

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 18
“The Spectre Haunting Europe”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.

Where is the party in opposition that has not been designated as communistic by its opponents in power? Where is the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of communism, against the more advanced opposition parties, as well as against its reactionary adversaries?

Communism is already acknowledged by all European powers to be itself a power.

- Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 18. The Spectre Haunting Europe.

Now, as I've mentioned before, the principal political debate of the 19th century was conservatives versus liberals. And as I have cautioned you before, be very careful which side you want to jump into on this debate, because the words conservative and liberal do not mean the same thing that they mean today. Liberalism was the bright new thing of the 19th century, and the American and French Revolutions were its birth pangs. Liberalism challenged the age-old order in Europe, which held that a certain readily-identifiable class of people, the aristocracy, are just plain smarter and better than everybody else, and the natural order of society is for those people to lead and everyone else to follow. Against this old order, liberalism proposes a bold new framework: Everyone is equal. Everyone has something to offer. No one should presume to tell another what to think, what to say, what to believe. Every person should be free to find their own way in the world and pursue their own happiness, to coin a phrase. Governments must be equally responsive to every citizen, and every citizen should have a voice in government policy.

A *laissez-faire* economic policy is part of a liberal ideal, but it's only the economic expression of the larger principle that individuals should be free to decide for themselves what they like and what they don't like, what they want and what they don't want, what they should do and what they should refrain from doing. The most radical claim of liberalism is not merely that individuals would know more individual happiness once granted more freedom (that seemed pretty obvious), the radical claim was that to empower the individual is to strengthen the society. To enrich the individual is to enrich the society. To see to the happiness of every citizen is to build a nation that is more stable and more secure.

It's an exciting and revolutionary idea, and it fit hand-in-glove with the Industrial Revolution. No one can question by the end of the 19th century that Europe was better, stronger, richer and happier than it had ever been before.

But at the same time, it cannot be denied that large portions of the populations of even the wealthiest and most advanced European nations are living lives of desperate poverty and abject misery. You may recall that back in episode 8 when I spoke of this era as a golden age. When I described the turn of the century as a golden age to Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century, she remarked that her grandparents certainly didn't describe it that way to her. My own grandfather worked a job in an iron foundry 12 hours a day, a job he commuted to on foot, walking five miles each way, until he died in 1915 at the age of 46 from heart failure. He left behind a widow and 9 children in a world where there were no food stamps, no social security, no workers' compensation.

You may have noticed that in this podcast, I don't like to quote other historians. I prefer to tell history my own way. But I'm going to break my own rule now and read a passage from Barbra Tuchmann's collection of essays *The Proud Tower*, which as I've mentioned before, I highly recommend. I'm going to read this to you because I've already tried and failed to come up with a better way to describe the poverty of the time.

They came from the warrens of the poor, where hunger and dirt were king, where consumptives coughed and the air was thick with the smell of latrines, boiling cabbage and stale beer, where babies wailed and couples screamed in sudden quarrels, where roofs leaked and unmended windows let in the cold blasts of winter, where privacy was unimaginable, where men, women, grandparents and children lived together, eating, sleeping, fornicating, defecating, sickening and dying in one room, where a teakettle served as a wash boiler between meals, old boxes served as chairs, heaps of foul straw as beds, and boards propped across two crates as tables, where sometimes not all the children in a family could go out at one time because there were not enough clothes to go round, where decent families lived among drunkards, wife-beaters, thieves and prostitutes, where life was a seesaw of unemployment and endless toil, where a cigar-maker and his wife earning 13 cents an hour worked seventeen hours a day seven days a week to support themselves and three children, where death was the only exit and the only extravagance and the scraped savings of a lifetime would be squandered on a funeral coach with flowers and a parade of mourners to ensure against the anonymity and last ignominy of Potter's Field.

And that was the great puzzle of the 19th century. Despite the Industrial Revolution and technological and material progress, a good portion of the citizenry were suffering amid misery and deprivation even worse than in previous ages. In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, for instance, a country where feudalism itself had only been abolished in the early 19th century, Italian peasants discovered that under feudalism, they had the right to graze their animals in common land, but now that private property was absolute, they were denied even that. They began to look back on serfdom as the good old days.

The liberal democratic political system that had evolved in the western world during the 19th century didn't seem to have the answer. In the conservative vs. liberal debate, the conservatives simply shrugged and said some men were born to lead, and other men were born to follow. The liberals simply shrugged and said individual employers and individual workers will eventually work it out on their own without need for government direction. But as 1830 became 1850 became 1870 became 1900, and things kept getting worse, liberal promises rang increasingly hollow.

And some people began to wonder whether this increasing poverty was in fact, as we would say in our day, not a bug, but a feature. Not a transient problem to be overcome, but an integral component of the modern economy. Is the misery and degradation of the less fortunate the very wellspring of modern middle-class comforts?

[music: Brahms, *Academic Festival Overture*]

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

-The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, verses 41-45

By the 1830s, social critics in Europe were already attacking the problem of wealth inequality. You may remember Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who coined the word "anarchist" and declared that property was theft. In England, Robert Owen advocated decentralizing the state into local collectives. In Russia, Mikhail Bakunin argued that the ideal society would consist of people organizing themselves freely into associations for the common good without any state at all.

By 1832, these ideas were beginning to be called "socialism", and soon after that came the word "communism". What is socialism, exactly? Well, that's a big question. Socialism means different things to different people, but I'm going to try to cast a wide net here for the sake of thoroughness, because we're going to want to examine different kinds of socialism.

In the broadest sense, socialism means the view that working people are not getting their fair share of the fruits of their labors, and advocates intervention in government, in society, in the economy, to rectify this economic injustice. The terms communism and socialism were first used interchangeably, although communism soon took on the implication of something much more radical than socialism.

Okay, I admit my definition is pretty vague. In particular, the word “intervention” is doing a lot of heavy lifting in my definition. What kind of intervention are we talking about?

I’m being vague about this because there are many different kinds of interventions proposed by many different kinds of socialists. We’re going to be looking at different kinds of socialism, and I think an easy way to categorize them is by what kind of intervention they advocate. Socialists were by no means of one mind on the question of what was the right intervention that would bring justice to the working class. In fact, they will spend the rest of the 19th century, and all of the 20th century, debating among themselves the best way to bring economic justice into the world.

I’ve already talked about the anarchists, you remember them. To the anarchists, property is theft, and the state, as the enforcer of property rights, is the enemy. The state had to be broken through revolution to end the curse of poverty. But the anarchists, you’ll recall, with their singular aversion to any kind of hierarchy, opposed any form of organization to bring about the revolution. Anarchists, needless to say, did not form political parties or stand for election. Other types of socialists saw no problem with forming socialist organizations to bring the day of revolution closer.

Ah, but how do you bring the revolution closer? For that matter, is a revolution the goal, or is the goal evolutionary change to the existing political system?

And here we come to the two problems that socialism has always confronted. First, socialist thinkers and leaders tend not to come from the class of people socialism is meant to save. Oh, some important socialists did rise from the working class, as we will see, but they were always the minority. The thinkers and leaders of the socialist movement tend to be pretty comfortable people themselves. They tend to be professors and academics, writers and journalists. And so from the get-go, the socialist movement has always been vulnerable to the criticism that it is not a movement of the people that it purports to represent, and that the working-class people that socialists presume to speak for aren’t actually interested in socialism.

The second problem is: What is the goal? I’ve already alluded to one of those disputes. Is the goal revolution or is it evolutionary change within the existing system? And even if you’ve decided which of the two sides of that divide you fall on, that doesn’t come close to resolving the question. If you believe in an evolutionary model of socialism, how do you go about changing society? And what changes do you want to make first? If you’re a revolutionary socialist, what is the role of a socialist organization? Is it to raise the consciousness of the working class until the working class are themselves ready to unleash the revolution? Or is it the role of socialists to be the leaders of the revolution themselves? This latter was a doctrine that came to be known as “vanguardism”, since it calls for the socialist movement to be the vanguard of the revolution.

And that brings us to Karl Marx. Karl Marx was born in 1818 in Trier. In college, he studied law, philosophy and economics. He would abandon the Lutheranism of his childhood, become an atheist, and in collaboration with his friend Friedrich Engels spend the rest of his life formulating the most carefully researched and thought-out case for revolutionary socialism ever put to paper. Marx argued that all of human history is the history of the class struggle, and that the stark injustices of capitalism are evidence that the class struggle is now reaching its final stage. The divide between the comfortable elite and the starving and destitute working class would widen into a chasm so vast that the entire capitalist edifice will collapse into it. The collapse of capitalism will lead to socialist government, which will gradually wither away into the sort of stateless utopia the anarchists were always on about.

But how do you bring about the collapse? Some socialists agree with the anarchists that revolutionary violence was the only way, except they didn't have any qualms about organizing it. Others spurned the political process in favor of organizing and educating the working class. This fit hand-in-glove with the rising labor movements of the western world. In particular, socialists in the English-speaking world would see trade unions and labor organizations as one of the best ways to improve the lot of working people, and many would spurn politics. In other countries, especially France and Germany, socialists would organize political parties and seek to elect socialists into the national legislatures. At this time, the only major countries that had universal male suffrage are France and the United States. Most of the energy in the U.S. was going into labor unions, as I said, but universal male suffrage made France a promising place. Similarly, once imperial Germany came together in 1871, it also introduced universal male suffrage for the national legislature, the Reichstag, although not state and local elections, which would have made Germany an attractive place for political socialism were it not for the fact that during the chancellorship of Otto von Bismarck, socialist political parties were banned.

The wily Bismarck tried to take the steam out of the socialist movement by introducing generous worker protections in Germany, and Germany would soon have the most advanced labor laws in the world. At the beginning of the 20th century, German industry was booming, unions were winning wage increases, German workers had workers' compensation, old-age pensions, and government-mandated minimum wages, maximum hours, guaranteed time off, and safety regulations. German regulations even specified minimum requirements for windows and toilets. Well, this is Germany we're talking about.

In 1864, the International Working Men's Association was founded. It would later come to be known as the First International, although of course that's not what they called it at the time. The idea was to bring together various socialist movements under one umbrella organization. Socialists by this time were already a splintered and argumentative lot, as you may have noticed. But at the same time socialism puts a lot of stock into keeping the movement unified so as to bring about the revolution that much sooner, hence the First International. The First International would only last a few years. It quickly polarized between the followers of Marx, with their insistence on a well thought out and organized program of resistance to capitalism culminating in a Marxist state, and the followers of Bakunin, who are anti-state, and dreamed of a world where workers freely came together into voluntary organizations without coercion. Bakunin's critique of Marx was that, should a Marxist revolution ever occur, it would simply remove the existing capitalist elite and replace it with a new Marxist elite. Hmm, we'll have to check back on that.

The First International would end in a schism, with the Bakuninists and the Marxists expelling each other from the organization. A second attempt to organize international socialism would be made at a conference in Paris on July 14, 1889, the hundredth anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, no less. This organization, which history has dubbed the Second International, excluded the anarchists, syndicalists, and labor organizers. This International would be limited to socialist political parties.

But what are socialists supposed to do with political power? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Make things better for the working class? Except, if you believe in revolutionary socialism, in an odd way, reducing the level of misery of the working class a little bit now might postpone the day when working-class misery is abolished altogether, and you might conclude that this would be counterproductive. There's an old story of two socialists walking down the street. A beggar approaches and asks for money. One of the socialists reaches into his pocket, but the other one stops him. "Don't delay the revolution," he says.

And so many socialists, even socialist political parties, oppose reforming the capitalist system on the grounds that capitalism isn't meant to be reformed, it's meant to be destroyed. Some socialist parties would get members elected to a legislature and then simply instruct them to vote "no" on everything in the hopes of gumming up the works and hastening the day when the system collapsed. After all, Marx had already worked it out for us. To the Marxists, Karl Marx was to socialism what Hari Seldon is to the Foundation in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy – the man who had written out the blueprint for how to reach the socialist utopia. And Marx himself had said that it was the contradictions of capitalism that would bring it down, as the benefits of progress concentrated increasingly in the hands of the few while the many found that their own lives were getting no better, or even getting worse.

Marx didn't actually come out and say that what was really needed to bring about the revolution was heightening the contradictions, as some people say today, but that was the implication. For example, Marx supported free trade laws, on the argument that free trade would accelerate the spread of capitalism, therefore accelerating the concentration of capitalist power in fewer hands, and therefore accelerating the revolution.

On the other hand, socialist parties are trying to get themselves put into a position of power through the democratic process. How do you get working people, your natural constituency, to vote for you unless you're willing to work to make their lives better, like advocating minimum wage laws or maximum hours or restrictions on child labor? But that doesn't amount to "maximizing the contradictions" – that's minimizing the contradictions, and thus delaying the revolution.

The Second International itself had trouble reconciling the competing imperatives of the future and the now. The 1889 congress voted four resolutions that laid out their immediate objectives: An eight-hour workday, universal male suffrage, citizen militias in the place of standing armies, and the recognition of May Day as an international workers' day. So you can see right there on the list of objectives the tensions between the needs of today and the imperative of tomorrow.

[music: Brahms, Academic Festival Overture]

Universal suffrage was an important socialist demand, and of course, when I say universal suffrage, I mean universal suffrage for men, although you shouldn't overlook the fact that socialists were among the first to call for equal rights for women. In many countries, political power was restricted to property owners or people of wealth, which deprived the working class of the opportunity to elect their own.

For example, I mentioned that Germany had universal male suffrage for the Reichstag, but not for state elections. In Prussia, one of the German states (and the biggest and most important one), seats on municipal councils were allocated in blocs according to how much tax you paid. The large number of people who paid the bottom third of municipal tax revenue elected $\frac{1}{3}$ of the council. The much smaller group of people who paid the middle third of taxes elected $\frac{1}{3}$ of the council. And a handful who paid the upper third of the taxes elected $\frac{1}{3}$ of the council. The socialists were repeatedly frustrated in these Prussian municipal elections because they regularly filled all the seats allocated to the bottom third of taxpayers, but could not win a single seat in the other two blocs.

Now, I had mentioned that in Germany socialist political parties were banned. This did not mean that socialists could not get elected to the Reichstag, they could and they did, but they had to run as independents, not as a party. That changed in 1890, the year after the Second International was formed, as Bismarck retired and the young new emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II, perhaps feeling a little bit too sure of himself, legalized socialist parties.

In the first election where the SPD, the German Social Democratic Party, could run openly, they won 1.4 million votes. That was 20% of the total votes cast, more than any other German political party. But, owing to the fact that socialist votes were concentrated in the urban industrial regions of Germany (no surprise there), and also given the way the districts were drawn in a way that favored rural conservative voters (you know, the way that districts are drawn in every other country), socialists only won about 9% of the seats in the Reichstag. Still, that was 35 seats out of 397, a respectable bloc of votes, making the SPD the fifth-largest party in the Reichstag.

In the next election, in 1893, the SPD got 1.8 million votes, 23% of the total, still more than any other party, and won 44 seats. Socialist principles, however, required that the SPD remain aloof and not join coalitions with other parties, which limited their legislative effectiveness.

Still, the rest of the socialist world was very impressed. The SPD was an impressive organization. They had trained field organizers steadily working to build the party membership. Given Germany's technological and social development, its high rate of industrialization, its brittle imperial government, and its capable and dynamic socialist party, many socialist thinkers believed Germany was the country most likely to become the first one to transition to socialism.

Kaiser Wilhelm must have believed that, too, because he was coming to regret his youthful tolerance of the SPD. By 1895, he was saying things like: "I regard every social democrat as an enemy of the Empire and fatherland," and called the SPD "a gang of traitors" and "a breed of men who do not deserve the name of Germans". That same year, one of the founders of the SPD, Karl Liebknecht, was arrested and prosecuted for insulting the Kaiser in a speech of which George Bernard Shaw said: "Arthur Balfour might make to the Primrose League with the approbation of all England."

In 1897, the Kaiser declared:

The Party which dares to attack the foundations of our State, which sets itself against religion and does not stop at attacking the person of the All-Highest Ruler must be rooted out to the very last stump.

I should pause here for a moment to announce that for legalizing a political party in 1889 and then condemning it as a gang of traitors and prosecuting its leaders a few years later, I would like to present this week's Kaiser Wilhelm II Award for Making an Ass Out of Yourself to Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Anyway, the German voters weren't very impressed by these imperial condemnations. In the 1898 Reichstag election, over 2 million German voters chose the SPD. That was 27% of the total votes cast, and gave the SPD 56 seats in the Reichstag, making it the second-largest party.

On paper, the SPD endorsed orthodox Marxism, but it was not very orthodox in practice. One of the leading lights of the party at this time was Eduard Bernstein. Eduard Bernstein was a Jewish German born in the Berlin suburbs in 1850. In his youth, he was an orthodox Marxist, but when he had to flee Germany during the crackdown on socialists, he lived in exile for a time, including several years in Britain, and he became impressed with the democratic openness and political resilience of the British parliamentary system. Beginning in 1896, Bernstein wrote a series of articles for SPD publications called "The Problems of Socialism". These articles would be collected and expanded into a book in 1899 entitled *The Evolution of Socialism*.

In brief, Bernstein argued that contrary to Marx, the middle class was not shrinking, it was increasing. And the state of the working class was getting better, too. Capital was not becoming more concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer capitalists of greater and greater power, as Marx had predicted. To the contrary, stock exchanges were spreading capitalist wealth into the hands of more and more people. Bernstein suggested that capitalist society might in fact be able to go on indefinitely, and that socialists would do better to focus their efforts on making the existing system fairer and more equitable. Of the coming revolution and socialist utopia, Bernstein famously declared:

I have little interest in the final goal of socialism. The goal is nothing to me. The movement is everything.

Bernstein returned to Germany in 1901, and became editor of the SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* that year. And soon after that, he got a seat in the Reichstag. You may recall from episode 2 that under Bernstein's leadership, *Vorwärts* began outing the surprising number of closeted gay men among Kaiser Wilhelm's friends, advisors and confidants, even though Bernstein himself was a very early advocate of LGBT rights.

Bernstein's form of socialism came to be called "Revisionism", a pejorative term to orthodox Marxists, and although the SPD officially rejected revisionism, it began embracing it in practice. One of the advantages of revisionism is it gave the party some flexibility to emerge from its political isolation and began working cooperatively with other political parties.

This question came to a head after the election of 1903, when the SPD collected 3 million votes, 32% of the total, gaining it 81 seats in the Reichstag. Under the imperial German system, this entitled the SPD to take one of the Reichstag vice presidencies. But, if an SPD member assumed the position of vice president, protocol demanded that he pay an official call upon the kaiser, dressed in the court costume: knee breeches with long stockings and buckled shoes.

The prospect of a socialist in knee breeches triggered days of furious debate within SPD leadership. To do such a thing was an insult to the 3 million Germans who voted SPD, some argued. And anyway, this was just a formality and it would not increase SPD power in the Reichstag. Bernstein shot back that what mattered was not how a socialist dressed, but how he voted. But the orthodox view prevailed, and the knee breeches stayed in the closet.

French socialists had experienced a similar debate in 1899. You may recall from episode 8 that 1899 was the year that Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason for a second time. This created such an uproar that it brought down the French government, and the French President, Émile Loubet, appointed a new Prime Minister, Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau, whose government issued a blanket amnesty. Given the turmoil that the Dreyfus Affair was creating, Waldeck-Rousseau tried to create a broad-based government to address the controversy, and so he was looking for some socialist support, and he offered a cabinet position, minister of commerce and industry, to a socialist deputy, Alexandre Millerand, who accepted.

The Second international was appalled at the thought of a socialist serving in a bourgeois government, all the more so because also serving in the same government was Waldeck-Rousseau's choice for war minister, none other than the Marquis de Gallifet, the general who had put down the Paris Commune uprising back in 1871, which to many socialists was the first real-world attempt at a socialist revolution. Imagine a socialist serving in the same government as the butcher of the Commune. Others pointed out what a victory it was for socialism that the republic could not be saved without the support of the proletariat.

The debate between orthodox Marxism vs. revisionism, between compromise and accommodation with other political parties vs. purity and isolationism, will bedevil the Second International well into the 20th century, much the same way that the debate between Marxism and anarchism bedeviled the First International.

The socialist left has always put a premium on unity and solidarity. Naturally, if you're fighting for the disempowered working class against the aristocrats and the capitalists and their lackeys in the military, solidarity is essential. But whatever the left's commitment to solidarity in the abstract, the socialist left has a long tradition of theoretical debates and endless infighting over questions that seem obscure, borderline theological, to the outside observer. Nevertheless, this quarrelsome group of mostly writers and journalists, doctors and professionals, largely middle-class people taking up the cause of the working poor, will have a profound impact on the 20th century.

We'll have to stop there for today. If you like *The History of the Twentieth Century* and you haven't done it yet, why not head on over to the iTunes store and give us a nice rating and review? That will help other people find the podcast, people who hopefully will enjoy it as much as you do. And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we visit Africa and probe the Heart of Darkness. Spoiler alert: It's not just a novel. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Russian Social Democratic Party didn't have to concern itself with knee breeches or offers of cabinet positions. Russia didn't even have a parliament, or elections, and the Social Democratic Party there was illegal. Their first congress was held in secret in Minsk in 1898, and resulted in everyone attending being arrested. Nevertheless, they had their internal disputes.

In 1902, one of the exiled leaders of the party, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, writing under the pen name of "Lenin", published a pamphlet in Germany entitled *What Is To Be Done?* It was banned in Russia. Lenin laid out his vision of how Russia could be transformed into a socialist state, revealing himself to be a vanguardist. Basically, he argued, in fierce opposition to the revisionists, that the only way socialism would come would be through violent revolution led by a single man or small group of men, who would have to seize control of the country lest the uneducated working-class masses be led astray.

The second congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party was held in 1903 in Brussels, until the Belgian government, pressured by the Russian government, forced them to leave the country. So they reconvened their congress in London, where Lenin took a leading role. Lenin proved to be fanatically stubborn in his convictions and unwilling to compromise, or even listen to criticism, even criticism from fellow party members with impeccable credentials. Lenin got his way on most of the votes in the congress, but although the congress was close to evenly split between Lenin's followers and his opponents, Lenin afterward began referring to his opponents in the Social Democratic Party as "the Minority" and his followers as "the Majority" – or in Russian, the "Bolsheviks". The split between Lenin's followers and his opponents would divide the Russian Social Democratic Party for years to come.

And back in Russia, the Russian secret police began funnelling money and support to Lenin, because they saw him as a controversial and inflammatory figure who was dividing and weakening the Russian socialist movement.

[music: Closing Theme]