



The tasks of our times: Kautsky's *Road to Power* in Germany and Russia

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Abstract

Kautsky's *Road to Power* (*Der Weg zur Macht*, 1909. <https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/kautsky/1909/macht/index.htm>) was received in very different ways in Germany and Russia. In Germany, it earned Kautsky hostility from the trade-unionists on the right of the party and the radicals on the left. Later writers dismiss the book as preaching “revolutionary passivity.” In Russia, the Bolsheviks immediately seized on the book as an endorsement of specifically Bolshevik positions. After the war broke out, they used it to show that Kautsky was a renegade who did not live up to his stated views. In the end, *Road to Power* helped inspire Kautsky's greatest fans turned fiercest foes to make what he considered a tragic mistake: the October revolution.

Keywords Kautsky · Lenin · Bolshevism · Social democracy · Russian revolution
Marxism

Der Weg zur Macht, a small book written by K. Kautsky in 1909 and translated into many European languages contains a most complete exposition of the tasks of our times ... and moreover it came from the pen of the most eminent writer of the Second International.

(Lenin, December 1914)

Karl Kautsky operated as the hub of an intense and energetic international network that circulated texts, information, and ideological frameworks. Not only did he produce an impressive number of texts himself, but they were translated and diffused across the globe. The flow was not only from Kautsky outwards; socialists from many countries wrote directly to Kautsky or dealt with him personally.¹

¹ A whole book has been written on Kautsky and the Russian Marxists (Donald 1993). For Kautsky's correspondence with socialists in Iran, see *The Left in Iran* (2010).

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A book-length bibliography of Kautsky's writings published in 1960 gives us some dimensions of this phenomenon (Blumenberg 1960). In a literary career spanning from 1875 to 1938, Kautsky published close to 1800 books, articles, interviews, and reviews (over 1200 prior to World War I, over 1400 prior to the October revolution). There are translations of these works into Bulgarian, Chinese, Czech and Slovak, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, Georgian, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Latvian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Rumanian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Swedish, Tatar, Ukrainian and Yiddish. As the publication data shows, many of Kautsky's works retained their resonance for years and decades. The recent revival of interest in Kautsky has led to the appearance in English of yet more of his significant works.²

As Blumenberg's (1960) bibliography reveals, the most intense foreign audience for Kautsky's works was Russia. Blumenberg's list of Kautsky publications in Russia has recently been updated and considerably expanded by Moira Donald, who shows the continued influence of Kautsky well into the Soviet era, despite Kautsky's virulent opposition to the Bolshevik system (Donald 1993). As Lenin wrote in *State and Revolution*, generously but accurately:

Undoubtedly, an immeasurably larger number of Kautsky's works have been translated into Russian than into any other language. It is not without justification that German Social Democrats sometimes say jokingly that Kautsky is more read in Russia than in Germany (we may say, in parentheses, that there is deeper historical significance in this joke than those who first made it suspected; for the Russian workers, by making in 1905 an unusually great and unprecedented demand for the best works of the best Social Democratic literature and editions of these works in quantities unheard of in other countries, rapidly transplanted, so to speak, the enormous experience of a neighboring, more advanced country to the young soil of our proletarian movement) (Lenin 1958–1964, 33:104).

The direct, detailed and manifold impact of Kautsky on the Bolsheviks at all stages has been consistently ignored, underplayed or even denied. In the years following the 1905 revolution, Kautsky's role as Bolshevik mentor was understood by all Russian factions. Despite the intense personal and political opposition between Kautsky and Lenin that developed after 1914, Lenin never lost his admiration for "Kautsky when he was a Marxist"—indeed, his central accusation against his former mentor was that Kautsky had betrayed his own ideas.

Kautsky served as a guide and as an authoritative endorsement for the Bolsheviks in three distinct areas. First, his *Erfurt Program* of 1891 remained the classic exposition of what it meant to be a "revolutionary Social Democrat"—that is, it provided a basis for Bolshevik political self-identification. As such, it remained more crucial to the political education of Bolsheviks than any work by any Russian Marxist. Second, in his seminal 1906 article "Driving Forces and Prospects

² For examples, see Kautsky (1988) (his major work *The Agrarian Question*), Day and Gaido (2009, 2012) (these collections include many influential essays by Kautsky), and Kautsky (2011) (one of many recent Kautsky translations by Ben Lewis).

of the Russian Revolution,” he provided what the Bolsheviks themselves lauded as the best exposition of their fundamental tactic of “hegemony.” Thirdly, in a series of writings commencing with *The Social Revolution* of 1902 and finishing with *Road to Power* in (1909), Kautsky provided a wide-ranging global portrait of “a new era of war and revolution.” This list merely gives us the highlights of the Kautsky writings that were meaningful to the Bolsheviks and to Lenin personally.

After *Road to Power*, the relations between Kautsky and the Bolsheviks became progressively more strained, ending in mutual anathema. For this and other reasons, *Road to Power* can be seen as a *summa*, a culminating exposition, of Kautsky’s sense of “the new era of war and revolutions.” Yet, despite Kautsky’s eminence as *the* theorist of international Social Democracy, the status of *Road to Power* as an expression of socialist orthodoxy was immediately contested from various directions. Kautsky’s three prefaces illustrate the point. In the first preface of 1909, he was constrained by nervous party officials to add a disclaimer: “I alone, and not my party, am responsible for what I have written, insofar as it is not based on our program and on the resolutions of our Party congresses” (Kautsky 1996, xxxviii). In the preface to the second edition of 1910, Kautsky responded to criticisms from trade-union officials on the right of the party. In the preface of the third edition in 1920, Kautsky responded to criticism from radical leftists inspired by the Bolshevik revolution. The polemic between Kautsky and the leftists was a strange one: each side claimed that the other side was the only one to change their views.

The dispute over the meaning of *Road to Power* has not dissipated over the years. Kautsky’s book was reissued in France in 1969 with an introduction by Victor Fay, and a new English translation was issued in 1996 edited by John H. Kautsky (Karl’s grandson). Both Fay and John Kautsky argued that Lenin’s praise of Kautsky’s book was based on a misunderstanding—although Fay made the point in order to protect Lenin’s reputation and John Kautsky in order to protect his grandfather’s reputation. Neither editor, it must be said, displayed a real sense of why the Bolsheviks so strongly admired Kautsky’s *summa*.

In his classic study of German Social Democracy in the decade prior to the war, Carl Schorske asserts that *Road to Power* essentially counseled passivity and a truce between revisionists and radicals. He sums up its message in this way:

Social Democracy would move neither toward further acceptance of the existing order, nor toward action to hasten its collapse. It would organize and agitate, and maintain its moral integrity while waiting for the ruling class to destroy itself ... The proletariat would be the passive beneficiary of the process thanks to having maintained its oppositional integrity.³

Schorske’s description hardly prepares us for its enthusiastic reception by the Russian Bolsheviks, a party not usually associated with passivity. Consider the description of *Road to Power* by Lenin’s top lieutenant, Zinoviev (1909): “It sets

³ Schorske seems unaware of the scandal surrounding the publication of *Road to Power* and of the intense antipathy it aroused in trade-union circles, as discussed below (Schorske 1955, 111–115).

out perspectives for the future struggle of the revolutionary proletariat and, in view of all this, serves as a newly formulated and fully rounded exposition of orthodox Social Democracy on the situation facing us today—the ‘platform,’ to use Russian terminology, of the left wing of the party” (Zinoviev 1909). The Bolsheviks never repudiated this judgment, even after the October revolution.

How could the same message be passive in Germany and the opposite in Russia? Because—or so I shall argue—Germany was Germany and Russia was Russia. The underlying presupposition of Kautsky’s view of the world was that Social Democracy represented “the merger of socialism and the worker movement”—that is, the mutual reinforcement of long-term socialist goals and here-and-now worker protest. In Germany, this merger was falling apart by 1909, dooming Kautsky’s strategy to irrelevance and passivity. In Russia, the merger was still vital and provided the basis for the October revolution. In fact, counter-intuitive as it may seem, 1917 was a revolution à la Kautsky.

Road to Power: the argument

The title *Der Weg zur Macht*—the path or road to power—expresses two basic themes of revolutionary Social Democracy. The metaphor of a path to socialism evokes a long and often torturous journey but with a fixed and inspiring destination that served as “the star to every wandering bark.” The path metaphor remained central to Bolshevik and Soviet imagery, from Bukharin’s book *Path to Socialism* in 1925 to the glasnost-era query “which path leads to the temple?” (Lih 2006). *Macht* does not here simply mean “power” in quantitative terms: the ability to bend others to one’s will. It refers rather to legitimate sovereignty and authority in the state. The heart of Marxism for Kautsky and his generation was the proletariat’s mission to acquire this state power in order to establish socialism. The Russian equivalent of *Macht* is *vlast*, a word that appears in the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” (*Vsia vlast’ sovetam!*).

Road to Power grew out of a series of previous articles in which Kautsky sparred with the revisionists who argued that a socialist transformation of society could be achieved by means of a *Hineinwachsen* or “growing in,” as opposed to the sudden break of a revolutionary transfer of state power into the hands of a new ruling class.⁴ Thus the subtitle: *Political Reflections on Growing into the Revolution*. Kautsky’s polemic against revisionists such as Eduard Bernstein went back over a decade, but it had entered a decisive new phase in 1902 with the appearance of *The Social Revolution* (instantly translated into Russian by Lenin). Not contenting himself just with poking holes in Bernstein, Kautsky now sketched out a portrait of contemporary Europe where class antagonisms were sharpening rather than softening. By 1909, with the Russo-Japanese war and the ensuing Russian revolution under his belt, Kautsky expanded his vision of a stormy revolutionary era to global dimensions.

⁴ For a discussion of these previous articles, see Salvadori (1979). For further background on the context for *Road to Power*, see Stenson (1980).

A first-person paraphrase of the book's overall argument follows [Kautsky's exact words are in quotation marks; page numbers in the text here and later refer to Kautsky's (1996) English-language edition]:

When looking back at developments over the last decade (1899–1909), many socialists have concluded that class antagonisms seemed to have softened, due to a prolonged economic upswing, the growth of worker organizations such as trade unions and cooperatives, and the progress of social reforms. Even “many strata” of the proletariat no longer see radical opposition as necessary. Perhaps the old recipe of proletarian class rule is no longer necessary; perhaps we can smoothly “grow in” to socialism without a catastrophic upheaval.

But much of the new success of bourgeois society is due to imperialism, both as a practical policy and as an organizing ideal, and imperialism will eventually destroy the pious hope of “growing in.” The imperialist ideal allows the bourgeoisie to unite most of the non-proletarian classes into a single bloc. The grandiose name of Kaiser Wilhelm's colonial policy—*Weltpolitik*—creates the aura of a heroic program. Bourgeois and petty-bourgeois democrats have by and large subscribed to the imperialist ideal: the old desire for abolition of the standing army has been replaced by support for military spending. Imperialism has thus been adopted as a great rallying cry and a positive ideal for an otherwise worn-out society. Even many socialists have been seduced by imperialist ideology—of course, such socialists insist on “ethical” colonialism with a “civilizing mission.”

Imperialism is “the last refuge of capitalism,” since expansionist policies allow a temporary escape from periodic crises and long-term stagnation. But in reality, the new age of imperialism merely assures vaster and more devastating social conflict. At home, entrepreneurial organizations such as cartels and trusts have grown to immense size and influence; in consequence, they are so truculent that normal trade-union methods will no longer bring the same results. “When the trade unions have to deal with the large entrepreneurial organizations, they can, admittedly, not directly harm them. However, their struggles with such organizations are growing to a gigantic size; they are able to convulse the entire society, the whole state, to influence governments and parliaments, if the employers refuse to make any concessions” (67).

The imperialist coalition's hold on the intermediate classes is likewise precarious. The immense burdens imposed on the population by militarism and navalism will strain their loyalty. Furthermore, the inner emptiness of the imperialist ideal leads to a growth in self-seeking and corruption that continually shocks the sensibilities of the intermediate classes. Bourgeois parliamentarism is more and more of a sham: “professional politicians, members of parliament, journalists” are “clerks of the capitalists” who are increasingly bought off by “the rulers of high finance” (85–86).

Abroad, the expansion of imperialism has been brought to a standstill by the resistance of the non-European peoples. Imperialism proceeds on the assumption that other peoples are “children, idiots or beasts of burden”; the socialists who

support imperialism don't really disagree, although they wish to direct the destinies of other nations in an "ethical" manner. "But reality soon teaches [socialist supporters of "ethical" imperialism] that our party's tenet that all men are equal is no mere figure of speech, but a very real force" (81).

The non-European peoples will fight back—indeed, they have already begun to do so, inspired by Japan's victory over Russia in 1905. A new revolutionary period is beginning in the East: "a period of conspiracies, coups d'état, uprisings, reactions and renewed rebellions, continuous upheavals, that will last until the conditions required for a tranquil development and secure national independence of that part of the world have been achieved" (83–84). These resistance struggles may not be strictly speaking socialist, but they are still highly damaging to imperialism.

Imperialism is also a domestic threat. It is blocking the way even to the most necessary political and social reforms. Intransigent entrepreneurial organizations, high taxes to support militarism, threatened attacks on the inadequate political rights conquered in the past—all these dispel the illusion of peaceful "growing in." Socialist support for imperialism is therefore intolerable: "the fight against imperialism and militarism is the common task of the entire international proletariat" (70).

Social reforms are no longer thinkable without "political struggles, shifts of power and upheavals": the proletariat "cannot achieve democracy and the elimination of militarism ... without itself attaining to a dominant position in the state" (72). Perhaps the German elites will try to escape this situation by means of war—but "war means revolution, it results in enormous shifts in political power." Therefore, one can no longer speak of a *premature* socialist revolution in Europe: the foreseeable future will very probably "bring about considerable shifts in power to the proletariat's advantage and could even lead to its exclusive rule in Western Europe"—in other words, the dictatorship of the proletariat (84, 42, 6).

The new age of revolutions also has profound implications for Social Democracy's leadership tasks. "No matter how much the organization of the proletariat grows, it will never, in normal, non-revolutionary periods, comprehend the totality of the laboring classes in a state, but always only an elite that is raised above the masses of the population by some special occupational, local or individual characteristics" (46). Furthermore, the proletariat is always being supplemented by fresh supplies from the countryside who are far from grasping the significance of social revolution: "winning them for the idea of socialism is an indispensable, but under normal circumstances, an uncommonly difficult task" (51). But circumstances are becoming less and less normal, and we must remember that "the attractive power of class organizations in revolutionary periods, when even the weakest feel fighting fit and eager to do combat, depends only on the size of the classes whose interests they represent" (46).

The new age of revolutions can potentially transform Social Democracy's relation to the petty bourgeois. We should not write him off because of his present hostility, since an outbreak of war or some other catastrophe might enrage him. "One day, under intolerable pressure from taxation and shaken by a sudden moral collapse of those in power, he might swing over to us *en masse* and perhaps thereby sweep away our opponents and decide the struggle in our favor. And, in truth, that is the smartest thing he could do, for the victorious proletariat can offer to all who are

not exploiters, to all who are oppressed and exploited, including those who are now vegetating as petty bourgeois and small peasants, an enormous improvement of their living conditions" (88).

International tension is now so high that an outbreak of war is more than likely—indeed, the main thing now preventing war is fear of a proletarian revolution. And this is not a baseless fear: "The proletariat hates war with all its might; it will do its utmost to prevent a mood of bellicosity from arising. If, nevertheless, a war should break out, the proletariat is, at the present time, the class that can look forward to its outcome with the greatest confidence" (84).

Marx and Engels saw the battlefield of proletarian revolution mainly in Western Europe. In contrast, resistance to imperialism at home and abroad means that Social Democracy must learn to think globally: "Today, the battle in the liberation struggle of laboring and exploited humanity are being fought not only at the Spree River and the Seine, but also at the Hudson and Mississippi, at the Neva and the Dardanelles, at the Ganges and the Hoangho" (91).

A successful revolution arises out of an objectively revolutionary situation that has the following essential features: a regime hostile to the mass of the people; a crisis of confidence on the part of the bureaucracy and the army; the existence of a "large party of irreconcilable opposition" that represents the interests of the vast majority and has its trust (45). The crisis of imperialism will fulfill many of these preconditions, but the Social Democrats must be ready to provide the necessary revolutionary leadership.

Above all, in this new age of revolutions, we must remain true to our heritage of irreconcilable opposition. To compromise now, to go soft on imperialism or even join a coalition government, would be to commit moral suicide. Our greatest strength is the power and inspiring force of our ideal. We can keep our head when all about us are losing theirs. "The more the Social Democratic Party maintains itself as an imperturbable power in the midst of the perturbations of authority of every kind, all the higher will its authority rise" (89). The party must stand uncompromisingly for a "great idea, a great goal," one that will "unleash all the energy and devotion" that lie below the surface in non-revolutionary periods (70, 84, 89, 46).

Road to Power in Germany: the demerger of socialism and the worker movement

Road to Power ran into an unexpected roadblock when it was first issued in early 1909: "the Party Executive Committee (*Parteivorstand*), with only one dissenting vote ... prohibited its further distribution by the official Party publishing house *Vorwärts*" (Kautsky 1996, xxii). The stated reason was a fear that certain statements in the book would allow the state prosecutor to bring charges against the party as a whole. As an example, the party lawyer pointed to the final sentence of the book: "Fortunate are those destined to take part in this sublime struggle and share in this glorious victory!" The lawyer explained that "as sympathetic as I am to this sentence, I consider it the most worrying of the whole book, because it could be seen as an incitement to revolution in the sense of Section 85 of the penal code, whereas the

rest of the book represents only a study of the maturation and course of the revolution to come” (Kautsky 1969, 194).

The stakes were not small: such a prosecution could send Kautsky to prison and do great damage to the party. Nevertheless, dark suspicions quickly arose among Kautsky and his friends that the real problem was disapproval of the book’s radical political message by the revisionists and by the entrenched party and trade-union bureaucracy. My own guess is that this kind of disapproval was not the motive but that it colored the perceptions and judgments of the party leaders.

An intense fight over this decision—largely hidden from the public—immediately played itself out in the Control Commission of the party. Here Kautsky’s champion was Clara Zetkin, one of the leaders of the left wing of the party. After much infighting, the final decision was to issue *Road to Power* as a party publication in April 1909, after a number of editorial changes. Kautsky added a sentence to the preface taking personal responsibility for the views therein expressed. John Kautsky has examined the many small verbal changes in the main text and concludes that they were “minor indeed, and did not significantly affect the substance or even the tone of his work ... almost all changes merely eliminated the word ‘revolution,’ which would seem to make little difference as that word still appears over and over again throughout the second edition.”⁵ The allegedly subversive final sentence remained untouched.

Who won and who lost in this brouhaha? Kautsky’s friend Hugo Haase assured him that he had won a moral victory, giving up inessentials for the sake of party peace. His opinion is seconded today by pro-Kautsky chroniclers such as John Kautsky and Gary Steenson. Clara Zetkin was completely disgusted with the outcome and with Kautsky for accepting it. Her opinion is seconded by Victor Fay, the French leftist who wrote a preface for the French edition of 1969.⁶

Whether victory or defeat, all participants were exasperated with each other. The leader of the SPD, August Bebel, wrote to Victor Adler that

If Karl had possessed the sense of solidarity he should have, then he would, after our decision, have announced the first time that he gave up on further distribution. We all asserted that we did not have the slightest objection to the tendency of the work, but that we could, in the present situation, not wish for a trial of high treason, least of all for him, and that, besides, the work was an inexhaustible source of charges against the party ... Karl has no feel for these tactical questions, he contemplates, as if hypnotized, the goal, and has no interest in, or understanding of, anything else. (107–108)

Clara Zetkin angrily wrote directly to Kautsky:

⁵ Kautsky (1996, xxiii and xxxv). John Kautsky identifies the version issued in April 1909 to the second edition, with the result that the second edition was issued twice, once in April 1909, and then in July 1910 with a preface (xlv). But the text of the prefaces indicate that Kautsky himself regarded the modified text issued in April 1909 as still the first edition, since he says in the 1910 preface published that “I have seen no reason to alter even a single word of any significance” in the second edition (xxxix), a statement that is not true if April 1909 represented the second edition.

⁶ References.

Words and actions seem to have lost all meaning for you, if you call this love affair a “victory.” It is out-and-out capitulation ... In the interest of restoring the health of our Party life, there was only one thing to do: to try and see that the [central committee] got the public thrashing they deserve for their disgraceful behavior ... So you capitulate, and worse still: by your capitulation you let down those who wanted to use the situation in the interest of the Party as a whole. (116)

Kautsky himself bitterly complained:

It is not our Party interest that is being expressed here, but a brutally domineering position that treats me like a coolie who cannot obtain his rights at any price ...

Events are working in our favor. But what *we* can do is take advantage of these events, that is missing. If in earlier times our leaders speeded our progress as far as individuals can do so, they now obstruct it as far as individuals can. (111, 95)

As soon as the book came out, it was attacked by the official trade-union organization in a pamphlet entitled *Sisyphian Labor or Positive Successes?* According to the trade-union caricature, Kautsky condemned the trade unions to ultimately meaningless efforts, since their methods would not lead to any permanent improvement in living conditions. In his preface to the second edition, Kautsky remarked on the “intentionally offensive” quality of the trade-union pamphlet (xxxix). He denied that he had ever talked about a “labor of Sisyphus.” His argument was rather that a *political* crisis was brewing, so that the great successes achieved by strictly *economic* trade-union work during the previous decade could not be duplicated in the decade to come. This diagnosis, Kautsky insisted, was not a rejection of the trade unions—far from it!—but a call to the party as a whole to shift to more political tasks:

Not a *policy of alliance*, but only *mass action*, and specifically the action of the organized masses, can move us ahead today. *Massiveness of scale and organization*—those are the weapons suitable to the proletariat’s economic situation. Only with them can it stand its ground and gain victory. But proletarian mass organization and mass action means *trade-union* organization and action.

We make no advances without political conquests. But we cannot win political victories without the help of strong unions that are capable of struggle and conscious of their strength. (xliv)

Underneath this dispute we can easily see the forces leading to schism a few years later. Kautsky’s vision of Social Democracy was “the merger of socialism and the worker movement.” In practical terms, this formula meant that radical intellectuals such as Clara Zetkin and trade-union functionaries such as Carl Legien could work together in one party—that the party could and would fight harder for *current* reforms because they were seen as steps toward the *final* goal of socialism. A demerger would leave sectarian socialists without mass support and a worker movement unable to fight even for radical democratic change. And this was exactly what

was happening when the scandal over *Road to Power* exposed the growing mutual incomprehension. The result? Kautsky, truly inspired by the vision of the merger of socialism and the worker movement, ended up despised by both sides.

***Road to Power* in Russia: Bolshevik enthusiasm**

Grigory Zinoviev reviewed *Road to Power* in the party journal *Sotsial-Demokrat* immediately following publication (Zinoviev 1909). Lenin himself did not find occasion to mention Kautsky's book until 1914, but, as we shall see, there is no reason to doubt that he shared Zinoviev's enthusiasm. The opening paragraph shows Zinoviev's awareness of some of the scandal surrounding the publication of *Road to Power*. For him, Kautsky's Aesopian language added to the glamor of the book:

Path to Power is the title of the most recent book by K. Kautsky, a work considered by the German socialist press to be an event in international socialist literature. This new work is a continuation of *The Social Revolution* by the same author; it touches on so many "delicate" questions for the ruling classes that even in Germany, with its relative freedom of press, Kautsky had to reckon with "circumstances beyond his control" and occasionally had to find ways of expressing his ideas with the state prosecutor in mind.

Kautsky's work, along with its great significance for general politics, has also, of course, large implications specifically for Social Democracy. His book sums up the events of the last five years: revolution in Russia, the awakening of the East, the regrouping of social forces in Germany, the successes of the proletariat in Austria, the sharpening of the class struggle in England, and so forth ... This new work of Kautsky's has already sparked off a battle between the orthodox and the revisionists, and this battle is still expanding, providing us with the opportunity once more to judge the respective positions of the two camps as applied to the vital questions of today. (Zinoviev 1909)

The focus of Zinoviev's review was thus on the clash between orthodox versus revisionist, a.k.a. revolutionary Social Democrat versus opportunist, a.k.a. (in Russia) Bolshevik versus Menshevik. Zinoviev had no doubt that Kautsky's authority weighed in completely on the Bolshevik side of the scales, and he was able to cite attacks on Kautsky by the Menshevik leader Iulii Martov to confirm the point.

As we look through Zinoviev's review, a surprising fact becomes evident: the lessons that Zinoviev extracted from *Road to Power* serve as an accurate and comprehensive guide to the Bolshevik stance during the war years and even during 1917. In fact, the Bolsheviks themselves insisted on this continuity. Let us survey Zinoviev's conclusions about proper Social Democratic tactics in relation to the proletariat, the "petty bourgeoisie," the progressive liberals, and society at large.

Workers: the merger of socialism and the worker movement Kautsky is sometimes caricatured as someone who believed only in legal, peaceful, reformist and "parliamentary" work, but his opponents at the time accused him of the exact opposite. Zinoviev even feels called upon to insist that Kautsky *did* believe in "positive" work,

if undertaken with the proper revolutionary spirit. Zinoviev's comments reveal how the canonical merger was supposed to work:

Social Democracy remains true to itself when it uses the most legal, most "lawful" methods of struggle while bringing revolutionary content to this legal activity; when participating in the most petty everyday conflicts, Social Democracy illuminates every detail, every small issue, from the point of view of socialism and revolution, thus turning the most "lawful" methods into the most revolutionary. (Zinoviev 1909)

Petty bourgeoisie: alliance versus isolation Kautsky's book does not spend any time on the topic where his authority was most vital for the Russian Bolsheviks: his endorsement of their tactics of a revolutionary alliance with the peasantry. On this subject, Zinoviev focuses on explaining the *contrast* between Germany and Russia that implies a refusal of alliances in the one case and an insistence on an alliance in the other. Zinoviev argues that an alliance with the peasantry is justifiable in Russia because Russia is undergoing a *bourgeois-democratic revolution* and not yet an exclusively socialist/proletarian one.

Debates among the Bolsheviks in April 1917 have been totally misunderstood because this rule of Bolshevik discourse has been ignored. Those Bolsheviks who insisted that Russia was undergoing a bourgeois-democratic revolution were not vowing *support* for the Provisional Government but instead insisting on the need for the peasant ally in order to *overthrow* it. Nevertheless, the Russia angle is not prominent in *Road to Power* itself, so we will spend no further time here on it.

Liberals: Anti-agreementism The issue of "agreements" with liberal progressives is central for Zinoviev:

The issue of the relation of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie (both liberal and democratic), of possible blocs and agreements [*soglasheniia*] with it, of the growth or the blunting of contradictions between it and the proletariat, and so forth, has for a long time been the central point of dispute between Marxists and revisionists in all countries. Kautsky too considers it important at present to underline that on this issue the revolutionary Marxists are still insufficiently "narrow," insufficiently decisive, that even Marx along with Engels and the most loyal of their followers—despite their energetically negative attitude toward any kind of agreement [*soglasheniia*], conciliation, or adaptation to the bourgeois democrats—nevertheless looked on such agreements way too optimistically and overvalued them. (Zinoviev 1909)

I stress the Russian word *soglasheniia*, because in 1917 the fairly neutral Russian word for "agreements" was turned into the abusive label "agreementism" or *soglashatelstvo*. The critique of agreementism became the heart of the Bolshevik message during the revolutionary year. In a footnote, Zinoviev quotes an eloquent tirade by Parvus against Mensheviks who called for revolutionary socialists to moderate their stance for the time being for the sake of a larger alliance against reactionary forces. Parvus's tirade could have appeared in *Pravda* in 1917 with very little change:

Of all the movements in Russian society, the bourgeoisie has up to now always been tagging behind. You would think this fact would lead to reflection [on the part of the Mensheviks]. But instead of drawing political conclusions from this historical fact and testing their basic assumptions, people blame history for not acting according to plan and order other social strata to move backwards, so that the line of advance will not become unequal. “Step to the side, gentlemen, give way to the *burzhui*! Keep it down, he’s easily frightened. Watch your manners, for he’s been well brought up. Don’t get carried away, because he doesn’t like being irritated—don’t remind him of material sacrifices, because he’s far from altruistic. And don’t try to take the lead—your place is in the back!” The retreat of the opposition along the whole line—that is what these people mean by a united opposition. (Zinoviev 1909)

Society: a new era of revolutions. Zinoviev ends his review by emphasizing Kautsky’s view that the situation in 1909 was only “the calm before the storm” and that “a new era of revolutions” was on the horizon. This new era had several dimensions, including national liberation movements on a global scale and direct socialist revolution in Western Europe. Zinoviev expressed the solidarity of the Bolsheviks with Kautsky’s assertion that “the spirit of resistance is spreading everywhere in Asia and Africa, along with uprisings against European exploitation, accompanied by the use of European arms.”

Zinoviev is already convinced in 1909 that war will lead to revolution. So obvious is this connection in his mind that he thinks that the ruling classes are also aware of it: “the ruling classes would have set off a war long ago, if they were not faced with the inevitable alternative of sparking off a revolution.” Reading Zinoviev’s review, we can get some idea of the frustration and disillusionment experienced by the Bolsheviks when the war did break out and the Social Democrats did—nothing.

The need for revolutionary purity Zinoviev sums up Kautsky’s anti-“agreementist” polemic in stronger terms than can be found in the book itself:

The international situation is becoming extraordinarily tense, the dense ball of capitalist society’s contradictions is becoming ever more entangled, the sharpness of class antagonisms is growing. Social Democracy, in Kautsky’s opinion, must conduct a purge of its own ranks, it must free itself from petty-bourgeois elements, it must stand out more sharply than ever before against the politics of blocs and agreements with the bourgeoisie. (Zinoviev 1909)

After the war began and majorities in most Social Democratic parties not only refused to work for revolution but actually supported the war effort, the appalled Bolsheviks remained loyal to this recipe: they called for revolution (“turn the imperialist war into a civil war”) and a new, purified Third International. Many writers argue that Lenin underwent a massive rethinking after the war broke out, but Zinoviev’s article shows why the Bolsheviks themselves claimed the contrary: in their view, they remained loyal to the standard outlook of “orthodox” Marxists before the war—rethinking and renegacy was left to their opponents.⁷

⁷ I examine the rethinking interpretation in more detail in Lih (2014).

We cannot say—and ultimately the question is unimportant—to what extent the Russian Bolsheviks actually derived their views from Kautsky or to what extent they used him simply as an authoritative endorsement of their own independent views. Nevertheless, as Zinoviev's review shows, the Bolsheviks saw *Road to Power* as a “platform” of revolutionary Social Democracy and they thought of themselves as the Russian branch of this international movement. After 1914, Bolshevik intransigence was widely derided as marginal, but they themselves defiantly claimed to be mainstream.

***Road to Power* in Russia: war and revolution**

After war broke out in summer 1914, Lenin was infuriated by what he considered the shameful conduct of Kautsky. As he wrote to Aleksandr Shliapnikov, “I hate and despise Kautsky now more than anyone, with his vile, dirty, self-satisfied hypocrisy” (Lenin 1960–1968, 35:167). Lenin's anger did not mean he repudiated Zinoviev's high assessment of *Road to Power*. On the contrary, he used Kautsky's book to explain to Shliapnikov *why* he was so angry with Kautsky personally: “Obtain without fail and reread (or ask to have it translated for you) *Road to Power* by Kautsky [and see] what he writes there about the revolution of our time! And now, how he acts the toady and disavows all that!” (Lenin 1958–1964, 49:24).

Lenin took his own advice, judging from an article published in December 1914 entitled “Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism” in which he cited chapter and verse to demonstrate the excellence of Kautsky's analysis (Lenin 1960–1968, 21:94–101). The result gives us a very rare opportunity to observe a Marxist leader in the very act of reading another Marxist leader, so I will give the relevant passage *in extenso*. As scholarly value added, I have inserted page numbers to the specific passages quoted by Lenin (the references are to the 1996 English-language edition). These page numbers bring out Lenin's simple procedure: he sat down, went through the book page by page, and found something he liked every few pages.

For decades, German Social-Democracy was a model to the Social-Democrats of Russia, even somewhat more than to the Social-Democrats of the whole world. It is therefore clear that there can be no intelligent, i.e., critical, attitude towards the now reigning social-patriotism or “socialist” chauvinism, without a most precise definition of one's attitude towards German Social-Democracy, What was it in the past? What is it today? What will it be in the future?

A reply to the first of these questions may be found in *Der Weg zur Macht*, a small book written by K. Kautsky in 1909 and translated into many European languages. Containing a most complete exposition of the tasks of our times, it was most advantageous to the German Social-Democrats (in the sense of the promise they held out), and moreover came from the pen of the most eminent writer of the Second International. We shall recall the pamphlet in some detail; this will be the more useful now since those forgotten ideals are so often barefacedly cast aside.

Social-Democracy is a “revolutionary party” (as stated in the opening sentence of the pamphlet), not only in the sense that a steam engine is revolutionary, but “also in another sense” (1). It wants conquest of political power by the proletariat, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Heaping ridicule on “doubters of the revolution,” Kautsky writes: “In any important movement and uprising we must, of course, reckon with the possibility of defeat. Prior to the struggle, only a fool can consider himself quite certain of victory.” However, to refuse to consider the possibility of victory would be “a direct betrayal of our cause” (11). A revolution in connection with a war, he says, is possible both during and after a war. It is impossible to determine at which particular moment the sharpening of class antagonisms will lead to revolution, but, the author continues, “I can quite definitely assert that a revolution that war brings in its wake, will break out either during or immediately after the war” (14); nothing is more vulgar, we read further, than the theory of “the peaceful growing into socialism” (21). “Nothing is more erroneous,” he continues, “than the opinion that a cognition of economic necessity means a weakening of the will... The will, as a desire for struggle,” he says, “is determined, first, by the price of the struggle, secondly, by a sense of power, and thirdly, by actual power” (26–27). When an attempt was made, incidentally by *Vorwärts*, to interpret Engels’s famous preface to *The Class Struggles in France* in the meaning of opportunism, Engels became indignant, and called shameful any assumption that he was a “peaceful worshipper of legality at any price” (33). “We have every reason to believe,” Kautsky goes on to say, “that we are entering upon a period of struggle for state power.” That struggle may last for decades; that is something we do not know, but “it will in all probability bring about, in the near future, a considerable strengthening of the proletariat, if not its dictatorship, in Western Europe” (42). The revolutionary elements are growing, Kautsky declares: out of ten million voters in Germany in 1895, there were six million proletarians and three and a half million people interested in private property; in 1907 the latter grew by 0.03 million, and the former by 1.6 million! (49). “The rate of the advance becomes very rapid as soon as a time of revolutionary ferment comes” (51). Class antagonisms are not blunted but, on the contrary, grow acute; prices rise, and imperialist rivalry and militarism are rampant (60–75). “A new era of revolution” is drawing near (76). The monstrous growth of taxes would “long ago have led to war as the only alternative to revolution... had not that very alternative of revolution stood closer after a war than after a period of armed peace ...” (80). “A world war is ominously imminent,” Kautsky continues, “and war means also revolution” (84). In 1891 Engels had reason to fear a premature revolution in Germany; since then, however, “the situation has greatly changed.” The proletariat “can no longer speak of a *premature* revolution” (Kautsky’s italics) (84). The petty bourgeoisie is downright unreliable and is ever more hostile to the proletariat, but in a time of crisis it is “capable of coming over to our side in masses” (88). The main thing is that Social-Democracy “should remain unshakable, consistent, and irreconcilable” (89). We have undoubtedly entered a revolutionary period (90).

This is how Kautsky wrote in times long, long past, fully five years ago. This is what German Social-Democracy was, or, more correctly, what it promised to be. This was the kind of Social-Democracy that could and had to be respected. (Lenin 1960–1968, 21:94–101)

Let us focus for a few minutes on a single word in Lenin's account because it brings up some tangled issues of translation, censorship, and Marxist discourse. Lenin quotes Kautsky as writing that the current situation may well result in "a considerable strengthening of the proletariat, if not its dictatorship, in Western Europe." This seems to be Lenin's own translation from the German (there was as yet no Russian translation of the whole book). Yet Kautsky did not write *Diktatur* but *Alleinherrschaft* (this wording is in Kautsky's original edition and therefore unaffected by his censor-evading editorial changes).⁸ In the 1996 English translation of Kautsky's book, *Alleinherrschaft* is translated as "exclusive rule." This rendering sounds considerably milder than "dictatorship." Did Kautsky shun the word "dictatorship"? Did he use "exclusive rule" as Aesopian code for "dictatorship"? Did Lenin illegitimately strengthen Kautsky's language (thus confirming the argument that he misunderstood or misrepresented Kautsky)? Or, finally, did the English-language edition find an equivalent for *Alleinherrschaft* that made Kautsky seem milder than he was, in line with the editor's desire to widen the chasm between Kautsky and Lenin?

Let us examine this last possibility. The original English edition of 1909 renders *Alleinherrschaft* as "purely proletarian political domination." In consulting various dictionaries, I find the following English equivalents for *Alleinherrschaft*: autarchy, autocracy, exclusive control, monarchy, sole reign, absolute rule, and, yes, dictatorship. I conclude that Kautsky was not being euphemistic nor was Lenin souping up Kautsky.

Nevertheless, *Alleinherrschaft* is not simply an appropriate synonym for "dictatorship," but rather adds some explanatory value, as we see in this passage from *Road to Power*:

As much as Marx and Engels were in favor of using the disagreements between the bourgeois parties to further proletarian aims ... they nevertheless coined the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat," which Engels was still advocating in 1891, shortly before his death. This phrase implies that exclusive political rule [der politischen Alleinherrschaft] of the proletariat is the only form in which it would be able to wield political power (6).

When Lenin re-read *Road to Power* in 1917 (as discussed below), he wrote down the sentence about *Alleinherrschaft* and commented: "That's all? of what it consists, not a word" (33:280). Lenin agrees that *Alleinherrschaft* is an accurate elucidation of the meaning of "proletarian dictatorship," but adds that he is disappointed (or perhaps, by 1917, rather pleased) that Kautsky doesn't discuss the political state forms of this dictatorship.

⁸ The German text translated by Lenin reads as follows: the struggle "höchst wahrscheinlich bereits in absehbarer Zeit erhebliche Machtverschiebungen zugunsten des Proletariats, wenn nicht schon seine Alleinherrschaft in Westeuropa herbeizuführen." The French edition of 1910 says "hégémonie exclusive."

We may conclude that the rendering “exclusive rule,” although it underplays the militancy of Kautsky’s language, does bring out the explanatory value of *Alleinherrschaft*. In Marxist discourse, “class dictatorship,” whether bourgeois or proletarian, meant a situation in which a class could enforce its full class interest without compromise.

Road to Power was a book written 5 years before the outbreak of war by a man who Lenin now considered to be a traitor to the cause of socialism. Yet he rather obsessively continued to cite *Road to Power* as a justification for his own policies. I count at least eighteen specific references to the book, starting as soon as the war broke out and continuing to late 1918, a full year after the Bolsheviks took power (Lih 2011). Lenin pounded away at the following points: Kautsky predicted the new epoch of wars and revolution, an epoch in contrast to the peaceful past and requiring new tactics. Kautsky said that war would lead to a revolutionary situation, that revolution was inevitable, and that socialist revolution was in no way premature. Socialists should never let fear of defeat hinder their actions. These conclusions by the super-cautious Kautsky expressed a broad consensus among revolutionary Social Democrats. Kautsky is therefore now a shameless renegade.

Here are some sample outbursts (all citations from Lih 2011):

[January 1915:] It was none other than Kautsky himself, in a whole series of articles and in his book *Road to Power* (which came out in 1909), who described with the fullest possible definiteness the basic traits of the approaching third epoch and who pointed out its radical distinctiveness from the second (yesterday’s) epoch ... But Kautsky now commits to the flame what he once worshipped and he is changing front in the most incredible, most indecent, most shameless fashion.

[September 1915:] We stand, *without a doubt*, on the eve of a socialist revolution. This was acknowledged even by “super-cautious” theorists such as Kautsky, already in 1909 (*Road to Power*).

[January 1916:] And the one denying revolutionary action is the very same authority of the Second International who in 1909 wrote a whole book, *Road to Power*, translated into practically all the major European languages and demonstrating the *link* between the future war and revolution, demonstrating that “the revolution *cannot* be premature”!!

[October 1918:] Long before the war, all Marxists, all socialists were in agreement that a European war would create a revolutionary situation. When Kautsky was not yet a renegade, he clearly and with definiteness acknowledged this—in 1902 with *Social Revolution* and in 1909 (*Road to Power*).

Just prior to the February revolution, when taking notes for what became *State and Revolution*, Lenin once again re-read *Road to Power* along with *The Social Revolution* (1902). He didn’t find what he already suspected was not there, namely, any discussion of the need to radically democratize the state along the lines of the

Paris Commune.⁹ This absence is the official critique made of these books in *State and Revolution*. Nevertheless, Lenin clearly rediscovered the qualities of these books that had inspired him when he first read them. The page that Lenin devotes to *Road to Power* in *State and Revolution* is almost all complimentary. It is the “best of Kautsky’s writings against the opportunists ... a giant step forward” because it talks about “concrete conditions.” His entire criticism is contained in one clause of one sentence: “All the more characteristic, then, that with such definiteness about the era of revolutions that is already beginning—in a book that is dedicated (as he himself says) to the ‘political revolution’—he nevertheless completely evades the question of the state” (Lenin 1958–1964, 33:110–111).

What did Kautsky think of this attitude toward his book? In his preface to the third edition in 1920, he turned the tables on his former admirers and present tormentors: it was they, not he, who renounced the views they held before 1914. Kautsky quoted chapter and verse from his own work to show that he had never defended revolution at any price, nor enthusiastic recourse to violence, nor instant socialism in the peasant countryside, and so on:

In a modern great power, a party can gain power through a revolution and stand its ground only when it “represents the interests of the great majority of the population and [has] its trust” (*Road to Power*, 45). With those words I rejected the idea of a dictatorship of a minority of the people as early as 1909. For Russia I considered such a dictatorship possible, but not as the means for attaining to socialism, for which Russia is by no means ready. To this last view, too, there was not the least objection from the ranks of the revolutionary Marxists. (xlix)¹⁰

Unfortunately, Kautsky’s polemic rested on a hostile view of the Bolsheviks that they themselves did not accept. They certainly did not see themselves as advocates of revolution at any price, or of violence as automatically preferable to incentives or persuasion, or of instant socialism in the countryside, and the rest. Indeed, the real clash between Kautsky and the Bolsheviks after October lay not so much in basic ideological or even tactical commitments as in empirical understandings of events in Russia. So, for example, Kautsky and the Bolsheviks did not disagree about the need for support from a great majority of the population but really over whether the Bolsheviks in fact enjoyed such support.

Lenin’s pronouncements from 1914 to 1918 make it clear that Kautsky’s authority as a cautious theorist and a spokesman for the left-wing of international Social Democracy was a vital source for Bolshevik confidence in the outbreak of a socialist revolution in Europe in the near future. This confident expectation in turn

⁹ Lenin carefully limits his case to the accusation that Kautsky ignored Commune-related questions in these two popular works directed against the opportunists. In point of fact, Kautsky did discuss the need to democratize the state along the lines of the Commune in writings such as *Republic and Social Democracy in France* (1905).

¹⁰ I do not recall that Kautsky anywhere argued that a minority dictatorship was desirable or possible in Russia even during a democratic revolution, since, according to Kautsky, this revolution had to be based on a worker-peasant alliance.

strengthened the Bolshevik resolve to carry out the October revolution, since Bolshevik spokesmen in 1917 all emphasized that soviet power could not survive in the absence of European socialist revolution. First irony: Kautsky gave Lenin the confidence to carry out a revolution that he, Kautsky, abominated. Second irony: by late 1919, the Bolsheviks had begun to realize that although there would be no European revolution in the immediate future, they—lo and behold!—had managed to survive. *Road to Power* no longer spoke to their situation and so we see no more mentions by Lenin after the end of 1918.

Revolution à la Kautsky?

We have witnessed the strange polemic between Kautsky and the Bolsheviks, with each side accusing the other of inconsistency and renegade behavior. We have noted the contrast between Carl Schorske's dismissal of *Road to Power's* revolutionary "passivity" and the Bolsheviks' enthusiastic praise of its militancy. Kautsky's advice was: be confident that a revolutionary situation will develop, do not try to bring it into being by artificial methods, but when it arrives, know how to use it. In Germany, a revolutionary situation never developed (if only because of the absence of a genuine party of radical mass opposition) and so Kautsky's advice looks like passive *attentisme*. In Russia, the Bolsheviks had very little to do with the creation of a revolutionary situation, but they understood how to respond to it when it came. They then followed Kautsky's tactical advice and found themselves indeed on the road to power.

The course of events in Russia fits easily into Kautsky's framework. A war broke out and an incompetent ruling class ensured that the war did in fact give birth to revolution. The February revolution was followed by the sort of rapid radicalization described by Kautsky in *Road to Power*:

When times of revolutionary ferment come, the tempo of progress all at once becomes rapid. It is quite incredible how swiftly the masses of the population learn in such times and achieve clarity about their class interests. Not only their courage and their desire to fight, but also their political interest is spurred on in the most powerful way by the consciousness that the moment has arrived for them to rise by their efforts out of the darkest night into the bright glory of the sun. Even the most sluggish become industrious; even the most cowardly, bold; even the most intellectually limited acquire a wider mental grasp. In such times, political education of the masses takes place in years, that otherwise would require generations. (51)

From the Bolshevik point of view, Kautsky's description of a revolutionary situation fit Russia well in the weeks before October: a regime hostile to the mass of the people; a crisis of confidence on the part of the bureaucracy and the army; the existence of a "large party of irreconcilable opposition" (themselves) who represented the interests of the vast majority and had its trust. Events also seemed to justify Kautsky's claim that the "petty bourgeoisie"—that is, the peasants—might very well make a wide swing in favor of a revolutionary outcome.

The Bolsheviks also wagered that militant intransigence would win them popular support, following Kautsky's advice from 1909:

The more *imperturbable, consistent, and irreconcilable* the Social Democratic Party remains, all the more readily will it get the better of its opponents. To demand that the Social Democratic Party participate in a policy of coalition or alliance now ... at the very time when those parties have prostituted and utterly compromised themselves; to want the Party to link itself with them in order to further that very prostitution—is to demand that it commit moral suicide. (89–90)

The Bolsheviks saw Russia through Kautskian lens and prospered. But they also saw Western Europe through the same lens and made serious miscalculations. They were utterly confident that Europe was on the eve of a socialist revolution—but even this miscalculation gave them the courage to take the enormously risky step of assuming full state power in Russia.

Kautsky's compact outline of "the tasks of our times" had an ironic destiny. *Road to Power* inspired his greatest fans turned fiercest foes to make what he considered a tragic mistake. And so his book, so influential at the time, remains semi-forgotten today. The scandal caused by Lenin's admiration for it is covered up by calling it all a misunderstanding. Yet *Road to Power* remains what Zinoviev termed it in 1909: an eloquent statement of the platform of the Marxist and revolutionary left-wing of Social Democracy in the years leading up to World War I and the Russian revolution.

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