

The Second International (Social-Democracy) 1880 — 1917

Introduction

In 1880, the [German Social Democratic Party](#) supported the call of its Belgian comrades, to call an international socialist congress in 1881. The little town of Chur was chosen and the Belgian socialists, the French Parti Ouvrier, the German social democracy, and the Swiss social democracy, participated in the preparations for the congress which would lead to the founding of the Socialist International.



Unlike the First, the Socialist International was made up of political parties with properly elected leaderships, political programs and membership bases in each country. The national sections of the International built trade unions, contested elections, and were deeply involved in the life of the working class in each country.

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 and the national and revolutionary crises which the War engendered however, threw the International into crisis. A group of Social-Democrats, minorities within their own parties, met at Zimmerwald in 1915 to try to work out a joint platform of opposition to the slaughter taking place around them. The [Zimmerwald Conference](#) failed to unite all the Social Democrats or end the War, but did bring together a Left wing which supported the Russian Revolution and laid the basis for the Third (Communist) International.

- [Summary](#)

Formation of the International

October 1881 (Chur) [Founding Conference of the Second International](#).

“The Belgian socialists, the French Parti Ouvrier, the German social democracy, and the Swiss social democracy, participated in the preparations for the congress. But whereas at Ghent the anarchists had also participated, they had nothing to do with the Chur Congress, but ... called a congress of their own in London.”

Delegates included: Wilhelm Liebknecht (Germany); McGuire, General Secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (Socialist Labor Party of North America); Louis Bertrand (The Belgian Socialist Party); J. Joffrin and Benoît Malon (The French Parti Ouvrier); J. P. Becker and Solari for French-

speaking Switzerland, and Conzetti, Herter, Lenbert, and Schwartz for German-speaking Switzerland; Rachow (German communist, London); Varinski and Limonowski for various Polish socialist groups, and Paul Axelrod (Russia), Ferenezi Siula (Budapest).

The Conference did not succeed in bringing the parties into a new International, but called for the drafting of a joint socialist manifesto to be submitted to the next international congress, to be organised by the Parti Ouvrier in Paris in 1886.

1886 (Paris) International Labour Conference, showed progress towards a new International with socialist parties in Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries, France, the United States, etc.

July 1889 (Paris) International Socialist Congress, attended by delegates from 20 countries, founded the new Socialist International, formally adopting the principles of the International Workingmen's Association founded in London in 1864. May Day was declared as an international working-class holiday.

International Socialist Congresses

2. 1891 (Brussels)

3. 1893 (Zürich) Engels was elected honorary president of International Socialist Congress, but died in 1895. The Congress established the International Metalworkers Federation, uniting metalworkers across the world to this day.

4. 1896 (London) affirmed right of nations to self-determination and opposition to colonialism.

5. September 1900 (Paris) Established a standing International Socialist Bureau composed of representatives of the socialist parties of all countries, its secretariat to be in Brussels. At this Congress, there was a split within the 28-strong Russian delegation. Lenin cast his vote for Plekhanov as the Russian delegate to the International, against Krichevsky, one of the editors of *Rabocheye Dyelo*.

In 1903, the Russian party split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

6. 1904 (Amsterdam)

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded in Chicago in June 1905, and over the next few years, the Social Democrats were active in a struggle against Anarcho-Syndicalism within the IWW.

7. August 1907 (Stuttgart), there were 884 delegates from 25 nations including Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Germany, Italy, India, Japan, Norway, Poland, Russia, the USA and one delegate from South Africa. The First International Conference of Socialist Women was held just prior to the opening of the Congress (See Kollontai)

The Fourth convention of the IWW in 1908 resulted in a split between “political actionists”, led by Daniel DeLeon of the SLP, and “direct actionists”, led by Vincent St. John and J.H. Walsh. DeLeon set up a rival “Detroit” IWW in opposition to the “Chicago” IWW who were opposed to participation in Parliament.

8. August 1910 (Copenhagen). Second International Conference of Socialist Women held prior to opening of Congress, set [International Women's Day](#) for March 8 every year.

November 1912 Extraordinary Congress (Basel)

The final session of the International Socialist Bureau was held at Brussels on July 29, 1914 and “resolved unanimously that it shall be the duty of the workers of all nations concerned not only to continue but to further intensify their demonstrations against the war, for peace, and for the settlement of the Austro-Serbian conflict by international arbitration, ...”

1915 September (**Zimmerwald**, near Berne, Switzerland) organised opposition to the War. [Manifesto](#) signed by Georg Ledebour, Adolf Hoffmann (Germany); A. Bourderon, A. Merrheim (France); G.E. Modigliani, Constantino Lazzari (Italy); Lenin, Pavel Axelrod, M. Bobrov (Russia); St. Lapinski, A. Warski, Cz. Hanecki (Poland); for the Inter-Balkan Socialist Federation Rakovsky (Rumania), Wassil Kolarov (Bulgaria); for Sweden and Norway Z. Hoglund, Ture Nerman, H. Roland-Holst (Holland); Robert Grimm, Charles Naine (Swiss).

1916 April (Kienthal) follow-up to Zimmerwald Conference.

1917 July - August (Stockholm) did not convene due to delegates being prevented from attending. Final meeting of Zimmerwald group at Stockholm

The Social Democratic Party of Germany

The defeat of the [Paris Commune](#) in 1871 plunged Europe into a period of reaction, leading to the disintegration of the [First International](#) by 1873. The reconstruction of the international socialist movement began in Gotha in 1875.

The German Socialists were the founding and most powerful section of Social-Democracy throughout the period of its existence. The **Socialist Workers' Party of Germany** was founded in May 1875 at [Gotha](#), uniting Liebknecht and Bebel's [Social-Democratic Workers' Party](#) and the [Lassallean](#) General German Workers' Union. See Marx's [Critique of the Gotha Programme](#) and Engels' 1891 [Foreword](#) to the Critique.

Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900) After participating in the 1848 revolution, fled to Switzerland, then to England, returning to Germany in 1862. Liebknecht and Bebel were the first deputies of a left-

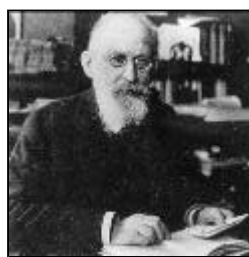


wing party to be elected to the North German Reichstag. In Eisenach in 1869, Liebknecht and Bebel founded the Social-Democratic Workers' Party, and in 1891 were co-founders of the Social Democratic Party. Liebknecht was a member of the German Reichstag from 1874 until his death in 1900.

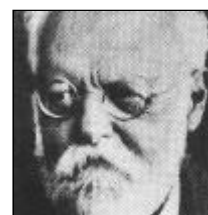
August Bebel (1840-1913) Bebel had trained as a cabinet maker, and was introduced to socialist theory by the Lassallean German Workers' Association founded in 1863. In 1872, Bebel and Liebknecht were imprisoned for two years for their opposition to [Franco-German War](#). After the SDP merged with the Lassalleans in Gotha in 1875, Bebel remained the unquestioned leader. His fiery parliamentary speeches were renowned across Europe, and Bebel remained on the Left of German Social Democracy until his death shortly before the beginning of the War. His [Women and Socialism](#) is the earliest Marxist work on the emancipation of women.



Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) Left Germany during the anti-Socialist laws to produce the *Sozial Demokrat* from Switzerland. Lived in London from 1888 to 1900 where he was close to Engels until Engels' death in 1895, and was named his literary executor. From 1896, Bernstein became an advocate of reformism, coining the aphorism: "The movement is everything, the final goal nothing". See [Evolutionary Socialism](#), 1899. Reichstag Deputy on and off from 1902; founded the [Independent Social Democratic Party](#) 1916, but returned to the Social Democratic Party after the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in 1919.



Karl Kautsky (1845-1938) In 1880, Kautsky joined Bernstein in Zurich who smuggled socialist material into Germany in defiance of the Anti-Socialist Laws. Bernstein introduced Kautsky to Marxism and Kautsky visited Marx and Engels in England. He founded *Neue Zeit* in Stuttgart in 1883 and was its editor until 1917. In this position he became the most influential leader of Social-Democracy and authority on Marxism until the Russian Revolution. In 1891, Kautsky's [Erfurt Program](#) was adopted by the SDP.



The Spartacists

Franz Mehring (1846-1919) Literary critic, writer and historian, a leader of the Left-wing of the German Social Democrats and later member of the [Spartacist League](#). Mehring and Clara Zetkin were the only members of the "older generation" of Marxists who supported Lenin's "revolutionary defeatism" line against the War and survived to see the founding of the Communist Party of Germany in 1919.



Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) Clara Zetkin was member of the Bookbinders Union in Stuttgart, and active in the Tailors and Seamstresses Union, becoming its provisional International Secretary in 1896, despite the fact that it was illegal for women to be members of trade unions in Germany at that time. From 1895, she was a leader of the left-wing of the SPD. As Secretary of the International Bureau of Socialist Women, Zetkin organised the Socialist Women's Conference in March 1915. She joined the Spartacists and was a founding member of the German Communist Party in 1918, a Reichstag delegate from 1920 and a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International from 1921, but lived in Russia from 1924 until her death in 1933. See [Clara Zetkin's report to the 1896 Congress of the SDP](#) and [Eleanor Marx's report of the Congress](#)



Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) A Polish Jew, at 18 years of age Rosa Luxemburg was forced to escape to Zurich to avoid imprisonment for her revolutionary agitation. Here she met Russian Social Democrats such as Georgy Plekhanov and Pavel Axelrod. Luxemburg split with both the Russian and Polish Socialist Party over the issue of Polish self-determination, and helped create the Polish Social Democratic Party. [Leo Jogiches](#), leader of the Polish Socialist Party became her life-long companion.

Rosa Luxemburg was a leader of both the German and Polish Social Democrats, an electrifying speaker who always stood on the left wing of social democracy. She was critical of Lenin's centralised methods of organisation (See [Russian Social-democracy](#)) and was a foremost advocate of the mass strike as opposed to parliamentary activity (See [The Mass Strike](#)). She spent the War inside prison, and was released only in time to take her place at the head of the German Revolution and to be arrested by her erstwhile Social-Democratic comrades, and murdered in January 1919.

Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) Son of Wilhelm Liebknecht and founding leader of the Socialist Youth International in 1907.

With Rosa Luxemburg, Liebknecht was leader of the "International Group" and later founded the Spartacist League and was the only Reichstag Deputy to oppose war credits in the Reichstag in 1914. Drafted during the war, he was imprisoned in May 1916 for anti-war activity. Released in November 1918, Liebknecht was a leader of the failed Berlin uprising in January 1919 and murdered on January 15th 1919, along with his life-long comrade Rosa Luxemburg.



[The German SDP and the War, 1914](#)

Other Social-democratic Parties in Europe



Herman Gorter (1864-1927) Dutch poet who opposed the pro-War stance of the Dutch Social-Democrats and later became a "left-wing communist", conducting a polemic against Lenin's book of that name. See his [Open Letter to Lenin](#).

Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960) The Dutch astronomer Anton Pannekoek was active in the German Social Democratic Party while living in Germany before the War and contributed to *Die Neue Zeit*. The leader of the Social Democrats in the Netherlands, after the Russian Revolution, Pannekoek stayed aloof from both the Comintern and the Socialist Parties, taking a syndicalist direction. See [Party and Class](#).



The French Parti Ouvrier

Paul Lafargue

(1841-1911) Paul Lafargue was born in Cuba but studied medicine in France and became a follower of [Proudhon](#). He met Marx and Engels while acting as a delegate to the First International and married [Laura Marx](#) in 1868, thereafter working closely with Marx and Engels and leading the Marxist wing within the Parti Ouvrier.



After the fall of the Paris Commune Paul and Laura fled to Spain but later settled in London. Lafargue was an influential speaker and writer, including works on ethical aspects of socialism. The couple committed suicide together in 1911. See [Paul Lafargue Archive](#).

Jules Guesde



(1845-1922) Publisher of *L'Égalité*, leader of the Marxist wing of the French workers' movement. In 1879, together with Lafargue, he founded the French Workers' Party [*Parti ouvrier*]. In the 1880's and 90's Guesde led the fight against the [Possibilists](#) and opposed participation in Parliament. By 1900 he had moved to a reformist position however, and during the war a social-chauvinist and in 1914-15 a member of the government. See [Jules Guesde Archive](#).

In December 1920 the [French Socialist Party joined the Comintern](#).

Garbriel Deville: one of the theoreticians of the French Workers Party (POF) of Guesde and as such introduced Marxism into France.



Swedish Social-Democracy



See [Swedish Social-Democracy Archive](#)

August Palm

introduced Social-Democracy into Sweden from Germany with his famous 1881 speech in Malmö and was the leader of its left-wing.

Hjalmar Branting

displaced Palm from leadership and went on to become Prime Minister and a Nobel Prize winner.

Poland**Leo Jogiches**

(1867-1919) Jailed for his agitation in Lithuania, in 1890 he escaped to Switzerland where he began a long political and personal relationship with Rosa Luxemburg. In 1893 together they founded the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP), which later merged with the Polish Workers' Party. Jogiches was murdered while trying to investigate the assassination of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht during the Spartacist uprising.

**Italian Socialist Party****Antonio Labriola** (1843-1904)

Father of Italian Marxism.



Filippo Turati (1857-1932), leader of the right-wing of Italian Social Democracy.

Enrico Ferri (1856-1929), criminologist, later joined the Fascists.

**Russian Social-Democracy**

The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party grew out of the Emancipation of Labour Group founded in 1878 by Plekhanov, Vera Zasluich, Pavel Axelrod and others.

The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party

The R.S.D.L.P. was founded in 1901, but at its Second Congress into two factions known as the “Bolsheviks” and the “Mensheviks”. These two factions still operated as parts of a single party as late as 1912.

G V Plekhanov (1856-1918) Left Narodnya Volya, with its focus on the peasantry and terrorist tactics, and founded the Emancipation of Labour Group, with a focus on the urban working class. Forced into emigration in 1880, Plekhanov did not return to Russia until the formation of Provisional Government in 1917.



Plekhanov was the “father of Russian Marxism”, and up to 1903 Lenin and Plekhanov were allies in the struggle against Bernstein's “evolutionary socialism.” Even after Lenin split with Plekhanov, Plekhanov was held in high regard. However, he did not foresee the possibility of the working class seizing power without Russia first passing through a period of democratic capitalism, and opposed the October Revolution.

Vera Zasulich (1851-1919) Joined the Narodniks as a youth, but after emigrating in 1880 joined with Plekhanov in the Emancipation of Labour Group. Zasulich translated a number of Marx's works into Russian and with Lenin and Plekhanov as an editor of Iskra. Zasulich was a Menshevik from 1903.



Pavel Axelrod (1850-1928) Influenced by the writings of Bakunin, in 1877 he joined Land and Liberty. When this group established the terrorist Narodnya Volya, he joined instead with Plekhanov in the Emancipation of Labour Group. Axelrod was a Menshevik from 1903.



Julius Martov

(1873-1923) Began his political career in 1895 working with Lenin in the St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class and on Iskra but led the Mensheviks in opposition to Lenin's conception of Democratic Centralism in 1903. At the time of the October Revolution he held a left position in the Menshevik ranks, remaining in the Second Congress of the Soviets after the Right



SRs and Mensheviks had departed. He emigrated to Berlin and published *Sotsialistichesky Vestnik*.

V I Lenin (1870-1924) Left Russia to meet with Plekhanov, returning to Russia in order to unite all the revolutionary circles in Russia in a single Party – the R.S.D.L.P.. However, Lenin's conception at this time was for a party of “professional revolutionaries”, rather than the amateurish revolutionary circles or loose labour parties of Europe. Over this issue, Lenin split with all the older generation of Russian Marxists.



Lenin's Bolshevik faction was the centre of opposition to the War at the Zimmerwald Conference. The February Revolution, which brought a social-democratic Provisional Government to power, which continued Russia's participation in the First World War. Returning from exile in April 1917, Lenin called for the overthrow of the Kerensky government and the ending of the War,

and led the successful Russian Revolution of October 1917. Lenin died just when power had been secured after the Wars of Intervention.

See [The Bolsheviks](#) Subject Archive. The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin and Zinoviev, were the main force in the Zimmerwald-Left opposition to the First World War, laying the basis for the [Communist International](#) formed in 1918.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) Worked with Lenin on *Iskra* in 1902 but broke with Lenin after the Second Congress. He broke with the Mensheviks in 1904 and tried during the next decade to reunite the factions of the RSDLP. In the 1905 revolution, he was the leader of the St. Petersburg Soviet and developed the theory of [Permanent Revolution](#). In 1915 he wrote the [Zimmerwald Manifesto](#).



Trotsky joined the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and was elected to its Central Committee and led the Military Revolutionary Committee which organised the October Revolution.

The Workers' Parties in the English-speaking world

The well-established Trade Union movement in Britain and the other English-speaking countries spawned both Parliamentary wings and Anarcho-syndicalist or doctrinaire parties rejecting Parliament. Sections of the Second International were usually smaller parties inside the Labour Parties or outside in opposition to them.

Britain

Henry Hyndman



(1842-1922) While on holiday in the United States in 1881, Hyndman read a copy of *Capital* decided to form a Marxist political group when he arrived back in England. The [Social Democratic Federation](#) (SDF) became the first Marxist political group in Britain and its members included trade unionists such as [Tom Mann](#), John Burns and Ben Tillet, as well as Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling, William Morris, George Lansbury and H. H. Champion. By 1885 the organisation had over 700 members.

Hyndman's domineering style, adventurous tactics and questionable relations with the Tories weakened the SDF. In December 1884 William Morris and Eleanor Marx left to form the Socialist League. H. H. Champion, Tom Mann and John Burns also left. In February 1900 the SDF joined with the [Independent Labour Party](#) of Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, the [Fabian Society](#) and several trade union leaders to form the Labour Representation Committee, later to become the Labour Party.

Hyndman had very little influence and in August 1901 the SDF disaffiliated from the Labour Party and Hyndman established the British Socialist Party (BSP). Hyndman supported Britain's part in the War and left to form the National Socialist Party.



In 1885, Eleanor Marx, William Morris, Ernest Belfort Bax, Edward Aveling and others left Hyndman's SDF to found the [Socialist League](#) and whole branches, such as those in East London, Hammersmith and Leeds, joined the new organisation.



[William Morris](#) (1834-1896) A member of Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, and of the Socialist League, where he sided with the Anarchists against those oriented towards Parliament, and resigned from the SL in 1896. The renowned artist and writer continued his work as part of the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

See [A Short Account of the Paris Commune of 1871](#), by Bax, Morris and Dave.



[Eleanor Marx](#) ("Tussy") (1855-1898) Along with translating and acting, Tussy was involved in organizing, writing, record-keeping and speaking for militant trade union such as the Gasworkers, and the Dockers Union. In 1889 she was a delegate in Paris for the founding of the Second International. Later she was involved in editing Marx's papers. During a period of depression in 1889, she committed suicide at the age of 43.

[Edward Carpenter](#) and [Walter Crane](#) were also members of the Socialist League, which reached a peak of 10,000 members in 1895, but came under anarchist influence, declined and was wound up in 1901.



[E. Belfort Bax](#) (1854-1925) Bax was the most renowned interpreter of Marx's philosophical and historical ideas in the English language. He joined Hyndman in founding the SDF and then with Eleanor Marx and William Morris in the Socialist League, but after the demise of the Socialist League returned to Hyndman.

[Harry Quelch](#)



was editor of *Justice* and co-author with Bax of the [New Catechism of Socialism](#), 1903/09.

Index to articles in [Justice &](#)



Commonweal.

Edward Aveling (1849-1898) Londoner who married Eleanor Marx and made the first English translation of *Capital*; died soon after Tussy's suicide.

See also John Round's attack on the socialists: [The Coming Terror](#), 1881.

See [Review of "Forerunners of Socialism"](#) by Henry W Macrosty, 1895.



The United States



Eugene Debs (1855-1926) Founder of the American Railway Union and co-founder of the IWW and a leader of the left-wing of the American Socialist Party. Debs helped organize the massive Pullman strike in 1894 and was sent to prison and was jailed 1918-21 for opposition to the War. Solidarised with the Russian Revolution, but remained in the SP and did not join the Communist Party. Other members of the Socialist Party were [Big Bill Haywood](#) and Morris

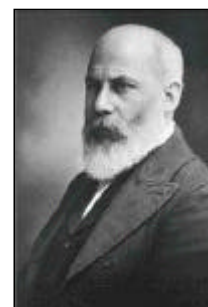
Hillquit.



[Daniel De Leon](#)

US academic who joined the Socialist Labor Party (originally the American Socialist League) and transformed it from a small propaganda group, based in the European immigrants, to a lively, if doctrinaire party, active in the powerful US workers movement. De Leon participated in the founding of the IWW in

the USA in 1905.



Australia

Both Hyndman's S.D.F. and later DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party found their reflections in Australia, but it was the visit of [Tom Mann](#) to the colony which led to the development of a Marxist Party, the Victorian Socialist Party.





Marxists of the early years of the 20th century included Frank Hyett, John Curtin, Maurice Blackburn, Frank Anstey, [Jock Garden](#) and [Guido Baracchi](#).

See [How Labour Governs](#), Vere Gordon Childe, 1923.



[The International Workers' Movement](#) | [History Archive](#) | [M.I.A.](#)