

Ninety years since Hitler took power

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80 years ago: Red Army soldier raises victory flag over Stalingrad, February 2, 1943. The victory was the turning point in the defeat of the Nazis.

German working class supported socialism. How did the Nazis crush them?

Ninety years ago, on Jan. 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. A dozen years of hell followed, with tens of millions killed. Six million Jewish people and over 300,000 Roma and Sinti people were murdered.

Never forget that 27 million Soviet people from more than 150 nationalities gave their lives to defeat the Nazis. It was on the Eastern Front that the Nazi war machine was destroyed.

That's where almost 80% of the Third Reich's military casualties occurred. Soviet soldiers fought 1,400 miles from Stalingrad on the Volga River to Berlin. On Jan. 27, 1945, the Auschwitz extermination camp was liberated by Soviet forces.

How did the Nazis take over the homeland of Marx and Engels? Hitler was put into power by the biggest German capitalists. The Krupp steelmaking and munitions empire; the Flicks that run Mercedes-Benz; the Quandt family, owners of BMW; Deutsche bank; and Allianz insurance all bankrolled the Nazis.

German industrialists and bankers took a country that gave Beethoven and Einstein to the world and put it in the sewer. The U.S., British, French, and Dutch capitalists — whose fantastic wealth started with the African Holocaust — are no better. Belgian King Leopold II killed millions of Africans in Congo for rubber profits. About half the Congolese population died.

George Washington's Mount Vernon estate and every other plantation were concentration camps for enslaved Africans. Every concentration and death camp, including Auschwitz, had a factory.

While Yankee insurance companies, like Aetna, insured enslaved Africans, Allianz insured the concentration camps.

The defeat of the German working class still hangs over workers and oppressed peoples today. Germany became the breakwater for the Bolshevik Revolution.

Instead of expected socialist revolutions triumphing in Western Europe, the Soviet Union was isolated for a quarter-century.

All the socialist countries today — China, Cuba, Peoples' Korea, Laos, and Vietnam — had been plundered by colonialism. The only parts of the imperialist metropolis that came under working-class rule were East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Despite many working-class struggles, billionaires in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Japan continue to exploit Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The super-rich are cooking the earth and threatening to launch World War III against the Russian Federation and China.

A world in flames

By 1919 capitalism seemed to be coming apart at the seams. Workers and peasants took power in the former Russian Empire on Nov. 7, 1917. The German Kaiser was overthrown a year later, on Nov. 9, 1918.

Europe was devastated by World War I. Twenty million people were killed, and millions more were disabled.

The dead included African and Asian soldiers press-ganged from European colonies. The subsequent influenza epidemic killed 50 million people worldwide, including at least five percent of Ghana's population.

Workers revolted everywhere. One out of seven industrial workers in the United

States went on strike in 1919. They included 365,000 steelworkers led by future communist leader William Z. Foster.

The Honorable Marcus Garvey rallied millions of Black people in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Garvey admired Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution.

After Lenin died in 1924, [Garvey declared](#), “We as Negroes mourn for Lenin because Russia promised great hope not only for Negroes but to the weaker people of the world.”

Asia rose up against colonialism. Millions of Koreans revolted against the Japanese occupation on March 1, 1919. Thousands were killed.

On April 13, 1919, a pro-independence rally in Amritsar, India, was fired upon by British colonial troops, killing hundreds.

The May Fourth Movement of Chinese students in 1919 was the beginning of the Chinese Revolution.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic was established on March 1, 1919. A day later, the Communist International, often described as the Third International, was founded in Moscow.

This was the most dangerous period of the Russian civil war. The Red Army of workers and peasants was attacked by a dozen armies. Among them were U.S. troops that occupied Arkhangelsk and Vladivostok.

Being surrounded, the Red Army could offer little help to their Hungarian comrades. After 133 days of existence, the Hungarian Soviet Republic was crushed on Aug. 1, 1919.

Socialism and war

All eyes were on Germany. German sailors had revolted and took over Kiel on Nov. 3, 1918. Six days later, the Kaiser fled on his private train.

General Ludendorff, who functioned as the military dictator of Germany during the war, demanded an armistice be signed. He feared the soldiers would follow the sailors' example.

The country's new Social Democratic leaders, Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheideman, even hesitated to declare a republic. They were terrified by German workers, soldiers, and sailors who had formed workers' councils called soviets, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution.

Ebert and Scheideman instead helped drown the German Revolution in blood. Among those assassinated were the revolutionary leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who were killed by army officers on Jan. 15, 1919.

Almost 1.8 million German soldiers were killed in World War I, while a million civilians died of hunger. Germans still died after the armistice because of the continuing Allied blockade. The U.S., British and French capitalists sought to starve the working class into submission.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) was Germany's largest party. It won 37.9 percent of the vote in the January 1919 elections. The Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) — an anti-war split from the SPD — won 7.6 percent.

Both these parties called for socialism. Together they got almost 14 million votes, or 45.5% of the total. But neither the SPD nor the USPD was revolutionary.

The SPD was founded in 1869 by followers of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Its leaders were August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the father of Karl Liebknecht.

This was the first mass working-class party in the world. It became a model for socialists around the world, including the Bolsheviks.

Lenin said that the Bolsheviks stood on the shoulders of the 1871 Paris Commune. But there also would have been no Bolshevik Revolution without the experience of the German working-class movement.

This can be seen in “What Is To Be Done,” written by Lenin. It emphasized the role of German socialists in saturating millions of workers with class consciousness and tackling every political question.

One example Lenin gave was the SPD’s defense of so-called obscene literature. This probably referred to Magnus Hirschfeld, a pioneering defender and researcher of LGBTQ+ people.

Workers of the world unite!

Unlike French capitalists who politically exploited the legacy of the 1789 revolution, German moneybags had nothing to brag about. They helped betray the 1848 revolutions. German unification was accomplished under the leadership of the Prussian monarchy and landlord aristocrats called “Junkers.”

August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht had already been elected to the Reichstag — the German parliament — when the Franco-Prussian war began in 1870. They courageously protested the German annexation of the French territories of Alsace-Lorraine.

The Junker Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had Bebel and Liebknecht jailed for treason. However, this didn’t stop the SPD from winning the support of more and more workers.

Bismarck responded by imposing harsh anti-socialist laws in 1878. Thousands of

workers were jailed. This was the SPD's best period.

It was because of this crackdown that [the largest memorial meeting](#) for Karl Marx, who died on March 14, 1883, was held in New York City's Cooper Union auditorium. José Martí wrote about it for "La Nación" in Buenos Aires.

Bebel became famous for using the Reichstag to attack capitalism. SPD members would vote against the government budget, with Bebel thundering, "Not a penny for this system!" Lenin described Bebel as a "people's tribune" in "What Is To Be Done."

This example helped inspire workers in other countries to form socialist parties. With the help of Frederick Engels, a Socialist International of workers' parties was formed.

It was founded in Paris on July 14, 1889, the 100th anniversary of the storming of Bastille prison, the beginning of the Great French Revolution. Echoing the Communist Manifesto, its slogan was "workers of all countries unite!"

The SPD's growing strength forced the repeal of the anti-socialist laws in 1890. Large numbers of workers were being won over to socialism. It was socialists who organized workers into unions.

By 1914, the SPD had a million members and was the largest party in the Reichstag, with 110 seats. But the party's leadership was no longer revolutionary. Bebel had died.

The long period of relative capitalist stability had corrupted most of the SPD leaders. On Aug. 4, 1914, all of the socialists in the Reichstag voted for war appropriations.

On the same day, every one of the 102 French socialists in the Chamber of Deputies also voted for an imperialist war. The workers of the world were now in the trenches killing each other for their capitalists.

A failed revolution

The Second International was dead. Rosa Luxemburg, a socialist leader and theoretician active in Germany and Poland, called the SPD a “stinking corpse.”

Not all of the socialist parties were swept up in supporting the military slaughter. The six Bolsheviks in the Russian Duma denounced the war. So did the two socialist members of Serbia’s National Assembly.

Lenin called for turning the imperialist war into a civil war. Liebknecht broke with the other SPD Reichstag members and started to vote against war appropriations.

He declared that the main enemy was at home. On May 1, 1916, Karl Liebknecht shouted, “Down with the Kaiser!, Down with the war!,” at an anti-war demonstration in Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz.

Liebknecht was immediately arrested. Rosa Luxemburg had already been jailed.

That May Day, 55,000 workers in Berlin had gone on strike against the war, with thousands more stopping work in other cities. On Aug. 2, 1917, 400 sailors on a battleship mutinied and marched into Wilhelmshaven.

The dam broke in the fall of 1918. The masses were sick of war and starvation. German workers went on strike while soldiers and sailors refused to kill other poor people.

The people wanted the Junkers and war-profiteering capitalists overthrown. The Communist Party of Germany was born on Dec. 30, 1918.

The leaders of the SPD and the unions were hostile to a socialist revolution. They were willing to let military officers in vigilante gangs called the “Freikorps” murder thousands of revolutionaries, including Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

But when General Kapp attempted to overthrow the newly formed republic in March 1920, the unions called a general strike that stopped the “Kapp Putsch.”

Germany was defeated, yet it remained the biggest industrial country in Europe. German capitalism was propped up by loans from U.S. banks, which helped modernize factories.

The real victor of World War I was Wall Street. The Du Ponts made so much money from explosives that they bought General Motors.

Both GM and Ford built plants in Germany. The Rockefeller-controlled Standard Oil of New Jersey (now Exxon Mobil) gave the chemical giant I.G. Farben 2% of its shares, worth millions.

This was in exchange for licensing Farben’s process for making synthetic oil and rubber from coal. During World War II, Farben built a gigantic plant for doing this at Auschwitz, where it also supplied the Zyklon B for the gas chambers. (“The Crime and Punishment of I.G. Farben” by Joseph Borkin)

Capitalists turn to fascism

The Great Depression devastated Germany. One out of four workers became unemployed.

It was also a crisis for the capitalist class, whose profits nosedived, and export markets shriveled.

German capitalists relied on various political parties to keep themselves in power during the 1920s. While the wealthy despised the Social Democrats, they used them to fight communism.

During the May Day marches in 1929 led by the Communist Party (KPD), it was the

Social Democratic government in the state of Prussia that killed 61 workers. The Catholic Center Party also served to prop up the capitalist order.

The capitalists themselves, particularly the “smokestack barons” of heavy industry like the Krupps, would have welcomed a return to the monarchy. But this went nowhere.

The high point of their political vehicle, the German National People’s Party (DNVP), was in the December 1924 federal elections, when it received 20.5% of the vote. By July 1932, the DNVP only got 8.34%.

German capitalism needed a hangman in a plebeian disguise. They got one in Adolf Hitler.

The wealthy and powerful feared being overthrown by the workers and poor. The KPD had 300,000 members and received nearly 5.3 million votes in the July 1932 elections. Communists were the biggest party in Berlin and got 60% of the vote in the city’s Wedding neighborhood.

Capitalists required fascism not only to crush communists but also to pulverize every form of working-class organization. The SPD, the unions, and the entire working class culture had to be shattered in order to cut wages sharply.

These included cooperative stores, sporting, cultural, and bicycle clubs, and hundreds of newspapers built up over the decades.

Big Capital poured millions into the Nazi coffers to put thousands of Nazi thugs in brown shirts on the street. These stormtroopers were a German Ku Klux Klan terrorizing the workers and poor.

Hitler, Henry Ford, and hate

The Junkers and big capitalists were so discredited that Hitler called his party the “National Socialist German Workers Party.” The multimillionaire former Trump advisor Steve Bannon says he wants to form a “workers’ party.”

Hitler was no worker and dreaded becoming one. One of his heroes was Henry Ford, whose thugs beat up Walter Reuther and other union organizers at the “Battle of the Overpass.”

In 1923, the German radical publication [Das Tagebuch](#) said Ford was financing the Nazis. That was the year of Hitler’s “Beer Hall Putsch” when the Nazis tried to overthrow the government in Bavaria.

A photograph of Ford was prominently displayed in the Nazi headquarters in Munich. “I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration,” [Hitler told a Detroit News](#) reporter in a 1931 interview.

It wasn’t just Ford’s wealth that attracted the Nazis. Henry Ford had his car dealers distribute the “Dearborn Independent,” a newspaper with a circulation of 900,000 copies. It ran a 91-part weekly series called “The International Jew” that blamed Jewish people as “the world’s problem.”

The Russian Czars used murderous anti-Jewish riots called pogroms to divert the masses and stay in power. These massacres were like those that killed hundreds of Black people in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917 and Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921.

A gusher of hate was pouring from the top of capitalist society. Hundreds of Black people were killed in U.S. cities, including Chicago and Washington, D.C., during the summer of 1919.

The counterrevolutionary White Guards killed 100,000 Jewish people in Ukraine during the Russian civil war. The capitalist class in Europe and the United States blamed Jewish people for the Bolshevik Revolution.

In a Jan. 3, 1920, speech, Winston Churchill attacked British socialists who “believe in the international Soviet of Russian and Polish Jews.” Later that year [Churchill called Jews](#) “the main instigators of the ruin of the [British] Empire.”

The bigoted U.S. 1924 immigration act kept Anne Frank’s family and thousands of other Jewish people out of the United States.

IBM’s German subsidiary, Dehomag, made the punch cards that helped organize the Jewish and Roma Holocaust. One of Dehomag’s plants was next to the Warsaw ghetto.

While U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson had Hiroshima and Nagasaki incinerated, he refused to bomb the railroad lines leading to Auschwitz.

Hate and the class struggle

This record hasn’t prevented U.S. imperialism from shoveling over \$140 billion into the apartheid regime that occupies Palestine. Both Ford and IBM have research laboratories in Israel.

The U.S. has now spent over \$100 billion to prop up a Ukrainian regime that uses the former TV comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a Jewish figurehead. Meanwhile, Kiev’s military forces, like the Azov Battalion, are openly pro-Nazi.

The European disease of anti-Jewish bigotry is connected to the class struggle. “Set fire to their synagogues or schools,” [declared the old German priest, Martin Luther](#), in his pamphlet “On the Jews and Their Lies.”

This was the same Luther who called German peasants — more than four-fifths of the German nation — “mad dogs” during the great peasant war in 1525. Lutheranism became the state church for backward feudal regimes in northern Europe. Only under the impact of the French Revolution was serfdom overthrown in

those countries.

Racism alone doesn't explain the Nazis' victory. As Mark Twain described it, "The United States of Lyncherdom" experienced more racist violence in the 1920s than Germany did.

In 1928, the Black prisoner Charley Sheppard was paraded for hours through Mississippi before being burned alive in front of a crowd of 6,000 whites. ("Mississippi: The Closed Society," by James W. Silver.)

The Nazis hated Black people and wanted a return of the former German colonies in Africa. Herman Goering was the number two Nazi who became the number one war criminal at the Nuremberg trials. His father was a German colonial governor of Namibia.

Tens of thousands of Herero and Namaqua people were murdered there by German troops. Germany refuses to pay any reparations for this genocide.

In defiance of the Nazis, some of the biggest rallies for the Scottsboro defendants — nine Black youths framed on phony rape charges in Alabama — were held in Germany.

As many as 100,000 German workers came out in Hamburg to hear Ada Wright in May 1932, a few months before Hitler came to power. She was the mother of two of the Scottsboro defendants.

This international campaign, along with the mobilization in the Black community, saved the Scottsboro defendants from the electric chair. German workers said no to racism.

The workers divided will be defeated

Despite the explosive growth of the Nazis, their greatest strength was in rural areas, smaller towns, and wealthy neighborhoods. They had little support among union members.

In Berlin, “the highest levels of support for the National Socialists came from the upper- and upper-middle-class districts,” according to “[Who Voted for Hitler?](#),” by Richard F. Hamilton.

In the Nov. 6, 1932, elections, three out of eight German voters cast their ballots for either the Social Democrats or Communists. Their combined total was 13,228,140 votes.

The Nazis got 11,737,021 votes, a drop of two million from what they received in the July 31, 1932, elections. In contrast, Communists gained almost 700,000 votes in three months.

This trend terrified the big capitalists. German tycoons turned decisively to back Hitler.

But how could they smash two working-class parties with millions of followers and unions with a membership of five million in a country of 65 million people?

The SPD was a dues collection agency. Their leaders had betrayed the working class, supported the imperialist war, and presided over the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

German communists wanted a revolution. But to overthrow capitalism, the KPD had to win over millions of workers who supported the SPD.

There was a line of blood between the SPD and KPD members. It was Social-Democratic cops who beat up and sometimes killed KPD members, like on May Day in 1929.

Around 90% of KPD members were unemployed. The Communists were a party of largely jobless young people, while SPD members were usually older and more likely to have a job still. Almost all the unions were allied with the SPD.

This division helped paralyze the working class and paved the way for the Nazis. The SPD union leaders refused to mobilize workers and declare a general strike as they did in 1920 against the Kapp Putsch.

Hitler's victory was tragically like the overthrow of the Soviet Union. In both cases, it was a largely cold takeover against the backdrop of a demoralized and confused working class.

The burning of the Reichstag on Feb. 27, 1933, which was orchestrated by the Nazis, served as an excuse for a reign of terror.

Thousands of communists and other anti-fascists were sent to concentration camps. Communist leader Ernst Thälmann was imprisoned at Buchenwald, where he was executed on Aug. 18, 1944.

A super Kornilov

Just as Bolsheviks studied the struggles of the German working class, German communists needed to learn from the Bolsheviks. Lenin urged them to do so in “‘Left-Wing’ Communism, an Infantile Disorder.”

Many experienced Communist leaders, like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, had already been assassinated with the acquiescence of SPD leaders. Communists were justifiably bitter, and their anger was often directed against fellow workers who remained in the SPD.

The SPD leaders convinced many of their followers that communists were dangerous extremists who served as tools of reaction. Some of the KPD actions reinforced this

attitude.

The Aug. 9, 1931, “Red Referendum” was a notorious example. This was a plebiscite endorsed by the Nazis to dissolve the Prussian Landtag, or state assembly, which was led by Social Democrats.

The only alternative at that point to an SPD-led Prussian government was one led by or in coalition with the Nazis.

The KPD endorsed the plebiscite, which fortunately lost. The KPD’s support for this referendum only deepened the distrust that Social Democratic workers had for Communists.

So did the term “social fascist,” which was used by the communist movement at the time to describe moderate socialists. How was it possible to form a united front against the Nazis if communists called SPD members in the workplace or neighborhood “social fascists”?

Following the “July Days” in 1917, Lenin was denounced as a German agent and driven underground. The Bolsheviks were mercilessly attacked not only by the capitalist “Cadet” party but also by many Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries.

This didn’t prevent the Bolsheviks from appealing to Menshevik and Social Revolutionary workers, soldiers, and sailors to defend the soviets against an inevitable counter-revolutionary coup.

When General Kornilov tried to be the revolution’s hangman, the Bolsheviks were able to lead the resistance. By doing so they won over a majority of the workers and were able to take power in the name of the soviets on Nov. 7, 1917.

Hitler and the Nazis were super Kornilovs. Winning over social-democratic workers to fight together against the fascists was a life-or-death necessity. This defensive

struggle of millions of workers would have stopped the Nazis and led to the overthrow of the capitalists who financed the scam.

Lessons for today

The tragedy of the German working class has many lessons for today's struggle. Steve Bannon and other Trump supporters want to build a fascist movement.

One of their main targets is Drag Queen story hours. The fascist Proud Boys were met with hundreds of opponents when they tried to stop a reading at the Jackson Heights library in Queens, New York City, on Dec. 29, 2022,

The police protected these fascists and escorted them to a nearby subway station without even paying a fare.

In the fall of 1974 in Boston, a mass fascist movement arose under the name "Restore Our Alienated Rights," or ROAR. Targeting school busing for integration, this fascist mobilization seemed to be unstoppable. School buses carrying Black, Asian, and Latinx children were attacked.

Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy and the entire liberal establishment were silent. Mass action was required. The Dec. 14, 1974, March Against Racism helped stop this fascist movement.

Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Revolution, famously asked, "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?"

Super racists Tucker Carlson and Donald Trump are not our friends, even if they're making some anti-war noises about Ukraine. They want a war against China instead.

Under certain conditions, it is permissible and even necessary for the left to block with the center to fight the right. But it's treason against workers and oppressed

people to block with the right against the center.

That's the case with the Rage Against the War Machine rally scheduled for Feb. 19 in Washington, D.C. It calls for disbanding NATO, ending the war in Ukraine, and freeing Julian Assange.

The rally is co-sponsored by the Libertarian Party, which wants to abolish social security and every other government program. One of the speakers will be the racist former congressman Ron Paul.

It's revealing that none of the rally's ten demands mention the war preparations against the People's Republic of China. That's especially important because of media hysteria over balloons.

Such a rally puts a stamp of approval on bigots like Tea Party founder Ron Paul and the right-wing Libertarian Party. It confuses workers like the "Red Referendum" did 90 years ago.

We need to mobilize for the March 18 genuine anti-war and anti-racism rally in Washington, D.C., that's called by the ANSWER coalition and other organizations.

Working and poor people united can defeat the capitalist cutbacks and all the Bannons and Trumps!

