capitalism from revolutionary proletarian power. [Emphasis added.]

The picture is perhaps overdrawn, particularly in its American detail. But that is the picture we all more or less accepted. There were no quotation marks around "revolutionary situations" such as Shachtman now places as preparation for his new view that Leninism "invites" putschism.

## It Is Necessary to Be Concrete

The formation of the Comintern and its Twenty One Conditions, the haste with which Communists tried to organize independent parties of their own and the methods used to build them, all this was not the product of some abstract conception of the vanguard party conceived by Lenin in a dyspeptic moment. Nor was the idea of an independent revolutionary party put forward as an eternal principle for all countries and all times. The conceptions and strategy of the Comintern were clearly rooted in the historic events following the moral and political collapse of the Second International in the first World War. And they were designed to consummate the Communists' revolutionary aspirations in the concrete revolutionary circumstances that panicked the European bourgeoisie.

It is not enough, then, to condemn the vanguard party, as Shachtman does, as if it were a permanent splitting principle. It is necessary to relate the theory to the events which impelled it and to the immediate problems it was to resolve. Shachtman fails to do this. What did Germany look like? What did German socialism look like? What about France? And Italy? Or for that matter, most countries other than the United States. A definitive historical analysis is not required. Just something more than ambiguous formulations and sermonizing which avoid concreteness and annihilate straw men.

To judge the early Cominternists it is necessary to recreate, at least in part, the world in which they functioned. And more than that is called for. If Germany, let us say, were discussed concretely—as Shachtman does not do—and the policies of the Communists *then* taken to task the critic would also be obliged to show what alternative policies the Communists could realistically have followed within the limits of their experiences to further the cause of socialism. Here, too, Shachtman fails to meet the requirements of a meaningful reevaluation. Without any reconstruction of events and without any realistic alternatives posited, his new views lack the precise thought his subject warrants.

If I charge Shachtman with failing to *discuss* concrete events and problems that is not to accuse him of not *mentioning* them at all. The difficulty is not only that concrete events are merely mentioned, but that they are often mentioned in variance with the facts—although presented in such an absolute fashion that one is almost inclined to accept his synoptic versions of history for their sheer categorical force.

These are serious charges to make against an important author dealing with an important historical topic, and must be backed up with some textual analysis. Following are a few of the errors of fact and method which should inspire some readers to pause for a moment or two before endorsing what is, in effect, a repudiation of much of their past.

### Good Edicts and Poor Logic

#### 1. On Page 236 Shachtman writes:

A socialist movement of any serious nature cannot be established overnight; it cannot be established by arbitrary mechanical means; it cannot be established by decree. It cannot be established in head-on opposition to the existing movement of the working class. And above even that, it cannot be established by virtue of a universal formula applicable to all countries, at all times and under all circumstances.

The last sentence in this paragraph obviously alludes to the early Comintern and its splitting policies. But between the allusion and the reality there is more than a shadow of doubt. I do not know of any Leninist "formula" that was to establish a socialist movement "by virtue of a universal formula applicable to all countries, at all times and under all circumstances." But if we leave aside this injudicious reference we are left with a good set of abstract edicts of what one should not do to build a serious movement: a movement should not be created mechanically or arbitrarily and certainly not by virtue of universal formulas transcending time and space. They are good edicts. They are also abstract edicts. And, if the reader will excuse a commonplace, an abstraction doesn't always provide us with an answer to a real live problem. Or,

to borrow from Shachtman, I might say that an abstraction cannot be taken as "a universal formula applicable to all countries, at all times and under all circumstances." In fact Shachtman is quite prepared to violate his own edict in the next page when he writes:

If the conservative leadership of a united movement tries, under such circumstances [where "a revolutionary situation exists or is imminent"], to gag and bind the radical wing, to deny it its elementary democratic rights inside the movement, to prevent it from advocating its views and winning support for them in a loyal manner, a new situation exists. That is essentially what the German "Majority Socialists" did during the first world war, not only with the Spartacist Left, but also with the Center group of Haase, Ledebour, Kautsky and Bernstein. A split was inevitable and it occurred. Both the Left and the Center set up their own independent parties. But the responsibility for the split was clear and unmistakable in the eyes, not merely of doctrinaires, but of the socialist workers.

If one looks closely at this paragraph, examines it and compares it with the previously quoted passage, the whole framework of Shachtman's argument against the Leninist tactic of building independent revolutionary parties in a revolutionary epoch begins to sag. In the first quotation—the abstraction—Shachtman establishes the more or less acceptable generality that a socialist movement "cannot be established in head-on opposition to the existing movement of the working class." But in the second quotation—that which mentions a concrete situation—a split from the existing movement of the working class is clearly justifiable.

Shachtman, it might be argued, is not in a contradiction here. He is simply discussing the question on two different levels—the abstract and the concrete. Possibly. But the right to discuss on two levels should not be denied to others. For example, Lenin is found in a contradiction when, in 1907 (!), he had kind words for Kautsky, the Second International, proposed comradeship between different national parties and then, 12 years later, after the fundamental change in the role of social democracy and when bourgeois equilibrium was replaced by revolutionary turmoil, Lenin and the Comintern as a whole pressed for splits and violently denounced the Second International. The spirit of 1907 was not "grossly violated" as Shachtman puts it. Everything was different. There is no more of a contradiction or a "gross violation" between Lenin of 1907 and 1919 than between Shachtman's abstract appeal for unity and concrete approval of a split in the same article.

### Shachtman Gives an Example of a Good Split

2. In the above passage from Shachtman's article we are told that where "a revolutionary situation exists or is imminent" a split is "inevitable" and justifiable, and its reasons are "clear in the eyes of . . . socialist workers" when the "conservative leadership of a united movement tries . . . to gag and bind the radical wing." This is part of a discussion of German Social Democracy "during the first world war." To be less vague than Shachtman, it relates to Germany 1916. But this is startling news. Where was the "revolutionary situation" in Germany 1916 that forms the justifiable context of *that* split of a centrist *minority*? There was none! Was the revolutionary situation "imminent"? Hardly. A revolutionary situation developed in Germany more than two years later, but it was not "imminent" in 1916. At any rate Shachtman is not really in a position to insist that it was "imminent" in 1916 in Germany when elsewhere in his article he strongly suggests that the post war revolutionary situation seen by Leninists in Europe, which includes Germany, was more "misjudgment" than fact. It is a little difficult to connect this "imminence" with the "misjudgment"; if there was no genuine revolutionary situation in Germany 1919 then it could not have been "imminent" several years earlier.

It is inexcusable to manufacture historical circumstances to justify a split of *moderate* socialists from their more conservative parent body—although that split was inevitable and correct. Is it the case that Shachtman cannot find a single exception to his anti-splitting edicts in the history of the

early Leninist movement which he is re-evaluating? Must he turn for an example to the more respectable Independents—and even this made more palatable with “imminent” revolutionary situations?

### Shachtman Reexamines the German Revolution

3. In our previous point we have seen how the Independent Socialist Party of Germany (USPD) fared pretty well. Here is how the extreme Left, the Spartacists, is handled (i.e., mishandled) :

The Spartacist uprising in 1919 was a *putsch*, undertaken against the pleadings and warnings of Rosa Luxemburg. It was one of several *putschist* attempts, all of them undertaken without the socialist workers, who were the great majority, and against them. (p. 239)

The section in Comrade Shachtman's article dealing with the early Comintern is peppered with such sweeping statements, altogether wrong in fact and altogether lacking in that compassion for revolutionaries and feeling for history that was and I hope remains characteristic of our movement. After everything that has been researched and said, analyzed and reviewed, by our movement, by other socialist tendencies and by academicians on post war Germany, Shachtman has to come up with this: the 1919 German revolution was a *putsch*! There is so much wrong with this assertion that an itemized account of some objections is necessary:

a) The January 1919 revolution in Germany was not a *putsch*, i.e., a conscious act by a small minority to seize power, usually by force. This was not the case in January 1919. The revolution was not executed by any conspiratorial Spartacist general staff. Just the reverse. The revolution was thrust upon the Spartakusbund. It was thrust upon it by the revolutionary militancy of *wide* sections of the German working class; a militancy that was elemental and chaotic.

b) Did the German revolution have the support of the majority of the people or of the working class? Probably not. But does this mean, as Shachtman would have us believe, that the revolution was “undertaken without the socialist workers . . . and against them” (Italics added)? Had this sentence appeared in any context other than Shachtman's article it might be passed off as careless writing.

The hundreds of thousands of German workers who participated in the 1919 revolution were supported, if not by a majority of workers, at least by millions. However, although the majority of German workers did not actively support the revolution, they would do nothing actively to oppose it. They did *not* feel that the revolution was “against them”; neither did they feel, unfortunately, the need to break completely from their traditional party. The majority of workers, then, was indecisive, but far to the left of the German Social-Democratic Party for which they voted: a Berlin metalworker and a Noske may have been members of the same organization but they were light years apart in conviction, spirit and aspirations.

If the vast majority of German workers thought that the 1919 revolution—led by Spartacists and left Independents and the powerful Shop Stewards movement—was a *putsch* against them, the majority, how can one explain the mass desertions of members and voters from the Social Democratic Party? In the June 1920 national elections the Independents campaigning on a program calling for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and a Soviet Germany received nearly 5,000,000 votes which, if added to the Communist vote of slightly less than 500,000 was the equivalent of the Social Democratic total. There was a corresponding rise in party membership with the Independents reporting a membership of nearly 900,000, just 20 percent less than that of the Social Democrats. These simple facts hardly justify a picture of irresponsible fanatics carrying on a *putsch* “against them [the majority of workers].”

c. But we need not turn to the elections a year and a half later to show that it was not “against them” and that it was not a “*putsch*.” While hundreds of thousands of revolutionary workers demonstrated in the Berlin streets the first

week of January, there were no detachments of loyal Social Democratic workers to stop them. How come? It wasn't lack of courage. It was simply that the Social Democratic government could not command enough respect from its own “supporters” to organize such detachments. And the government for its part was too sensitive to the danger of arming even professedly loyal workers. Instead, it was forced to rely on specially selected military detachments and secret negotiations with monarchist generals.

### The Measure of a Revolution

The “*putsch*,” as Shachtman calls it, succeeded in isolating the regime from active support of the masses not because it was planned so effectively—on the contrary, the revolution was largely spontaneous, without real discipline and leadership—but because so few were ready to lay down their lives to defend the caretaker regime. Here is how Noske described the government's isolation:

. . . the members of the government had arranged to meet somewhere else [apparently it was not safe to meet at the Wilhelmstrasse]. I met Ebert and Baake there, as I had my belly full of Down with Noske! . . . Somewhat later a message came that the Spartacists had occupied the *Vorwärts* building and, a little later, other newspaper buildings. We sat together in a depressed mood. The continued threats made it inadvisable to return home. To go out to a restaurant for dinner was not possible, for the waiters were on strike. I telephoned to an acquaintance, who gave us some food. In his apartment, later in the evening, I met Scheidemann and the same Baake. We spoke a lot, but arrived at no decision. It was not possible even to guess how Berlin would look to us the next morning.

It was quite a “*putsch*” that deprived the government's head of military defense of the comfort of a meal and a safe journey through the streets!

d. By referring to the January uprising as a Spartacist *putsch* the impression is created that the Spartacists organized the uprising. That was not the case. The phrase, “Spartacist uprising” is actually a misnomer. The Spartacists were a small band of about a thousand members in all of Germany who could not have easily led the spontaneous and massive January upheavals even if they had wanted to. And they did not exactly want to. It was the more cautious policy of Rosa Luxemburg which frequently prevailed in the top councils of the Spartacists (organized as the Communist Party in December 1918). To the extent to which there was an organizing force, it was provided by the Shop Stewards movement and left-wing Independents and Spartacists operating as individuals which often had to contend with the opposition of the newly organized Communist Party. It was not until the street fighting was already under way that the Communists formally endorsed the action and even then its ties to the Shop Stewards movement were tenuous. Liebknecht had been ordered by the Spartacists to break off official connections with the Shop Stewards movement before and during the revolution—which he refused to do.

The fact is, then, that the “Spartacist” uprising was not really a Spartacist uprising and to say that it “was undertaken against the warnings of Rosa Luxemburg” is misleading for it was her negative attitude toward the Shop Stewards movement and her general disapproval at the time of open armed conflict with the counter-revolutionary Ebert government which was the prevalent view in the top committee of her Party.

e. There is no indication in Shachtman's discussion that this “*putsch*” was in large part a response to an enormous provocation by the Social Democratic government. The government actually wanted the revolution which it regarded as inevitable. But a revolution at its convenience. Its power was slipping and it hoped that a premature revolution could be isolated and easily smashed. These provocations, climaxed in the dismissal of the left-wing Berlin police chief, Emil Eichorn, brought the revolution to a head. It also served to panic the government which was not prepared for the large number and fierce will of those who picked up the gauntlet.

That the uprising was, in part, due to provocation does not mean that it was not a putsch. My case doesn't rest on this. But if Shachtman is interested in presenting any kind of balanced picture of the alleged "putsch," and not just scoring points against the Leninist concept of the party, then he cannot afford to miss the element of provocation in this particular event—and through such omissions handle history in so lifeless a fashion.

f. From "a" to "e" under this point I have questioned Shachtman's presentation of the "Spartacist uprising" as a "putsch." Apart from this, I am uncertain about the relevance of his point, or, more exactly, about what Shachtman considers its relevance to a re-evaluation of the Comintern. Except as an inspirational source, the Bolsheviks and, later, the Third International had limited contact with and less programmatic influence on the Spartacists. The Luxemburgist concepts of a party and the road to power were by no means the same as Lenin's and it was the former which permeated the thinking of the Spartacists. One measure of the divergence between the two could be found in the instruction the German Communists gave Hugo Eberlein, its representative to the founding Congress of the Third International, that he was not to affiliate the German party to the Comintern. (The Party opposed the formation of the Third International.)

### **An Elemental and Chaotic Upheaval**

It strikes me that Comrade Shachtman has found enough to complain about in the activities of the early Comintern without tossing in the imagined sins of unaffiliated Spartacists for good measure.

But if the misnamed "Spartacist uprising" is not exactly relevant to Shachtman's list of Comintern sins, the 1919 revolt and its surrounding history are central to any discussion of Comintern conceptions of an *independent* revolutionary party. One will look in vain for such a discussion in Shachtman's article.

The revolutionary upheaval in Germany, as already noted, was elemental and chaotic. The working class with its accumulated experiences, its education and socialist traditions was propelled in a revolutionary direction by all the horrors of a four-year-long imperialist war and this movement accelerated by the Russian Revolution. As the working class moved forward, the social fabric of pre-war Germany's ruling class was being pulled apart. By 1918, the power of the princess was a negligible quantity, the General Staff was confronted by an increasingly mutinous army and the industrial magnates had to deal with a working class that was rapidly losing all illusions of *Burgfrieden*. In November 1918, the German people, with one mighty puff, blew down the once exalted house of Hohenzollern.

In November and December all the objective conditions were present for a successful and relatively peaceful socialist revolution. One decisive element was lacking—a mass party to act as a unifying force to give form, substance and leadership to the working class. And, in Germany, there could be no substitute for a revolutionary party. The Shop Stewards movement organized in 1917 as an underground movement emerged as a powerful mass movement but, by its very nature, it could not act as a mass party. The Councils of Workers and Soldiers that covered Germany in 1918 were loosely organized, internally divided, dominated by the Social Democrats and for all their potentialities as organs of socialist state power they were not equipped or ready to lead a proletarian revolt.

The vacuum left by the collapse of the old regime in November 1918, was rapidly being filled by the Social Democratic Party. This party could have organized the socialist revolution had its leaders willed it. For the leadership was faced with a ready revolutionary mass. But it was incapable of raising itself to the level of mass consciousness. The SPD bureaucracy and its overlapping trade union leadership with their most ardent supporters found among the more skilled and higher paid strata of the working class, was infected with the conservatism that overcomes any group which has

a vested interest in maintaining a harmonious social balance among the classes.

This subtle creeping paralysis that was striking at the brain of the world's most powerful labor movement before 1914 reached its acute stage by 1918, after four years of service to the Kaiser as his loyal shepherd of the proletarian flock. Its conservatism was backed by a formal kind of "Marxism" which pretended to see social evolution proceeding according to very definite schemes. According to the scheme, Germany could go no further than a bourgeois republic in November 1918. Even that was rushing the orderly course of history for some SPD leaders. Thus, when Philip Scheidemann proclaimed the Republic on November 9th, Fritz Ebert, soon to be chosen the Republic's first president, berated Scheidemann: "You have no right to proclaim the Republic. What becomes of Germany—whether she becomes a Republic or something else—a Constituent Assembly must decide." That was typical of the formalistic fetishism of a hidebound bureaucracy that could not adjust itself to the needs of the hour or the mood of the masses. Instead, it tried to fit history into its preconceptions and worked diligently to drag the masses down to its conservative level.

### **An All-Inclusive or a Revolutionary Party?**

Under these conditions, advocacy of an all inclusive party as a concrete policy in Germany after the war would have been a kind of madness. *The German SPD had to be supplanted as the party of the working class as a precondition for a socialist Germany; it could not be reformed from within but had to be replaced from without.* The slogan of party unity and the concept of all-inclusiveness would have had precious little meaning where the Right Wing leadership was busy negotiating with the General Staff to smash its revolutionary wing, and the revolutionary wing, in its turn, was busy organizing demonstrations against the Right Wing's caretaker government. Or, to put it another way, Noske, the Right Wing Social Democrat and Liebknecht, the revolutionary socialist, could live in the same party in, let us say, 1907; but Noske, the assassin, and Liebknecht, his murdered victim, could hardly have shared the same offices in 1919.

Shachtman must be concrete. What policy should the Russian Communists have advised their German friends to follow in the specific circumstances which were not of their making? No one arranged the time schedule for a revolutionary crisis. The crisis was there. The objective conditions for socialist revolution were present but they would not wait for ideal conditions for organizing a revolutionary party. Either the German Communists had to build an independent revolutionary party *swiftly*, which meant splitting sections from the existing mass party of the working class; or, it could resign itself to the fatalistic view that in Germany, 1919, there was a tragic and insoluble contradiction between the objectively ready and the subjectively unprepared forces of social revolution.

### **The Non-Objective School of History**

4. With long, vigorous strokes Shachtman paints his picture of the early Comintern on a wide canvas, sacrificing details to abstractions. But, where the artist's abstractions are simplifications of form suggested by reality, Shachtman's generalizations, as we have already seen, have little analogous relationship to experience and historical data. And where the forms of the creative artist have a logical unifying inter-relationship, Shachtman's sweeping edicts do not always correspond to one another. On close examination it turns out that he has presented us with an impressionistic sketch; not a completed or thought out painting at all.

In the sections dealing with the Comintern it is possible to take almost any half dozen consecutive sentences to demonstrate Shachtman's lack of internal consistency and error. On the top of page 238 there are five such sentences, all intended as forceful points against the early Comintern:

It turned out there, from the day the Communist Party was formed in 1919 to the victory of Hitler, that the Social-Democratic workers of the Right or the Center constituted the vast majority,

the Communist workers the much smaller minority. The refusal to remain in the same party with the Social-Democratic workers was tantamount to a declaration by the Communists that they did not need their support, even though they were for socialism in their own way. It was a declaration, in effect, that these workers could not be included in deciding the course toward the socialist revolution. To deny this on the ground that the Communist Party always urged the Social Democratic workers to join it, is positively absurd. If, as members of a united organization, you cannot get a given group of workers to abandon their leaders and their program in favor of yours, it is preposterous to believe that just because you split the organization and form a new one, the same group of workers will enter your ranks because they are urged to do so.

This passage, one of the more important sections of Shachtman's re-examination, deserves to be examined sentence by sentence.

a. In the first sentence we are newly informed that:

It turned out there [Germany] from the day the Communist Party was formed in 1919 to the victory of Hitler, that the Social-Democratic workers of the Right or the Center constituted the *vast* majority, the Communist workers the *much* smaller minority. (Emphasis added.)

Germany is the worst case that Shachtman can turn to for proving his thesis that the policy of split, in 1919, produced futile Communist sects. If we substitute a real number or two for Shachtman's vague algebraic expressions—"vast majority" and "much smaller minority"—it becomes clear that another column of his polemical structure rests on very shaky foundations.

In the 1933 elections, just before Hitler strangled Germany, the Communist Party received nearly 5,000,000 votes to the Social Democrats 7,000,000. The figures hardly fit Shachtman's "vast majority" of Social Democrats and "much smaller minority" of Communists. But we need not jump to 1933 when the CP was already a Stalinized party.\* Nine years earlier, in 1924, just four years after its formation, the Communist Party won 3,750,000 votes to the Social Democrats 6,000,000. The Right Wing had a "vast majority" of 3-2. But this figure, which by itself does so much damage to Shachtman's political mathematics, becomes devastating to his argument when it is remembered—and we will recall it in a subsequent point—that it was a vote taken *after* the Communists underwent a decisive defeat in the Fall of 1923, losing enormous popular support.

### The Argument of Tantamouncy

b. The indictment continues in the second sentence:

The refusal to remain in the same party with the Social Democratic workers was tantamount to a declaration by the Communists that they did not need their support, even though they were for socialism in their own way.

This sentence, with all its built in safeguards ("tantamount to") has no resemblance to the truth. It might well be argued that Lenin's tempo was wrong or, more than that, that his idea of the independent revolutionary party was wrong. But it cannot be argued that the course pursued by Lenin and his supporters was "tantamount" to rejecting the support of the social democratic workers.

The Leninists were for the formation of independent Communist parties because they believed that, in the revolutionary crisis in Europe, *that was the way* to win the socialist workers. They were convinced that by forming a new party and raising its banner, you can *by and in action* win the workers (i.e. the social democratic workers) where that could not be done by a left wing faction quarreling inside the party

with a powerful bureaucracy; at least not in such a way as to meet the requirements and opportunities of a revolutionary situation.

If anything was the case in the Comintern's formative years, the Communists suffered from an all consuming passion to win over the social democratic membership. While there is abundant evidence for such a criticism there is none that Shachtman does or could offer to give weight to his "tantamouncy" theory. And how could he give evidence for the theory when in the four-year period following its birth the Communists increased their electoral strength by 3,250,000, all garnered from the social democratic parties of Right and Center? How could the Communists have won these millions if they operated as if "they did not need their support"?

The argument of "tantamouncy" has a familiar and unpleasant ring. It is all too reminiscent of those Russian experts intent on proving that Lenin was a conspiratorial type who could only operate with a small band of apostles and disciples plotting to control, to manipulate and finally to dictate to the masses, but never to win them and never (Lenin forbid!) to trust them. That view was most cleverly presented by Bertram Wolfe. It was most persuasively answered by Shachtman—ten years ago in his articles, the Four Portraits, published in the *New Internationalist*. Given his present theory Shachtman could no longer perform the same necessary service.

When the Independents split from the mass party of the German working class in 1916 (that split, Shachtman agrees, was a good one) did that mean that the Independents did not want the support of the majority of workers who remained in the SPD? And when Rosa Luxemburg with her tiny band deserted the centrist Independents, and were thus twice removed by splits from the SPD, did that mean the Spartacists, either "in effect" or in "tantamouncy," turned their backs on the millions of Right and Center social democratic workers? Shachtman would be the first to defend the Independents and the Spartacists from such a crude indictment.

What, then, was the *differentia* between Leninist and Luxemburgist splitters? What was there about the Leninist splits which made them so unique: schisms organized by splitters who, unlike all others in the socialist movement, told the majority of workers (in effect): "we do not need or even want your support"? It could only be that the former, in its basic organizational conceptions and methods, was a conspiratorial type movement. Just like Wolfe said all along. What else is Shachtman's re-examination tantamount to?

c. Shachtman, in the above sentence, goes further than charging the CP with discouraging the masses from *joining* the party. The party, he tells us, did not even seek, in effect, their *support!* Shachtman's next sentence presents a charge against the Leninists that explicitly and by implication goes far beyond anything we have yet quoted or interpreted: the Leninists, because of their splitting policy, were actually *excluding the majority of workers from "deciding on the course toward the socialist revolution."* Does this not reduce ambiguity to a minimum? If the policy pursued by the Bolsheviks, from 1915 on meant, in reality, that workers could not join the party of the Bolshevik elect, that workers need not support the Party and are not wanted by it, and, finally, that the workers are excluded from deciding the fate of the revolution, itself, then what else is left to say except to sum up Leninism as an objectively undemocratic, conspiratorial and putschist sickness within the socialist movement. More than that, a party which shuns members, repudiates mass support, denies the masses their historic right and duty and *seeks power* is the type party with which we are all too familiar: no matter what its pretensions, it is a Stalinist or incipient Stalinist type organization.

For this portrait of the Leninists, Shachtman produces no figures, no documents, no quotations—and no logic. He says that the Communists in effect excluded the workers from deciding their fate. Yet, what resemblance is there between this image of the party and reality? *In Russia, the Bolsheviks demanded that the spontaneously organized Soviets seize*

\* I mention the 1933 statistics only because Shachtman includes that period in his discussion. Admittedly, I am discussing on his own terms, which are false terms. For it is inexcusable to include a picture of the Communist Party in 1933, in Germany or anywhere else, as an illustration of the consequences of a Communist policy in 1919. In 1933 the German Communist party was the agent of a counterrevolutionary state: Russia; in 1919, the German Communist Party, whatever its mistakes and shortcomings, was the party of socialist revolution. But this is all part of Shachtman's new method of evaluating the Leninist concept of the party by the Stalinist monstrosity it presumably encouraged or invited. We will take up this question of method further on in our discussion.

power at a time when the Party was a minority; and in Germany, the Communists called for all power to the Workers and Soldiers Councils—the equivalent of Russian Soviets—at a time when no Leninist party even existed and the Spartacists were a persecuted minority, denied their elementary rights in the Councils by the dominant reactionary Right Wing Social-Democrats.

### Two Devices: The Club and the Caricature

d. Following the sentences which simply assert that the Communists, in effect, did not want mass support and denied them their proper role in the revolution, Shachtman takes after those who would dispute his assertions with a sort of club: "To deny this [Shachtman's assertions] on the ground that the Communist party *always* urged the Social Democratic workers to join it is *positively absurd*" (emphasis added).

Who, after all, wants to be "absurd," not to mention, "positively absurd"? But let us risk Shachtman's rather severe censure, particularly as one might suspect that his intolerant expression is a facade to hide a lingering doubt over a vulnerable and poorly developed thesis.

Is it not Shachtman who is taxing one's credulity when he suggests that the same party that was in effect "declaiming" (no less!) that Social Democratic workers are not wanted is the same party that was "always urging" them to join it?

e. Shachtman writes in his fifth sentence:

If, as members of a united organization, you cannot get a given group of workers to abandon their leaders and their program in favor of yours, it is preposterous to believe that just because you split the organization and form a new one, the same group of workers will enter your ranks because they are urged to do so.

This is a device used too frequently by Shachtman in his article. The technique is to reduce the object of criticism to a ludicrous position and then proceed to destroy the caricature. Can any one in his right mind deny that it is preposterous to think that "*just because*" you split an organization, those who would not join you in the united party will try to break the door down to get into your new, rival organization? It *is* "preposterous." It is more than that: it is insane. The only trouble with his appeal to reason is that it is utterly irrelevant, a strong polemical point scored against no one at all. No German Communist to my knowledge ever said, or acted as if he believed, that "just because" you split the Social Democratic parties their members will become loyal Communists. There were many putschists in the German CP but few complete lunatics.

### Another Example of a Breathtaking Abstraction

5. One of Shachtman's major points—actually a pervasive theme—is the inevitable futility of revolutionaries breaking away from mass socialist parties. For Shachtman, the conception of the independent revolutionary parties has led only to putsches and uninfluential sects.

We have already seen how Shachtman's blanket condemnation of "vanguardism" has inspired a peculiarly unconvincing discussion of history. The following quotation is but another example of his breathtaking abstractions, divorced from the real world, designed to reduce the Leninist conception to just so much ridiculous baggage that has weighed down and impeded progress in the socialist movement.

Revolutionary parties and revolutionary leaderships cannot be constituted overnight. Revolutionary sects? Yes, any time of the day or night that a group of solemn minds is ready to announce itself to the indifferent world as The Revolutionary Party, like the seven tailors of Tooley Street who began their famous proclamation with "We, the people of England. . ." Revolutionary parties, which can seriously count on the political support of masses? No.

We can move the seven tailors of Tooley Street to a headquarters in Berlin without offending anyone, for the Communist Party there was "constituted overnight" and it follows from everything that Shachtman has written in his new history that the Berlin tailors, too, could not build a

revolutionary party which could "seriously count on the political support of the masses." All they could do was gather together in a "revolutionary sect."

The indicated question is: did the German Communists produce a party or a sect? If it was a sect, then Shachtman's example of the Tooley Street Tailors has both wit and merit. If it was a mass party then he is just left with wit.

Fortunately or unfortunately (it all depends upon one's point of view), whether reviewed with the added (sometimes all too facile) wisdom borne of hindsight or judged with all the limitations of contemporaneity, the indisputable fact is that the German Communists had a party—a big, powerful mass party. This, we have already shown in the few statistics given in a previous point. And even those figures do not reveal the full extent to which the party, a few years after its inception, could have counted on the political support of the masses.

The tremendous vote the Communist Party received in the German elections of May, 1924 was only a tragic reminder of how powerful it was during the German crisis of 1923. Just three years after the German Communist tailors issued their proclamation, their party was in a position to lead the majority of workers in a struggle for power. The events which propelled them to such a strategic position should be familiar to those who have read even part of the thousands of pages that our movement—and those hostile to us—have published on the subject. All that needs to be noted here is that despite its hasty organization in the 1919-1920 period, despite its subsequent addiction to putschism, its many undeniable mistakes vis-a-vis the German Social Democratic party, that is, despite all the elements that Shachtman declares should have kept the Communist Party of Germany an obscure sect, it was in a position to lead a struggle for power with the political support of the majority, or near majority of German workers! The reasons why the party missed its opportunity in October 1923, are not germane to our discussion and the fact that the party would have been better equipped to fulfill its responsibilities in 1923 if it made no earlier mistakes doesn't rescue Shachtman from his predicament.

### Dangers Inherent in Leninist Organization

6. Only a religious person who travels around with a self-awarded Badge of Bolshevism as if it were a magic icon which immunizes him against all sin—and all thinking, too—could claim that the Leninist concept of the party avoided all the dangers that inhere in other political parties.

All political parties are subject to a variety of internal and external pressures that can produce a complex of unhealthy organizational and political habits. And the Leninist party was not just any kind of party; it was a special type, unique in form, in the intensity of its cadre and the boldness of its purpose.

Anarchists and syndicalists denied the importance of political parties; social democrats came to look upon the party as a machine to educate workers on whom to vote for in order to elect socialism to power; Luxemburgists placed their hopes in a militant working class which through a series of mass strikes culminating in the political general strike would topple the bourgeoisie.

The Leninists, however, regarded it as their special mission to raise the working class, a class without history and without culture, from the level of economic consciousness which it reaches almost instinctively to the level of socialist consciousness for which the "outside" influence of the party is required. To bring this consciousness to the working class the party was essential; to see to it that consciousness was joined by action, the party was necessary; to see to it that the successful struggles of a socialist working class were not frustrated or dissipated the party was decisive.

The party was the indispensable agent for the victory of socialism. It would take a special talent, indeed, not to see that in addition to the democratic content of the concept—the emphasis on consciousness—there are also special dan-

gers that inhere in a political movement which assigns itself such momentous tasks.

Because of the seriousness of its purpose the Leninist party laid considerable stress on the necessity of discipline; but its stress on education and consciousness also induced a rich and democratic internal life. Discipline, however, can be difficult to reconcile with democracy and maintaining a proper balance between the two in the actual functioning of the party is not guaranteed by a rule book of "democratic centralism." A party which accents discipline so heavily might succumb to bureaucratism more readily than a broader socialist movement. That is one danger. A second danger is that a small, fanatical combat party which conceives of itself as a vanguard of the masses might produce grandiose delusions which would encourage elements to substitute the party for the masses and thereby promote, not revolution, but quixotic adventures. To recognize these obvious dangers in Leninism, however, is not to be confused with the thought that Leninism logically led to or invited them.

A third danger inhered not so much in the Leninist concept as in the special circumstances under which Leninist parties were born. History did not allow any leisurely development; Communist parties were forged rapidly in the heat of social revolution. They were pieced together by splitting and capturing other socialist parties swiftly, sometimes ruthlessly, with the result that organizational maneuvering could and often did become a fetish and an end in itself.

### Leninism and Putschism

Shachtman, of course, recognizes these dangers in the Leninist party. They are the subject of his discussion. But these defects and potential dangers are isolated from politics which is always concerned with alternatives, and they are magnified beyond recognizable limits. His exaggerations, omissions, vagueness and occasional misstatements — only a few of which have been mentioned here — seem to lead to one mighty conclusion: Leninism was a putschist conception; or it inevitably led to putschism. This is hinted at throughout the article. Shachtman is not ready to go that far. In fact, he draws back a bit from that conclusion. But the thought is there. Here is the way he finally formulates the question:

Lenin was not, contrary to widespread opinion, a putschist, and the Bolshevik Revolution was not a putsch. But Lenin's revised theory [\*] invited putschism, that is, the armed attempt of a resolute minority to seize political power without the support of the majority of the people or even the majority of the working class, and in opposition to the majority.

This is actually more of an uneasy concession than a denial. If all the early Communist efforts to take power outside of Russia were putsches *and* if these adventures were "invited" by Leninist concepts, then it surely follows that Leninism and putschism, if not synonymous, are at least most intimately juxtaposed.

This relationship would be hard to challenge if what Shachtman presented in his article really conveyed the flavor and substance of Lenin's conceptions of the independent revolutionary party, how it might be formed, what its role should be and what its relationship to the masses had to be. Read Shachtman's essay carefully and see how the vanguard theory is dealt with. Explicitly and by innuendo, the impression is built up that the essence of the vanguard theory was SPLIT. If the Leninists cannot get a majority they split; if they can get a majority, they expel. It is all so simple and clear. And if the *sine qua non* of the independent revolutionary party is splitting, then, indeed, who can deny that the concept's fatal flaw is its invitation to putschism?

Lenin's writings on organizational questions are permeated with the thought that the party must win the confidence of the masses. He repeated this over and over in a thousand different ways. The revolutionists would have to strive for

their organizational independence in the revolutionary epoch, but only from the opportunists, never from the masses; it must convince the *majority* of the working class to accept its leadership; the party cannot substitute itself for the people. He polemicized at length against putschism, against Blanquism, against all elements from right to left in the socialist movement who divorced the party from the masses. For Lenin was a revolutionary democrat and his view of the vanguard party was an extension of this fact in the realm of internal party organization *and* the party's necessary external relationship to the working class.

### Misjudging Concepts by Their "Advocates"

Yet, Communist parties did organize putsches, particularly in Germany. But they were organized by men who made a farce of the vanguard theory, not those who lived up to it.

The vanguard concept, however, is not the only idea which cannot be judged merely on the merits of what those who presumably subscribed to it actually did in practice. For example, let us look at the idea of the broad all-inclusive party that Shachtman proposes as a permanent alternative to the Leninist party. In theory this would be a party that embraces diverse socialist elements from reformist to revolutionist. The Second International before the first world war contained many such parties. Take the American Socialist Party at its peak. It was a broad party whose members and factions covered the political spectrum. But in 1912-13 the right and center wing leadership of this all-inclusive party organized a split, forcing out of its ranks about one fourth of its membership—its revolutionary syndicalist wing. Not many years later the same Socialist leadership in the American party, which believed, in theory, with broadness, and objected to vanguardism, saw fit to expel the overwhelming majority of its membership. These bureaucratic acts were not peculiar to the American party. Many of the European parties also suffered from their leaderships' violation of their own organizational precepts.

Does the fact that American and European socialists, time and again, sometimes outrageously—like professional splitters — violated their broad, all-inclusive organizational concepts disqualify this type movement as a proper form of party organization? Shachtman would be the first to point out that this would follow only if it can be proven that bureaucratic acts were naturally invited by the very concept of broadness. The perversions of party democracy that eventually became second nature to many parties in the Second International no more negates the idea of all-inclusiveness than the putsch of the German Communists discredits the Vanguard theory.

In the United States the bureaucratic expulsions — in 1912-13 — were caused by exceptional internal discord which could not be resolved within the framework of a broad party. In Germany there were specific circumstances that prompted Communists to abandon the Leninist concept. The putsch of 1921 was not promoted by the idea of a vanguard party but by the absence of such a party. It was the terrible sense of frustration felt by many German Communists following the 1919-1920 defeats, when they could not win the confidence of the majority of the working class, which encouraged them, in 1921, to accept the bizarre theory of "electrification" — a theory which presented the comforting thought that the inertia of the masses could be overcome by the example of a self-sacrificing (and unsupported) revolutionary party in armed revolt. (Another element, it should be added, behind the German putsch in 1921, was the genuine conviction of many communists that desperate measures had to be chanced to save Russia from total collapse.)

It would be instructive at this point to quote briefly from a speech of Trotsky's shortly after the 1921 German "revolution," repudiating the putschists and summarizing once again the meaning of vanguardism:

Preparation (for winning power) for us means the creation of such conditions as would secure us the sympathy of the broadest masses. We cannot under any conditions renounce this factor. The idea of replacing the will of the masses by the resoluteness of the

\* Lenin's revised theory is that in "the epoch of world revolution the revolutionary elements had to break out (from the Social Democratic Parties), constitute themselves independently and assume the task of revolutionary leadership."



Section C

Pages 1127-1134

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so-called vanguard is absolutely impermissible and non-Marxist. Through the consciousness and the will of the vanguard it is possible to exert influence over the masses, it is possible to gain their confidence, but *it is impossible to replace the masses by this vanguard*. And for this reason the Third Congress has placed before all the parties, as the most important and unpostponable task, the demand that the *majority* of the toiling people be attracted to our side. (Emphasis added.)

One could hardly guess from reading Shachtman's article that leading personalities in the early Comintern (there is only one passing reference in the entire article to Lenin and Trotsky's insistence that the party had to win the *majority* of the masses) held to the Leninist conception that "we cannot under *any* condition renounce . . . securing the sympathy of the broadest masses," and that the Comintern had "placed before all the parties, as the *most important and unpostponable task*, the demand that the *majority* of the toiling people be attracted to our side." (emphasis added)

### Leninism and Stalinism

7. Shachtman is too busy to give the Leninist conception a fair shake; too busy trying to prove his case that:

From the *conception* that the majority of the socialist workers are not needed (even, in a sense, not wanted) in the party which is to decide the policies to achieve the socialist revolution, not too far a jump was required to the conception that these workers are not needed to carry out the socialist revolution. (Emphasis added.)

I would go Shachtman one better and say that *if* it is true that from the Leninist *conception* of organization "not too far a jump" was required to exclude the masses from "a socialist revolution," *then it is not too far a jump to conclude that a dictatorship of a new kind was inherent in (at least "invited" by) Leninism*. If Leninism in its organizational *conception* could invite a movement to overthrow the bourgeoisie without the support of the masses (and as we are told elsewhere, even "against them") then, again, the link between Leninism and Stalinism is, if not firmly established, clearly indicated. An anti-capitalist party which takes power without the workers must fill the social vacuum left by the demise of the bourgeoisie, not with the dictatorship of the proletarians who opposed the revolution, but with the dictatorship of the party.

We have already seen that this is not the only place or the only approach in Shachtman's article in which a logical connection between Leninism and Stalinism is implied. (See point 4 in my discussion.)

Just a quick look into other sections in the article where the connection is suggested:

First, there is a section which begins with:

The Communist International and its Executive Committee were established with the grand aim of being "the general staff of the world revolution." This is not the place for an analysis of the Comintern. But this much can be said: *The aim, to begin with, was only a hope. It soon became a myth and an illusion. It ended as a monstrosity*. It was never a reality. Even before the triumph of Stalin, the Comintern and its Executive never organized or directed or led a revolution. It did organize or bear the responsibility for several disastrous putsches, in Germany, in Bulgaria, in Esthonia. The Executive Committee began to function as the authoritative leadership of the world Communist movement but the limits of its authority were narrowly circumscribed, it never got beyond a beginning and it lasted for no more than two-three years.

Following this passage there is a lengthy discussion of the growing corruption of the Communist International. Almost everything Shachtman writes here can be accepted. The Zinovievist method of carrying on Comintern affairs was inexcusably bureaucratic; there were unprincipled maneuvers, leadership became an end in itself, ultimatum from Moscow to subordinate parties became routine practice, there was intellectual intolerance and suppression of elementary democratic rights, etc. These habits became ingrained with the passage of time and eventually developed a momentum of their own.

The question that must be answered, however, is how did these practices gain a permanent foothold in the Comintern. What transformed the organization with the grand aim of socialist revolution into the vehicle of the Stalinist monstrosity? In the socialist movement there have been, broadly speaking, two answers which interest us here, one contradicting the other. One is that the Stalinist degeneration was inevitable, part of a logical disintegrative process set into motion by initial Leninist conceptions. The other answer is that Leninism and Stalinism are opposites, without any inherent evolution from one to the other, and views the triumph of Stalinism over Leninism as the price the working class paid for the defeat of the revolution in the West.

On the basis of Shachtman's discussion of the problem in this section of his article, and throughout the article as a whole, one would have little reason to doubt that he is pointed toward the first answer: Stalinism flows from Leninism.\* The degeneration of the Comintern is treated (in a six page long discussion following the above quotation) purely in organizational terms, as a cumulative process initiated by original Leninist conceptions. Absent from his discussion is anything more than a hint of the view, basic to our movement's historical analysis of Stalinism, which traces the moral, political and social disintegration of the Comintern to the failure of the European revolution.

To those who will argue that this is making too much out of an omission—"after all Shachtman cannot discuss everything in one article"—I can only reply that my point is missed and that they are possibly naive. The omission is in itself significant and its importance grows in light of the emphasis given throughout the article to the allegedly close relationship between Leninist conceptions, the party's separation from the masses and putschism.

### A Question of Method

The charge that Shachtman is abandoning the historical conceptions of our movement vis-a-vis the rise of Stalinism does not rest only on omissions and the other specific points I have mentioned. There is also his method of judging the right and wrong of early Comintern ideas. For example, where Shachtman poses the question, "Was the 1919 split and formation of an independent Communist Party historically justified?" he finds support for his negative answer (with which I agree for the United States) in the fact that the formal program of the *present* Communist Party has removed all the sectarian nonsense contained in the program of the *original* Communist Party. His reply has merit only if there is assumed a basic continuity between Leninism and Stalinism—unless Shachtman is suddenly agitating dissident CP'ers today in an article designed to re-examine the views of the anti-Stalinist socialist movement. But, if Stalinism is discontinuous with and the negation of Leninism, this method of determining the validity of the 1919 split is impermissible.

This is not the only instance in the article where Shachtman uses an example from the recent history of the Communist Party to judge Leninist habits and conceptions. To show that the recklessness of the Comintern in the early days grew increasingly worse with time we are reminded that "a snap of the finger in Moscow in 1945, and Browder is not only out of the leadership but of the party as well, cursed, reviled, debased." (Emphasis added.)

Shachtman is aware of the difficulty of judging or comparing the early communist movement in terms of Stalinist practices when he writes:

But that comparison is unfair and misleading, it may and probably will be objected to by some. The present Communist Party is not a real Communist Party, it is Stalinized through and through. The authentic Communist movement was ravished and ruined by Stalinism.

We will grant the objection in the interests of a more thorough discussion of the question. We will take the Communist movement before it swallowed the poison of Stalinism. . . .

\* Of course, I do not claim that Shachtman holds this view. Nevertheless, this is the implication I find in his article.

The problem, however, is not whether Shachtman will generously "grant the objection in favor of a more thorough discussion of the question"; the crux of the matter is whether the reader who finds that Shachtman's "comparison is unfair and misleading . . ." has a justifiable complaint.

### Should the Communists Have Split—Judiciously?

8. I have pointed out several inconsistencies in Shachtman's article. One more must be mentioned, and underlined, for it contradicts his thesis, practically in its entirety. On page 225 there is the following retrospective judgment:

The argument that the Third International had to be organized and to operate differently from the Second International, was quite correct, but only within limits. These limits were exceeded in the most reckless way before they could even be properly established.

Reflect on this passage for just a moment. Shachtman, before and after these sentences, has been hammering away at the Communist idea of splitting from the mass parties of the working class in a revolutionary period. But in this paragraph we are told that it was "quite correct" to organize a Third International, one that had "to operate differently from the Second International." This is more than an inconsistency. It is a terrible contradiction: it is logically impossible to berate the Communists for splitting existing mass parties and at the same time justify the formation of a Third International. This Third International even if organized with greater judiciousness and moderation ("only within limits") and with more caution and less recklessness ("these limits were exceeded in the most reckless way"), would have been, I presume, not a network of educational committees but a world organization of political parties. What else? But an International of political parties—of militant working class parties—must have members to begin with and more members to end up with. Where were they to come from? There's the rub. For they could come only from the existing mass parties of the working class—the reformist and centrist organizations. Where else? These reformist and centrist parties had a monopoly on the millions of politically conscious workers in Germany, Italy, France, in Austria and elsewhere. To win workers to a section of the Third International, then, meant to win them away from their reformist leaderships. The monopoly had to be broken, which is only a euphemistic way of saying that in order to build sections of the Third International—with all of Shachtman's qualifications—it was necessary to pursue a policy of splitting the established mass reformist movements.

It is either one or the other; either it was wrong to split the European socialist parties in the post-war period or else it was "quite correct" to organize a Third International. Shachtman is in the unenviable position of making the first judgment and implicitly approving its opposite.

The passage just quoted stands out for two reasons as far as I am concerned. First, for the fact that it so clearly contradicts his thesis; second, because it is one of the few sentences discussing the Comintern with which I can agree. I believe, along with Shachtman, that the Third International had to be formed. I agree, too, that the Third International that actually was formed committed many mistakes, i.e. it "exceeded in the most reckless way" certain necessary limits. Many of the formulations and conditions of the famous "21 points," for example, were revolutionary excesses; and the Third International made many reckless mistakes in its zealous flushing out of "centrists," especially in its dealings with the centrist Independent Socialist Party of Germany; and it is not difficult to see that the Third International was weakened from the beginning by the disproportionately one-sided role given to the Russians.

Reckless and needless mistakes were made; they became codified and emerged as "Leninist" principles as bureaucracy in the Third International was nursed by defeat and demoralization in Western Europe and in Russia. But to recognize these "reckless mistakes" of Leninists is a far cry from locating one of their main sources in Leninist organizational conceptions and the unquestionable excesses of the 21 Points

does not invalidate their historical justification—the necessity of creating independent revolutionary parties to contest capitalism in post war Europe.

### Good Old Fashioned American "Pragmatism"

9. I have already discussed one objection to Shachtman's method: the improper use made of a mechanical association of the ersatz communism of the American Left Wing with the Comintern. But there is another and more serious dissent to Shachtman's over-all method, to which all other weaknesses relate; his re-evaluations and judgments suffer from an over-application of good old-fashioned American "pragmatism": if a theory seemed to work out in life then it was a good theory and, conversely, if a theory did not work out then it was a bad theory. This is hardly the approach that is called for in re-examining complex political and historical questions.

Obviously, if activity toward a specific objective is made on the basis of a theory and that objective is realized in life that becomes substantial evidence that the theory was good and correct. But it doesn't prove that it was the best theory, if alternative theories were not applied. Once again, the converse is also true, and more pertinent to our discussion. If actions made consistent with theory are not crowned with success, that does not necessarily prove the theory wrong. In the first place, it must be learned if any alternative theory could have worked toward achieving the same objective, and, second, it must also be the purpose of a meaningful re-examination to see if there were subsequent factors not predictable at the time that frustrated a certain course of action. This seems elementary to me. Yet, Shachtman is guilty of a pragmatic oversimplification when he lays such great stress on the failure of the Leninist concept of the party to "work" as irrefutable proof of its bankruptcy.

If the Leninist party was too volatile a movement, what could have substituted for it, concretely, to reach its socialist objective? Shachtman, of course, does not present realistic alternatives to the Leninist party but with a kind of wooden logic dismisses it for not having withstood the test of time, i.e. it didn't work. And he is guilty of a formal and static method in his failure to recreate historical circumstances to see if the Leninist theory and its execution was hindered by later developments which could not have been foreseen and accurately gauged, such as the ability of social democracy to reactivate itself, the extent of Social-Democratic treachery in Germany and elsewhere, the resiliency of world capitalism, etc. Could the Leninists have prophetically assayed the course of all such events? And could they accurately have known how their own activities would have influenced the mood of the masses and other decisive social factors? I doubt it.

But, even if the Leninists through some special mystical powers could have foreseen certain negative developments in Europe which non-prescient people could not, that still does not necessarily mean that they should have departed from their given revolutionary course. If the early Communists had to be sure of every element, present and future, before they could determine their policies they would have been paralyzed from the start. History is made by men and movements who take risks, not irresponsible or reckless ones, but risks nevertheless.

If one were to give a literal interpretation to Shachtman's observation that "life has settled all the arguments of 1917-1919" that statement would mean nothing less than wringing out of history all problematical and debatable ingredients. Yet, this literal interpretation is warranted by his whole approach in the article. If life has settled the questions Shachtman discusses, one is justified in asking whether life has settled the debate that has ranged in the socialist movement around the problem of the Russian revolution. According to the sophisticated anti-Leninists, the October Revolution was a mistake. And, for them, life has settled any question of that. Just look at Russia today. Leninism did not work, the revolution did not work. What is more, they say: "Didn't we and our political antecedents warn the workers (and they did) that if the Bolsheviks took power in Russia the revolu-

tion would be isolated for it was premature to think of aid from the West, without which, a proletarian revolution in Russia—even if we concede that that is what the Bolsheviks led—was doomed?" Therefore, they conclude, the Bolsheviks should not have made or led the revolution. Hasn't life proved these prophets and critics correct? Yes, in a certain formal and superficial sense. But what a sterile way to discuss history! Shachtman, through his evasions, abstractions and pragmatic method, discusses the early Comintern with the same air of unreality. If I were to try to answer these critics of the Russian Revolution within the confines of his method I would have to surrender before the debate even started.

### What about the Lessons of the Russian Revolution?

But if we were to accept Shachtman's pragmatic method then what does history teach when it informs us that the *only* country where the socialist revolution succeeded (as Shachtman believes it did) was in Russia, that is, in the *only* country where a vanguard party was permitted to develop and consolidate itself in time to meet a revolutionary crisis? If Western European history has taught us that the Leninist party invites putschism and defeat and therefore, as Shachtman writes, the idea of the independent revolutionary party deserves to die, how is this alleged lesson from life reconciled with the lessons of the Russian revolution?

To pursue the point one step further: if the Bolsheviks, following the collapse of the Second International, sought to build a broad party that would include Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, could Soviet power ever have become a reality in Russia? Most unlikely; and I believe that Shachtman would agree with this. In which case, if the vanguard Bolshevik party brought the revolution to a successful climax and if our political understanding leads us to doubt that a broad party could have achieved the same objective, is that not weighty evidence for the historian today to conclude that not only was the existence of the vanguard party a decisive factor for the success of the Russian revolution but that its absence in Europe, especially in Germany in 1919, was no less a decisive factor for the defeat of the West European working class?

### A Party Above History, Theory and Tactics

Shachtman concludes his article with a declaration that "we want a socialist movement that works." But he has failed to give us an idea of how this permanently broad all-inclusive party would work. Detailed diagrams are not needed but he should tell us a little more about his substitute for the revolutionary party.

At one time, Shachtman would have heaped ridicule on the idea of a party permanently cemented by mutual affection and respect. He has changed his mind. That is all right. But his former disdain for his present proposal was based on tangible theoretical and practical objections\* and if he is to be effective in his new views he must let us know what these objections once were and why he no longer believes them valid.

If Shachtman were only discussing the needs of the present socialist "movement" there would be little to quarrel about. Today, I am for a broad and loose socialist movement, precisely because no movement exists.†

Shachtman, however, no longer believes in the independent revolutionary party at any time. It is now to the

\* For example, what is the relation to be between the Broad Party member who is active in the unions or in neighborhood organizations and his party? In the kind of party Shachtman always aimed at the Party was to be the political institution to which its members owed their first political obligation. That is to say: the individual trade unionist functioned in the unions as a Party person and the Party wherever feasible, functioned as a disciplined fraction in the unions or in neighborhood organizations or in still broader non-socialist political organizations. Will the Broad Party Shachtman advocates "work" in this way or is it to be a Party where everybody can do more or less as he pleases?

† My rejection of Shachtman's article must not be interpreted to mean that I hold these historical and theoretical questions to be the issues which define a socialist tendency today. It is obvious to me that what holds a tendency together in the present period are concrete political questions; in the case of the ISL, its political common denominator can be found in its support of the Third Camp, analysis of Stalinism, commitment to democracy and advocacy of independent class political action. I think that a comrade who accepts Shachtman's views on historical questions is weakening the theoretical basis of our common political ideas. But that is something to debate, not act upon.

Furthermore, if our tendency is defined by its political positions that does not mean that it must have an independent organizational existence. I am not for sects.

broad all-inclusive type movement that he looks as the best form of socialist organization; not only as a form which corresponds to the needs of the American working class today, but as a loose structure which under most, if not all, conditions, can serve the socialist cause better than the narrower revolutionary party.

According to Shachtman, the "Right Wing" and the "Left Wing" can live together in the same party indefinitely so long as the following two conditions are met:

That regardless of all other differences—on history, on theory, on tactics, on the road to socialism—there is clear agreement that socialism means the fullest achievement of democracy and that the socialist movement is committed to democratic means in attaining its goal and does not seek to impose it upon the working class or against the working class. And in the sense that the party and everyone in it zealously respects full and equal democratic rights for all members and tendencies. The only cement that can assure the unity of a party in which there are differences of opinion on the best way to achieve a common end, is compounded of democracy and loyalty. No individual or group in the socialist movement has a right to demand more of any other individual or group; equal democratic rights accorded to all and loyalty to the party from all. Under these elementary conditions, a united socialist movement was possible in the past and is possible, and necessary, today.

Shachtman is not offering membership regulations for college campus clubs. He is talking about a political party, as it should look today and tomorrow, when it is a small group and when it becomes a mass movement, when it is operating in a period of passivity and when it is to lead the working class in a period of decisive struggle. For Shachtman, party unity has apparently become a fetishism raised to the level of a theory of organization; the Party, one and indivisible, a phenomenon above and permanently undivided by history, by theory, by tactics, by the road to socialism. For the permanent good health of the party there is only a two-condition prescription: 1) different tendencies must be in "clear" agreement (does it have to be crystal clear?) that socialism means the fullest achievement of democracy; 2) the party must respect the democratic right of any tendency conforming to the first condition provided it, in turn, remains loyal to the party.

This medicine is hard to swallow and more difficult to digest.

If only the German socialists in 1919 could have abided by these simple strictures how different the world might look today. For both Left and Right met at least one half of Shachtman's conditions for permanent unity! Luxemburg was committed to the idea that "socialism means the fullest achievement of democracy"; but so was the entire Right Wing German leadership. Everybody agreed that Socialism was democratic and they all believed that their common objective should be reached by democratic methods. It seems they could not get along on precisely those questions which Shachtman now tells us, so belatedly, need not divide democratic socialists; they just did not see eye to eye on questions of "history, on theory, on tactics, on the road to socialism." And because these German socialists exaggerated the importance of such tertiary questions they found themselves violating Shachtman's second canon for a united movement: the Left could not operate in a manner loyal to a party controlled by the Right; and the Right could not permit the opposition its democratic rights (it preferred to let them be assassinated).

### A Not-So Hypothetical Example

How would Shachtman's formula work in the United States? Let us say that the united socialist movement here gains many supporters. It becomes a powerful mass party with deep roots in the labor movement. But being an all-inclusive party, it includes tendency "x" which, under a radical guise, collaborates with corrupt labor officials in the union movement, and tendency "y" which believes that the unsavory elements should be expelled from the labor movement. A difference in "tactics," I suppose. But both tendencies

are made up of socialists who are in the clearest agreement that socialism means the fullest achievement of democracy. (They merely have a difference on what democracy is or means in the union movement.) Thus far, then, there is no justifiable reason for a parting of the ways as the first of Shachtman's conditions for party unity is met.

His second condition for unity is that the majority respect the rights of the minority and the majority act loyally to the party. But what do democratic rights and party loyalty mean, concretely, under these conditions? Can tendency "y" demand of its "socialist" opponents that they reverse themselves in the unions—under threat of expulsion from the party? That would not be democratic. And how should tendency "x" (assuming it is the minority) prove its loyalty to the party? Allow itself to be defeated in or expelled from the union movement? Anything else could be interpreted as a flagrantly disloyal act to the united party. I'm afraid that the question could never be satisfactorily resolved within the framework of Shachtman's theory of socialist organization.

In a large movement such hypothetical examples will become real problems. In fact, we can find a similar problem in the history of the American socialist movement, and it is a pity that Shachtman did not discuss it in the light of his theory and its relevance to his article. In 1912 the American Socialist Party was a powerful organization with more than a hundred thousand members. It was also a divided movement. There were two main contending factions each one responding in its own way to the struggle raging in the broader labor movement between the IWW syndicalists and the Gompers dominated American Federation of Labor: Haywood and Hillquit sought to smash one another within the party just as the IWW and AFL sought to push one another into total oblivion.

Given the specific character of the fight in the union movement how could the factional situation in the party have been resolved? Haywood and his followers declare themselves loyal to the Hillquit dominated Socialist Party and abandon the IWW? Or, perhaps, the Hillquit majority respect the democratic rights of the syndicalist Left Wingers and permit them to hold party cards and carry on their campaign to destroy the AFL at the same time? Neither was possible. Mutual loyalty and respect meant nothing. As I think that Hillquit was more correct than Haywood, the best solution would have been for the syndicalists to admit their mistakes and devote themselves to working as responsible socialists within the AFL. But the Haywood followers did not and could not see it that way.

The deep division in the party, then, was resolved in the only way it could be under the circumstances: a split in the party corresponding to the civil war in the labor movement. Yet in theory, the Party was governed by its all-inclusive concept of organization. The concept, however, which seemed

## ADDENDUM

### The "Spartacist Putsch"

The latest scholarly study on the subject, Eric Waldman's *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919*, devotes special attention precisely to refuting the "putschist" charge against the Spartacists.

He shows, of course, that the initiative and leadership in the January 5 demonstration came not from the Spartacists at all, but from the Independents and Revolutionary Shop Stewards, following which the Spartacists endorsed it and signed the call. *Waldman documents the fact that at this point it was the Spartacists, and only the Spartacists, who explicitly warned against turning this movement into an attempt to seize power, not only privately but in their public appeals.*

Then the demonstration showed turbulent revolutionary moods in the Berlin masses; *the Independents and RSS's were carried away.* In the large steering committee meeting, the overwhelming majority voted against a handful to adopt the aim of seizure of power. There were two Spartacists there. Liebknecht (as well as Pieck) swung over and may even have been one of the leading spirits.

So far we see that it was the overwhelming majority of the Independents and RSS's who were carried away by what was objectively a "putschist" spirit, and not only Liebknecht. Now come two crucial facts:

Fact 1: *The Spartacist leadership did not support the decision or Liebknecht's swing; Luxemburg and Jogisches were against*

to work in earlier years simply succumbed to narrower definitions determined by political reality. Is the concept of broadness to be permanently indicted because it failed to meet the test of workability in 1912? Or is it to be permanently approved because at other times it seemed to be successful? Similarly is the concept of the independent revolutionary party to be impatiently dismissed for all times because it didn't work in Europe; or is the early Bolshevik party to become a permanent model for socialists everywhere and at all times because it worked in Russia?

The whole approach to party organization suggested by these questions is wrong, of course. But that is just the approach indicated by weighing ideas on the pragmatist's scale.

### Revolutionary versus Reformist Conceptions

The idea of a party geared to meet a revolutionary situation with a combative spirit, with discipline, with trained cadres, with fanaticism born of idealism and intelligence flowed from a certain revolutionary conception of society and how it is to be transformed. It was no historical accident that the most vigorous opponents of the Leninist party within the socialist movement were those who rejected in practice (and often in theory) the idea of uncompromising class struggle, who denounced the Leninist theory of the state and who looked upon the established parliamentary system as the vehicle of social transformation in contradistinction to the revolutionary conception of the road to power which they denounced as adventurism, putschism, etc. For these reformist socialists a party that was loose, less disciplined, less demanding and less centralized (in theory) was the type which they naturally endorsed. And for good reason. Reformism implied greater political conformity; *reliance on existing political institutions negated the necessity of militant and more narrowly organized parties.*

What is at stake in Shachtman's discussion of the Leninist conception of the party is much more than organizational stratagems or their historical evolution. Nothing less is involved than those theoretical questions—reform or revolution—which have been debated in the socialist movement from its inception. I am not charging Shachtman with repudiating basic revolutionary conceptions of social struggle because he has rejected the idea of an independent revolutionary party. Obviously one can be a revolutionary Marxist without holding to the Leninist type party. Luxemburg is a case in point. Perhaps Shachtman is of the opinion that the permanently broad party is compatible with revolutionary theory. I do not know; I am no mind reader. I do know, however, that in his failure to discuss political assumptions of our movement in his re-examination of organizational and historical questions, i.e., in his failure to relate theory to organization, he has at least left his readers in an uncertain state as to the depth and significance of his re-evaluations.

*both.* Another exploded charge, by the way, is the one that the Spartacist leadership secretly supported Liebknecht but did not want to take public responsibility.

Fact 2: So far none of this has anything whatsoever to do with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. But there was one Bolshevik around, Karl Radek. Whereas Luxemburg, though disagreeing with Liebknecht, felt that there was no alternative except to fight along with the others once battle was joined, *it was only the Bolshevik Radek who urged the Spartacist leadership to exert pressure on the Independents and RSS's to call the whole thing off instanter.*

Waldman shows that it was the "bloodhounds" who invented the very term "Spartacist uprising" to describe all this.

The Spartacist rank-and-file did indeed have an ultra-leftist majority, shown especially in its convention vote against participation in the elections. The ranks were swamped with green *wilde* and *lumpen*-elements. The Spartacists had unfurled their own banner only days before the crisis was on them, instead of being able to forge a steeled revolutionary party over a whole period of preparation, as did the Bolsheviks. The *wilde* element was so strong not because the Spartacists had trod in the Bolsheviks' footsteps but because they had not. Only Radek saw true, not because he was more brilliant than Luxemburg but because he had been trained in a school which knew the difference between putschism or "revolutionism" and *serious revolutionary preparation and action.* What "invited" putschism in the January days was the absence of an effective revolutionary vanguard.