

Notes on the History of the International

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Opening steps

On 28 September 1864, St Martin's Hall in the very heart of London was packed to overflowing with some two thousand workmen.¹ They had come to attend a meeting called by English trade union leaders and a small group of workers from the Continent. The preparatory *Address of English to French Workmen* stated:

A fraternity of peoples is highly necessary for the cause of labour, for we find that whenever we attempt to better our social condition by reducing the hours of toil, or by raising the price of labour, our employers threaten us with bringing over Frenchmen, Germans, Belgians and others to do our work at a reduced rate of wages; and we are sorry to say that this has been done, though not from any desire on the part of our continental brethren to injure us, but through a want of regular and systematic communication between the industrial classes of all countries. Our aim is to bring up the wages of the ill-paid to as near a level as possible with that of those who are better remunerated, and not to allow our employers to play us off one against the other, and so drag us down to the lowest possible condition, suitable to their avaricious bargaining.²

The organizers of this initiative did not imagine – nor could they have foreseen – what it would lead to shortly afterwards. Their idea was to build an international forum where the main problems affecting workers could be examined and discussed, but this did not include the actual founding of an organization to coordinate the trade union and political action of the working class. In reality, it gave birth to the prototype of all organizations of the workers' movement, which

1. This article is based upon the "Introduction" to Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!: The International 150 Years Later* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), an anthology of key documents of the International. Citations given here as GC and PI refer to multi-volume official Minutes published under the respective titles *General Council of the First International* and *Première Internationale*. See notes 1 and 4 to the Documents section in this issue.
2. David Ryazanov, "Zur Geschichte der Ersten Internationale," in *Marx–Engels Archiv*, vol. 1 (1925), 172.

both reformists and revolutionaries would subsequently take as their point of reference: the International Working Men's Association.³

It was soon arousing passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of men and women to struggle for the most radical of goals: changing the world. Thus, on the occasion of the Third Congress of the International, held in Brussels in 1868, the leader writer of *The Times* accurately identified the scope of the project:

It is not . . . a mere improvement that is contemplated, but nothing less than a regeneration, and that not of one nation only, but of mankind. This is certainly the most extensive aim ever contemplated by any institution, with the exception, perhaps, of the Christian Church. To be brief, this is the programme of the International Workingmen's Association.⁴

Thanks to the International, the workers' movement was able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of its own strength, and to develop new and more advanced forms of struggle. The organization resonated far beyond the frontiers of Europe, among the artisans of Buenos Aires, the early workers' associations in Calcutta, and even the labour groups in Australia and New Zealand that applied to join it.

The right man in the right place

The workers' organizations that founded the International were a motley assemblage. The central driving force was British trade unionism, whose leaders were mainly interested in economic questions; they fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence they conceived of the International as an instrument that might prevent the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes.

Then there were the mutualists, long dominant in France but strong also in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, they were opposed to

3. Near the end of the life of the International when considering for approval the revised statutes of the organization, members of the General Council raised the question of whether "persons" should be substituted for "men." Friedrich Engels responded that "it was generally understood that men was a generic term including both sexes," making the point that the association was and had been open to women and men, GC, V, 256.
4. Quoted in G. M. Stekloff, *History of the First International* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968 [1928]), ii.

any working-class involvement in politics and to the strike as a weapon of struggle, as well as holding conservative positions on women's emancipation. Advocating a cooperative system along federalist lines, they maintained that it was possible to change capitalism by means of equal access to credit. In the end, therefore, they may be said to have constituted the right wing of the International.

Alongside these two components, which comprised the majority, there were still others. Third in importance were the communists. Grouped around Karl Marx and active in small circles with limited influence, they were anticapitalist: opposing the existing system of production and espousing the necessity of political action to overthrow it.

At the time of its founding, the ranks of the International also included vaguely democratic elements that had nothing to do with the socialist tradition. The picture is further complicated by the fact that some workers who joined the International brought with them a variety of confused theories, some of a utopian inspiration; while the party led by followers of Ferdinand Lassalle, which never affiliated to the International but orbited around it – was hostile to trade unionism and conceived of political action in rigidly national terms.

To secure cohabitation of all these currents in the same organization, around a program so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Marx's great accomplishment. His political talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, ensuring that the International did not swiftly follow the many previous workers' associations down the path to oblivion.⁵ It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International, and Marx too who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly class-based, political program that won it a mass character beyond all sectarianism. The political soul of its General Council (GC) was always Marx: he drafted all its main resolutions and prepared most of its congress reports. He was "the right man in the right place," as the German workers' leader Johann Georg Eccarius once put it.⁶

Contrary to later fantasies that pictured Marx as the founder of the International, he was not even among the organizers of the meeting at St Martin's Hall, and was a non-speaking participant.⁷ Yet he

5. Cf. Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement* (London: MacMillan, 1965), 34.

6. Johann George Eccarius to Karl Marx, 12 October 1864, in *Marx–Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, vol. III/13 (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), 10.

7. Marx to Engels, 4 November 1864, in Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vol., 1975–2005 (Moscow: Progress Publishers [henceforth MECW]), vol. 42, 1987, 16.

immediately grasped the potential in the event and worked hard to ensure that the new organization successfully carried out its mission. Thanks to the prestige attaching to his name, at least in restricted circles, he was appointed to the standing committee,⁸ where he soon gained sufficient trust to be given the task of writing the *Inaugural Address* and the *Provisional Statutes of the International*. In these fundamental texts, as in many others that followed, Marx drew on the best ideas of the various components of the International. He firmly linked economic and political struggle to each other, and made international thinking and international action an irreversible choice.

It was mainly thanks to Marx's capacities that the International developed its function of political synthesis, unifying the various national contexts in a project of common struggle. The maintenance of unity was gruelling at times, especially as Marx's anticapitalism was never the dominant political position within the organization. Over time, however, partly through his own tenacity, partly through occasional splits, Marx's thought became the hegemonic doctrine. The character of workers' mobilizations, the antisystemic challenge of the Paris Commune, the unprecedented task of holding together such a large and complex organization, the successive polemics with other tendencies in the workers' movement on various theoretical and political issues: all this impelled Marx beyond the limits of political economy alone, which had absorbed so much of his attention since the defeat of the 1848 revolution and the ebbing of the most progressive forces. He was also stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and in particular to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society. The orthodox Soviet view of Marx's role in the International, according to which he mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory already forged in the confines of his study, is thus totally divorced from reality.

Membership and structure

During its lifetime, the International was depicted as a vast, powerful organization. The size of its membership was always overestimated. The public prosecutor who arraigned some of its French

8. At the founding meeting of the International, a Standing Committee was struck to organize the association. This became its Central Council, which subsequently became known as the General Council. Henceforth, these committees are referred to here simply as the General Council.

leaders in June 1870 stated that the organization had more than 800,000 members in Europe;⁹ a year later, after the defeat of the Paris Commune, *The Times* put the total at two and a half million.¹⁰ In reality, the membership figures were much lower. It has always been difficult to arrive at even approximate estimates, and that was true for its own leaders and those who studied it most closely. But the present state of research allows the hypothesis that, at its peak in 1871–72, the membership may have been over 150,000, but not much higher.

In those times, when there was a dearth of effective working-class organizations apart from the English trade unions and the General Association of German Workers, that figure was still sizeable. It should also be borne in mind that, throughout its existence, the International was recognized as a legal organization only in Britain, Switzerland, Belgium and the United States. In other countries it was at best on the margins of legality, and its members were subject to persecution. On the other hand, the Association had a remarkable capacity to weld its components into a cohesive whole. Within a couple of years from its birth, it had succeeded in federating hundreds of workers' societies; after 1868 societies were added in Spain, and following the Paris Commune sections sprang up also in Italy, Holland, Denmark and Portugal. The development of the International was doubtless uneven, yet a strong sense of belonging prevailed among those who joined it. They retained the bonds of class solidarity and responded as best they could to the call for a rally, the words of a poster or the unfurling of the red flag of struggle, in the name of an organization that had sustained them in their hour of need.¹¹

Members of the International, however, comprised only a small part of the total workforce. In Britain, with the sole exception of steelworkers, the International always had a sparse presence among the industrial proletariat.¹² The great majority of members there came from tailoring, clothing, shoemaking and cabinet-making – that is, from sectors of the working class that were then the best organized and the most class-conscious. Nowhere did factory workers ever form a majority, at least after the expansion of the organization in

9. See Oscar Testut, *L'Association internationale des travailleurs*, Lyon: Aimé Vingtrinier, 1870, 310.

10. *The Times*, 5 June 1871.

11. See Julius Braunthal, *History of the International* (New York: Nelson, 1966 [1961]), 116.

12. Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, 70; Jacques D'Hondt, "Rapport de synthèse," in Colloque International sur la première Internationale, *La Première Internationale: l'institution, l'implantation, le rayonnement* (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1968), 475.

Southern Europe. The other great limitation was the failure to draw in unskilled labour,¹³ despite efforts in that direction beginning with the run-up to the first congress. The *Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council* are clear on this: "Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class [the unions] cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks."¹⁴

In one of the key political-organizational documents of the International, Marx summarized its functions as follows: "It is the business of the International Working Men's Association to combine and generalize the spontaneous movements of the working classes, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinary system whatever."¹⁵ Still, despite the considerable autonomy granted to federations and local sections, the International always retained a locus of political leadership. Its GC was the body that worked out a unifying synthesis of the various tendencies and issued guidelines for the organization as a whole. From October 1864 until August 1872 it met with great regularity, as many as 385 times, and debated a wide range of issues: working conditions, the effects of new machinery, support for strikes, the role and importance of trade unions, the Irish question, various foreign policy matters, and, of course, how to build the society of the future, and drafted the documents of the International.¹⁶

The formation of the International

Britain was the first country where applications were made to join the International; the 4000-member Operative Society of Bricklayers affiliated in February 1865, soon to be followed by associations of construction workers and shoemakers. In the first year of its existence, the GC began serious activity to publicize the principles of the Association. This helped to broaden its horizon beyond purely economic questions, as we can see from the fact that it was among the organizations belonging to the (electoral) Reform League founded in February 1865.

13. *Ibid.*, 289.

14. GC, I, 340–351.

15. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 2; also, Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue, 19 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, 491: "The General Council was not the Pope, that we allowed every section to have its own theoretical views of the real movement, always supposed that nothing directly opposite to our Rules was put forward."

16. See Georges Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, Turin: Einaudi, 1978, 78.

In France, the International began to take shape in January 1865, when its first section was founded in Paris. But it remained very limited in strength, had little ideological influence, and was unable even to establish a national federation. Nevertheless, the French supporters of the International, who were mostly followers of Proudhon's mutualist theories, established themselves as the second largest group at the first conference of the organization.

In the following year, the International continued to expand in Europe and established its first important nuclei in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. The Prussian Combination Laws, however, meant that the International was unable to open sections in what was then the German Confederation. The 5000-member General Association of German Workers – the first workers' party in history – followed a line of ambivalent dialogue with Otto von Bismarck and showed little or no interest in the International during the early years of its existence. It was an indifference shared by Wilhelm Liebknecht, despite his political proximity to Marx.

The activity of the GC in London was decisive for the further strengthening of the International. In spring 1866, with its support for the strikers of the London Amalgamated Tailors, it played an active role for the first time in a workers' struggle, and following the success of the strike five societies of tailors, each numbering some 500 workers, decided to affiliate to the International. The International was the first association to succeed in the far from simple task of enlisting trade union organizations into its ranks.¹⁷

In September 1866, the city of Geneva hosted the first congress of the International, with 60 delegates from Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland. By then the Association could point to a very favourable balance-sheet of the two years since its foundation, having rallied to its banner more than one hundred trade unions and political organizations. Those taking part in the congress essentially divided into two blocs. The first, consisting of the British delegates, the few Germans and a majority of the Swiss, followed the GC directives drawn up by Marx (who was not present in Geneva). The second, comprising the French delegates and some of the French-speaking Swiss, was made up of the mutualists. At that time, in fact, moderate positions were prevalent in the International.

Basing themselves on resolutions prepared by Marx, the GC leaders succeeded in marginalizing the mutualists at the congress,

17. Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, 65.

and obtained votes in favour of state intervention. On the latter issue, Marx had spelled things out clearly:

In enforcing such laws [of social reform], the working class do not fortify governmental power. On the contrary, they transform that power, now used against them, into their own agency.¹⁸

Thus, far from strengthening bourgeois society (as Proudhon believed), these reformist demands were an indispensable starting point for the emancipation of the working class.

Furthermore, the “instructions” that Marx wrote for the Geneva congress underline the basic function of trade unions against which not only the mutualists but others had taken a stand:

This activity of the Trades’ Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. ... On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trades’ Unions were forming *centres of organization* of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trades’ Unions are required for the guerrilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as *organized agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule*.

In the same document, Marx did not spare the existing unions his criticism. For they were:

... too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital [and had] not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements.¹⁹

Growing strength

From late 1866 on, strikes intensified in many European countries. Organized by broad masses of workers, they helped to generate an awareness of their condition and formed the core of a new and important wave of struggles.

Although some governments of the time blamed the International for the unrest, most of the workers in question did not even know of its existence; the root cause of their protests was the dire working and living conditions they were forced to endure. The mobilizations did, however, usher in a period of contact and coordination with the International, which supported them with declarations and calls for

18. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 2.

19. *Ibid.*

solidarity, raised funds for strikers, and helped fight attempts by the bosses to weaken the workers' resistance.

It was because of its practical role in this period that workers began to recognize the International as an organization that defended their interests and, in some cases, asked to be affiliated to it.²⁰ Workers in other countries raised funds in support of the strikers and agreed not to accept work that would have turned them into industrial mercenaries, so that the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. In the towns at the centre of the action, hundreds of new members were recruited to the International. As was later observed in a GC report: "It is not the International Working Men's Association that pushes people into strikes, but strikes that push workers into the arms of the International Working Men's Association."²¹ Thus, for all the difficulties bound up with the diversity of nationalities, languages and political cultures, the International managed to demonstrate the absolute need for class solidarity and international cooperation, moving decisively beyond the partial character of the initial objectives and strategies.

From 1867 on, strengthened by success in achieving these goals, by increased membership and by a more efficient organization, the International made advances all over Continental Europe. It was its breakthrough year in France in particular, where the bronze workers' strike had the same knock-on effect that the London tailors' strike had produced in England. The International now had 25 sections in Geneva alone.

But Britain was still the country where the International had its greatest presence. In the course of 1867, the affiliation of another dozen organizations took the membership to a good 50,000.²² Nowhere else did the membership of the International ever reach that level. In contrast to 1864-67 period, however, the subsequent years in Britain were marked by a kind of stagnation. There were several reasons for this, but the main one was that the International did not manage to break through into factory industry or unskilled labour.

The growing institutionalization of the labour movement further contributed to this slowdown in the life of the International. The

20. Jacques Freymond, "Introduction," in *PI*, I, xi.

21. Various Authors, "Report of the [French] General Council," 1 September 1869, in *PI*, II, 24.

22. Henri Collins, "The International and the British Labour Movement: Origin of the International in England" in *Colloque International, La Première Internationale*, 34.

Reform Act, resulting from the battle first joined by the Reform League, expanded the franchise to more than a million British workers. The subsequent legalization of trade unions, which ended the risk of persecution and repression, allowed the fourth estate to become a real presence in society, with the result that the pragmatic rulers of the country continued along the path of reform, and the labouring classes, so unlike their French counterparts, felt a growing sense of belonging as they pinned more of their hopes for the future on peaceful change.²³

The situation on the Continent was very different indeed. In the German Confederation, collective wage-bargaining was still virtually non-existent. In Belgium, strikes were repressed by the government almost as if they were acts of war, while in Switzerland they were still an anomaly that the established order found it difficult to tolerate. In France, striking was legalized in 1864, but the first labour unions still operated under severe restrictions.

This was the backdrop to the congress of 1867, where the International assembled with a new strength based on expanded membership. Marx was busy working on the proofs of *Capital* and was absent from the GC when preparatory documents were drafted as well as from the congress itself.²⁴ The effects were certainly felt, as is evident in the congress's focus on bare reports of organizational growth in various countries and on Proudhonian themes dear to the strongly represented mutualists.

Also discussed there was the question of war and militarism, in which the delegate from Brussels, César De Paepe, formulated what later became the classical position of the workers' movement: "so long as there exists what we call the principle of nationalities . . . so long as there are distinct classes, there will be war . . . the true cause of war is the interests of some capitalists."²⁵ In addition there was a discussion of women's emancipation,²⁶ and finally the congress voted in favour of a report stating that "the efforts of nations should tend toward state ownership of the means of transport and circulation."²⁷ This was the first collectivist declaration approved at a congress of the International.

23. Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, 290–291.

24. Marx in fact continued not to attend congresses, with the exception of the crucial Hague Congress (1872).

25. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 49.

26. *Ibid.*, Document 6.

27. *Ibid.*, Document 32.

Defeat of the mutualists

From the earliest days of the International, Proudhon's ideas were hegemonic in much of French-speaking Europe. For four years the mutualists were the most moderate wing of the International. The British trade unions, which constituted the majority, did not share Marx's anticapitalism, but nor did they have the same pull on the policies of the organization that the followers of Proudhon were able to exercise.

Marx undoubtedly played a key role in the long struggle to reduce Proudhon's influence in the International. His ideas were fundamental to the theoretical development of its leaders, and he showed a remarkable capacity to assert them by winning every major conflict inside the organization. The workers themselves, however, were already sidelining Proudhonian doctrines; it was above all the proliferation of strikes that convinced the mutualists of the error of their conceptions. And it was the workers' movement itself that demonstrated, in opposition to Proudhon, that it was impossible to separate the social-economic question from the political question.²⁸

The Brussels Congress of 1868 finally clipped the wings of the mutualists. The high point came when the assembly approved De Paepé's proposal on the socialization of the means of production – a decisive step forward in defining the economic basis of socialism, no longer simply in the writings of particular intellectuals but in the program of a great transnational organization. As regards agriculture, mines and transport, the congress declared the necessity of converting land into "the common property of society," even observing the destructive environmental effect of private ownership of forests.²⁹ This marked an important victory for the GC and the first appearance of socialist principles in the political program of a major workers' organization.

If the collectivist turn of the International began at the Brussels Congress, it was the Basel Congress held the next year that consolidated it and eradicated Proudhonism even in its French homeland. Eleven of the French delegates even approved a new text which declared "that society has the right to abolish individual ownership of the land and to make it part of the community."³⁰ The 78 delegates were drawn not only from France, Switzerland, Germany, Britain and Belgium, but also from Spain, Italy and Austria, plus the National

28. Freymond, "Introduction," in PI, I, xiv.

29. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 3.

30. PI, II, 74.

Labor Union of the United States. The constituency of the association was visibly enlarged, and the record of the proceedings as well as general reports on the activity of the congress transmitted the enthusiasm of the workers gathered there.

The Basel Congress was also of interest because Mikhail Bakunin took part in the proceedings as a delegate. When his International Alliance for Socialist Democracy had applied to join the International, the GC initially turned down the request, on the grounds that it continued to be affiliated to another, parallel transnational structure, and that one of its objectives – “the equalization of classes”³¹ – was radically different from a central pillar of the International, the abolition of classes. Shortly afterwards, however, the Alliance modified its program and agreed to wind up its network of sections; its 104-member Geneva section was accordingly admitted to the International.

Marx knew Bakunin well enough, but underestimated the consequences of this step. The influence of the famous Russian revolutionary rapidly increased in a number of Swiss, Spanish and French sections (as it did in Italian ones after the Paris Commune), and already at the Basel Congress he managed to affect the outcome of deliberations. The vote on the right of inheritance, for example, was the first occasion on which the delegates rejected a proposal of the GC. Having finally defeated the mutualists and laid the spectre of Proudhon to rest, Marx now had to confront a much tougher rival, who formed a new tendency – collectivist anarchism – and sought to win control of the organization.

Before the Paris Commune

The late sixties and early seventies were a period rich in social conflicts. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International. When 8000 silk dyers and ribbon weavers in Basel asked for its support, the GC could not send them more than four pounds from its own funds, but it issued a circular that resulted in the collection of another £300 from workers’ groups in various countries. Even more significant was the struggle of Newcastle engineering workers to reduce the working day to nine hours,

31. Mikhail Bakunin, “Programme of the Alliance [International Alliance of Socialist Democracy],” in Arthur Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 174. The translation provided in this book is inaccurate and misleading. In *Fictitious Splits in the International* (GC, V, 356–409), Engels and Marx quoted directly from Bakunin’s original document (“l’égalisation politique, économique et sociale des classes”).

when two emissaries of the GC played a key role in stymying the bosses' attempt to introduce strikebreakers from the Continent. The success of this strike, a nationwide *cause célèbre*, served as a warning for the English capitalists, who from that time on gave up recruiting workers from across the Channel.³²

The year 1869 witnessed significant expansion of the International all over Europe. Britain was an exception in this respect, however. While the union leaders fully backed Marx against the mutualists, they had little time for theoretical issues³³ and did not exactly glow with revolutionary ardour. This was the reason why Marx for a long time opposed the founding of a British federation of the International independent of the GC.

In every European country where the International was reasonably strong, its members gave birth to new organizations completely autonomous from those already in existence. In Britain, however, the unions that made up the main force of the International naturally did not disband their own structures. The London-based GC therefore fulfilled two functions at once: as world headquarters and as the leadership for Britain, where trade union affiliations kept some 50,000 workers in its orbit of influence.

In France, the repressive policies of the Second Empire made 1868 a year of serious crisis for the International. The following year, however, saw a revival of the organization, and new leaders who had abandoned mutualist positions came to the fore. The peak of expansion for the International came in 1870, but despite its considerable growth, the organization never took root in 38 of the 90 *départements*. The national total has been put somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000.³⁴ Thus, although the International did not become a true mass organization in France, it certainly grew to a respectable size and aroused widespread interest.

In Belgium, membership peaked in the early 1870s at several tens of thousands, probably exceeding the number in the whole of France. It was here that the International achieved both its highest numerical density in the general population and its greatest influence in society. The positive evolution during this period was also apparent in Switzerland. In 1870, however, Bakunin's activity divided the

32. Braunthal, *History of the International*, 173.

33. Freymond, "Introduction," in *PI*, I, xix.

34. Jacques Rougerie, in "Les sections françaises de l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs," in *Colloque International sur la première Internationale*, 111, spoke of "some tens of thousands."

organization into two groups of equal size, which confronted each other at the congress of the Romande Federation precisely on the question of whether his International Alliance for Socialist Democracy should be admitted to the Federation.³⁵ When it proved impossible to reconcile their positions, the proceedings continued in two parallel congresses, and a truce was agreed only after an intervention by the GC. The group aligned with London was slightly smaller, yet retained the name Romande Federation, whereas the one linked to Bakunin had to adopt the name Jura Federation, even though its affiliation to the International was again recognized.

During this period, Bakunin's ideas began to spread, but the country where they took hold most rapidly was Spain. In fact, the International first developed in the Iberian peninsula through the activity of the Neapolitan anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli, who, at Bakunin's request, travelled to Barcelona and Madrid to help found both sections of the International and groups of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy. His trip achieved its purpose. But his distribution of documents of both international organizations, often to the same people, was a prime example of the Bakuninite confusion and theoretical eclecticism of the time; the Spanish workers founded the International with the principles of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy.

In the North German Confederation, despite the existence of two political organizations of the workers' movement – the Lassallean General Association of German Workers and the Marxist Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany – there was little enthusiasm for the International and few requests to affiliate to it. During its first three years, German militants virtually ignored its existence, fearing persecution at the hands of the authorities. The picture changed somewhat after 1868, as the fame and successes of the International multiplied across Europe, and both rival parties aspired to represent its German wing. The weak internationalism of the Germans ultimately weighed more heavily than any legal aspects, however, and declined still further when the movement became more preoccupied with internal matters.³⁶

Against this general background, marked by evident contradictions and uneven development between countries, the International made provisions for its fifth congress. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, however, left no choice but to call off the congress. The conflict at the heart of Europe meant that the top priority now was to

35. Jacques Freymond (ed.), *Études et documents sur la Première Internationale en Suisse* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 295.

36. *Ibid.*, x.

help the workers' movement express an independent position, far from the nationalist rhetoric of the time. In his *First Address on the Franco-Prussian War*, Marx called upon the French workers to drive out Louis Bonaparte and to obliterate the empire he had established 18 years earlier. The German workers, for their part, were supposed to prevent the defeat of Bonaparte from turning into an attack on the French people:

... in contrast to old society, with its economical miseries and its political delirium, a new society is springing up, whose international rule will be *Peace*, because its national ruler will be everywhere the same – Labour. The pioneer of that new society is the International Working Men's Association.³⁷

The leaders of the Social Democratic Workers' Party, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, were the only two members of parliament in the North German Confederation who refused to vote for the special war budget, and sections of the International in France also sent messages of friendship and solidarity to the German workers. Yet the French defeat sealed the birth of a new and more potent age of nation-states in Europe, with all its accompanying chauvinism.

The International and the Paris Commune

After the German victory at Sedan and the capture of Bonaparte, the Third Republic was proclaimed in France on 4 September 1870. In January of the following year, a four-month siege of Paris ended in the French acceptance of Bismarck's conditions; an ensuing armistice allowed the holding of elections and the appointment of Adolphe Thiers as President of the Republic. In the capital, however, Progressive-Republican forces swept the board and there was widespread popular discontent. Faced with the prospect of a government that wanted to disarm the city and withhold any social reform, the Parisians turned against Thiers and on 18 March initiated the first great political event in the life of the workers' movement: the Paris Commune.

Although Bakunin had urged the workers to turn patriotic war into revolutionary war,³⁸ the GC in London initially opted for silence. It assigned Marx the task of writing a text in the name of the

37. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 54.

38. Arthur Lehning, "Introduction," in Idem. (ed.), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. VI: *Michel Bakounine sur la Guerre Franco-Allemande et la Révolution Sociale en France (1870–1871)* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), xvi.

International, but he delayed its publication for complicated, deeply held reasons. Well aware of the real relationship of forces on the ground as well as the weaknesses of the Commune, he knew that it was doomed to defeat. He had even tried to warn the French working class in his *Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War*: "Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. The French workmen . . . must not allow themselves to be swayed by national memories of 1792."³⁹ A fervid declaration hailing the Commune would have risked creating false expectations among workers throughout Europe, eventually becoming a source of demoralization and distrust. His grim forebodings soon proved all too well founded, and on 28 May the Paris Commune was drowned in blood. Two days later, he reappeared at the GC with a manuscript entitled *The Civil War in France*; it was read and unanimously approved, then published over the names of all the Council members. The document had a huge impact over the next few weeks, greater than any other document of the workers' movement in the nineteenth century.

Despite Marx's passionate defence, and despite the claims both of reactionary opponents and of dogmatic Marxists eager to glorify the International,⁴⁰ the GC played no part in pushing for the Parisian insurrection. Prominent figures in the organization did play a role, but the leadership of the Commune was in the hands of its radical-republican Jacobin wing. Marx himself pointed out that "the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it have been."⁴¹

Marx had to spend whole days answering press slanders about the International and himself: "at this moment," he wrote, [he was] "the best calumniated and the most menaced man of London."⁴² Meanwhile, governments all over Europe sharpened their instruments of repression, fearing that other uprisings might follow the one in Paris. Criticism of the Commune even spread to sections of the workers' movement. Following the publication of *The Civil War in France*, both the trade union leader George Odger and the old Chartist Benjamin Lucraft resigned from the International, bending under the pressure of the hostile press campaign. However, no trade union withdrew its support for the organization – which suggests once again that the

39. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 57.

40. Georges Haupt, *Aspects of International Socialism 1871–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25, warns against "the reshaping of the reality of the Commune in order to make it conform to an image transfigured by ideology."

41. Karl Marx to Domela Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881, MECW, vol. 46, 66.

42. Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 18 June 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, 157.

failure of the International to grow in Britain was due mainly to political apathy in the working class.⁴³

Despite the bloody denouement in Paris and the wave of calumny and government repression elsewhere in Europe, the International grew stronger and more widely known in the wake of the Commune. For the capitalists and the middle classes it represented a threat to the established order, but for the workers it fuelled hopes in a world without exploitation and injustice.⁴⁴ Insurrectionary Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions. The experience showed that revolution was possible, that the goal could and should be to build a society utterly different from the capitalist order, but also that, in order to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organized forms of political association.⁴⁵

This enormous vitality was apparent everywhere. Attendance at GC meetings doubled, while newspapers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. Finally, and most significantly, the International continued to expand in Belgium and Spain – where the level of workers' involvement had already been considerable before the Paris Commune – and experienced a real breakthrough in Italy. Although Giuseppe Garibaldi had only a vague idea of the Association,⁴⁶ the “hero of the two worlds” decided to throw his weight behind it and wrote a membership application that contained the famous sentence: “The International is the sun of the future.”⁴⁷ Printed in dozens of workers' newsheets and papers, the letter was instrumental in persuading many waverers to join the organization.

The International opened a new section in Portugal in October 1871. In Denmark, in the same month, it began to link up most of the newly born trade unions in Copenhagen and Jutland. Another important development was the founding of Irish workers' sections in Britain; their leader John MacDonnell was appointed the GC's corresponding secretary for Ireland. Unexpected requests for affiliation came from various other parts of the world: some English workers in Calcutta, labour groups in Victoria, Australia and Christchurch, New Zealand, and a number of artisans in Buenos Aires.

43. Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, 222.

44. See Haupt, *L'internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, 28.

45. *Ibid.*, 93–95.

46. Nello Rosselli, *Mazzini e Bakunin*, Turin: Einaudi, 1927, 323–324.

47. Giuseppe Garibaldi to Giorgio Pallavicino, 14 November 1871, in Enrico Emilio Ximenes, *Epistolario di Giuseppe Garibaldi*, vol. I, Milan: Brigola 1885, 350.

The London Conference of 1871

Two years had passed since the last congress of the International, but a new one could not be held under the prevailing circumstances. The GC therefore decided to organize a conference in London. Despite efforts to make the event as representative as possible, it was in fact more like an enlarged GC meeting. Marx had announced beforehand that the conference would be devoted “exclusively to questions of organization and policy,”⁴⁸ with theoretical discussions left to one side. He spelled this out at its first session:

The General Council has convened a conference to agree with delegates from various countries [on] measures that need to be taken against the dangers facing the Association in a large number of countries, and to move towards a new organization corresponding to the needs of the situation. In the second place, to work out a response to the governments that are ceaselessly working to destroy the Association with every means at their disposal. And lastly to settle the Swiss dispute once and for all.⁴⁹

Marx summoned all his energies for these priorities: to reorganize the International, to defend it from hostile forces, and to check Bakunin’s growing influence. By far the most active delegate at the conference, Marx took the floor as many as 102 times, blocked proposals that did not fit in with his plans, and won over those not yet convinced.⁵⁰ The gathering in London confirmed his stature within the organization, not only as the brains shaping its political line, but also as one of its most combative and capable militants.

The most important decision taken at the conference, for which it would be remembered later, was the approval of Édouard Vaillant’s Resolution IX. The leader of the Blanquists – whose residual forces had joined the International after the end of the Commune – proposed that the organization should be transformed into a centralized, disciplined party, under the leadership of the GC. Despite some differences, particularly over the Blanquist position that a tightly organized nucleus of militants was sufficient for the revolution, Marx did not hesitate to form an alliance with Vaillant’s group: not only to strengthen the opposition to Bakuninite anarchism within the International, but above all to create a broader consensus for the changes deemed necessary in the new phase of the class struggle. The resolution passed in London therefore stated:

48. Karl Marx, 15 August 1871, in GC, IV, 259.

49. Karl Marx, 17 September 1871, in PI, II, 152.

50. Miklós Molnár, *Le déclin de la première internationale*, Geneva: Droz, 1963, 127.

... that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes; that this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end – the abolition of classes; and that the combination of forces which the working class has already effected by its economic struggles ought at the same time to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of landlords and capitalists.

The conclusion was clear: “the economic movement [of the working class] and its political action are indissolubly united.”⁵¹

Whereas the Geneva Congress of 1866 established the importance of trade unions, the London Conference of 1871 shifted the focus to the other key instrument of the modern workers’ movement: the political party. It should be stressed, however, that the understanding of this was much broader than that which developed in the twentieth century.⁵² Marx’s conception should therefore be differentiated both from the Blanquists’ – the two would openly clash later on – and from Lenin’s, as adopted by Communist organizations after the October Revolution.

Only four delegates opposed Resolution IX at the London Conference, but Marx’s victory soon proved to be ephemeral. For the call to establish what amounted to political parties in every country and to confer broader powers on the GC had grave repercussions in the internal life of the International; it was not ready to move so rapidly from a flexible to a politically uniform model of organization.⁵³

Marx was convinced that virtually all the main federations and local sections would back the resolutions of the Conference, but he soon had to think again. On 12 November, the Jura Federation called a congress of its own in the small commune of Sonvilier, and, although Bakunin was unable to attend, it officially launched the opposition within the International. Bakunin’s close ally James Guillaume and

51. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 74.

52. In the early 1870s the working-class movement was organized as a political party only in Germany. Usage of the word party, whether by followers of Marx or of Bakunin, was therefore very confused. Even Marx used the term more as synonymous with class. Debate in the International between 1871 and 1872 did not focus on the construction of a political party (an expression uttered only twice at the London Conference and five times at the Congress of The Hague), but rather on the “use ... of the adjective ‘political’” (Haupt, *L’Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, 84).

53. Jacques Freymond and Miklós Molnár, “The Rise and Fall of the First International,” in Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864–1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 27.

the other participants accused the GC of having introduced the “authority principle” into the International and transformed its original structure into “a hierarchical organization directed and governed by a committee.” The Swiss declared themselves “against all directing authority, even should that authority be elected and endorsed by the workers,” and insisted on “retention of the principle of autonomy of the Sections,” so that the GC would become “a simple correspondence and statistical bureau.”⁵⁴

Although the position of the Jura Federation was not unexpected, Marx was probably surprised when signs of restlessness and even rebellion against the GC’s political line began to appear elsewhere. In a number of countries, the decisions taken in London were judged an unacceptable encroachment on local political autonomy. Even the Belgian Federation, which at the conference had aimed at mediation between the different sides, began to adopt a much more critical stance towards London, and the Dutch too later took their distance. In Southern Europe, where the reaction was even stronger, the opposition soon won considerable support. Indeed, the great majority of Iberian Internationalists came out against the GC and endorsed Bakunin’s ideas. In Italy too, the results of the London Conference were seen in a negative light. In fact, the founding congress of the Italian Federation of the International took the most radical position against the GC: they would not participate in the forthcoming congress of the International but proposed to hold an “anti-authoritarian general congress”⁵⁵ in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. This would prove to be the first act of the impending split.

Feuding across the Atlantic also harmed relations among members in London. The relations of two allies with Marx took a turn for the worse, and in Britain too the first internal conflicts began to emerge. Support for the GC also came from the majority of the Swiss, from the French (now mostly Blanquists), the weak German forces, the recently constituted sections in Denmark, Ireland and Portugal, and the East European groups in Hungary and Bohemia. But they added up to much less than Marx had expected at the end of the London Conference.

The opposition to the GC was varied in character and sometimes had mainly personal motives. Still, beyond the fascination with

54. Various Authors, “Circulaire du Congrès de Sonvilier,” in *PI*, II, 264–265.

55. Various Authors, *Risoluzione, programma e regolamento della federazione italiana dell’Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori*, in Gian Mario Bravo, *La Prima Internazionale*, Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1978, 787.

Bakunin's theories in certain countries and Guillaume's capacity to unify the various oppositionists, the main factor militating against the resolution on "Working-Class Political Action" was an environment unwilling to accept the qualitative step forward proposed by Marx. Not only the group linked to Bakunin but most of the federations and local sections regarded the principle of autonomy and respect for the diverse realities as a cornerstone of the International. Marx's miscalculation on this score accelerated the crisis of the organization.⁵⁶

The end of the International

The final battle came towards the end of summer 1872. After the terrible events of the previous three years – the Franco-Prussian war, the wave of repression following the Paris Commune, the numerous internal skirmishes – the International could at last meet again in congress. In the countries where it had recently taken root, it was expanding through the enthusiastic efforts of union leaders and worker-activists suddenly fired by its slogans. Yet most of the membership remained unaware of the gravity of the conflicts that raged on within its leading group.⁵⁷

The Fifth Congress of the International took place in The Hague in September, attended by 65 delegates from a total of 14 countries. The crucial importance of the event impelled Marx to attend in person,⁵⁸ accompanied by Engels. In fact, it was the only congress of the organization in which he took part. Neither De Paepe nor Bakunin made it to the Dutch capital, but the "autonomist" contingent, a total of 25 in all, was present in strength.

By an irony of fate, the congress unfolded in Concordia Hall, though all the sessions were marked by irreducible antagonism between the two camps, resulting in debates that were far poorer than at the two previous congresses. This hostility was exacerbated by three days of wrangling over credentials. The representation of delegates was indeed skewed, not reflecting the true relationship of forces within the organization. French sections had been driven underground, and their mandates were highly debatable, yet the largest group of delegates was French; Germany had no sections of the

56. See Freymond and Molnár, "Rise and Fall of the First International" (note 53), 27–28.

57. Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, 88.

58. See Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 29 July 1872, in MECW, vol. 44, 413, where he noted that this congress would be "a matter of life and death for the International; and before I resign I want at least to protect it from disintegrating elements."

International, yet nearly one-quarter of the delegates. Other representatives had been delegated as members of the GC and did not express the will of any section.

Approval of the Hague Congress resolutions was possible only because of its distorted composition. The most important decision taken at The Hague was to incorporate Resolution IX of the 1871 London Conference into the statutes of the Association, as a new article 7a. Political struggle was now the necessary instrument for the transformation of society since: "the lords of land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defence and perpetuation of their economic monopolies, and for the enslavement of labour. The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class."⁵⁹

The International was now very different from how it had been at the time of its foundation: the radical-democratic components had walked out after being increasingly marginalized; the mutualists had been defeated and many converted; reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organization (except in Britain); and anticapitalism had become the political line of the whole Association, as well as of recently formed tendencies such as the anarcho-collectivists. Moreover, although the years of the International had witnessed a degree of economic prosperity that in some cases made conditions less parlous, the workers understood that real change would come not through such palliatives but only through the end of human exploitation. They were also basing their struggles more and more on their own material needs, rather than the initiatives of particular groups to which they belonged.

The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age in which the nation-state would be the central form of political, legal and territorial identity; this placed a question mark over any supranational body that financed itself from membership dues in each individual country and required its members to surrender a sizeable share of their political leadership. At the same time, the growing differences between national movements and organizations made it extremely difficult for the GC to produce a political synthesis capable of satisfying the demands of all.

It is true that, right from the beginning, the International had been an agglomeration of trade unions and political associations far from easy to reconcile with one another, and that these had represented

59. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 65.

sensibilities and political tendencies more than organizations properly so called. By 1872, however, the various components of the Association – and workers' struggles, more generally – had become much more clearly defined and structured. The legalization of the British trade unions had officially made them part of national political life; the Belgian Federation of the International was a ramified organization, with a central leadership capable of making significant, and autonomous, contributions to theory; Germany had two workers' parties, the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany and the General Association of German Workers, each with representation in parliament; the French workers, from Lyon to Paris, had already tried "storming the heavens"; and the Spanish Federation had expanded to the point where it was on the verge of becoming a mass organization. Similar changes had occurred in other countries.

The initial configuration of the International had thus become out-moded, just as its original mission had come to an end. The task was no longer to prepare for and organize Europe-wide support for strikes, nor to call congresses on the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialize the land and the means of production. Such themes were now part of the collective heritage of the organization as a whole. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers' movement was a revolutionary one: how to organize in such a way as to end the capitalist mode of production and to overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world. It was no longer a question of how to reform the existing society, but how to build a new one.⁶⁰ For this new advance in the class struggle, Marx thought it indispensable to build working-class political parties in each country. The document *To the Federal Council of the Spanish Region of the International Working Men's Association*, written by Engels in February 1871, was the most explicit statement of the GC on this matter:

Experience has shown everywhere that the best way to emancipate the workers from this domination of the old parties is to form in each country a proletarian party with a policy of its own, a policy which is manifestly different from that of the other parties, because it must express the conditions necessary for the emancipation of the working class. This policy may vary in details according to the specific circumstances of each country; but as the fundamental relations between labour and capital are the same everywhere and the political domination of the possessing classes over the exploited classes is an existing fact everywhere, the principles and aims of proletarian policy will be identical, at least in all Western countries. . . . To give up fighting our adversaries in the political

60. Freymond, "Introduction," in PI, I, x.

field would mean to abandon one of the most powerful weapons, particularly in the sphere of organization and propaganda.⁶¹

From this point on, therefore, the party was considered essential for the struggle of the proletariat: it had to be independent of all existing political forces and to be built, both programmatically and organizationally, in accordance with the national context. At the GC session of 23 July 1872, Marx criticized not only the abstentionists (opposed to any political engagement by the working class) but the equally dangerous position of “the working classes of England and America,” “who let the middle classes use them for political purposes.”⁶² On the second point, he had already declared at the London Conference that “politics must be adapted to the conditions of all countries,”⁶³ and the following year, in a speech in Amsterdam immediately after the Hague Congress, he stressed:

Someday the worker must seize political power in order to build up the new organization of labour; he must overthrow the old politics which sustain the old institutions, if he is not to lose Heaven on Earth, like the old Christians who neglected and despised politics. But we have not asserted that the ways to achieve that goal are everywhere the same. . . . We do not deny that there are countries . . . where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the lever of our revolution must be force; it is force to which we must some day appeal in order to erect the rule of labour.⁶⁴

Thus, although the workers’ parties emerged in different forms in different countries, they should not subordinate themselves to national interests.⁶⁵ The struggle for socialism could not be confined in that way, and especially in the new historical context internationalism must continue to be the guiding beacon for the proletariat, as well as its vaccine against the deadly embrace of the state and the capitalist system.

During the Hague Congress, harsh polemics preceded a series of votes. Following the adoption of article 7a, the goal of winning political power was inscribed in the statutes, and there was also an indication that a workers’ party was the essential instrument for this. The subsequent decision to confer broader powers on the GC – with 32 votes in favour, 6 against and 12 abstentions – made the situation

61. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 69.

62. Karl Marx, 23 July 1872, in GC, V, 263.

63. Karl Marx, 20 September 1871, in PI, II, 195.

64. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 56.

65. See Haupt, *L’Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, 100.

even more intolerable for the minority, since the Council now had the task of ensuring “rigid observation of the principles and statutes and general rules of the International,” and “the right to suspend branches, sections, councils or federal committees and federations of the International until the next congress.”⁶⁶

For the first time in the history of the International, a congress approved the GC’s decision to expel an organization: namely, the New York Section 12. Its motivation was that “The International Working Men’s Association is based on the principle of the abolition of classes and cannot admit any bourgeois section.”⁶⁷ The expulsions of Bakunin and Guillaume also caused quite a stir, having been proposed by a commission of enquiry that described the Alliance for Socialist Democracy as “a secret organization with statutes completely opposite to those of the International.”⁶⁸ The call to expel Adhemar Schitzguébel, on the other hand, one of the founders and most active members of the Jura Federation, was rejected.⁶⁹ Finally, the congress authorized publication of a long report, *The Alliance for Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association*, which traced the history of the organization led by Bakunin and analysed its public and secret activity country by country. Written by Engels, Lafargue and Marx, the document was published in French in July 1873.

The opposition at the congress was not uniform in its response to these attacks. On the final day, however, a joint declaration read out by the worker Victor Dave (1845–1922) from the Hague section stated:

1. We ... supporters of the autonomy and federation of groups of working men shall continue our administrative relations with the General Council ...
2. The federations which we represent will establish direct and permanent relations between themselves and all regular branches of the Association [...]
4. We call on all the federations and sections to prepare between now and the next general congress for the triumph within the International of the principles of federative autonomy as the basis of the organization of labour.⁷⁰

This statement was more a tactical ploy – designed to avoid responsibility for a split that by then seemed inevitable – than a serious political undertaking to relaunch the organization. In this sense, it was similar

66. PI, II, 374.

67. *Ibid.*, 376.

68. *Ibid.*, 377.

69. *Ibid.*, 378.

70. Various Authors, [“Statement of the Minority”], in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the CC, C.P.S.U. (ed.) *The Hague Congress of the First International, vol. 1: Minutes and Documents*, Moscow: Progress, 1976, 199–200.

to the proposals of the “centralists” to augment the powers of the GC, at a time when they were already planning a far more drastic alternative.

For what took place in the morning session on 6 September – the most dramatic of the congress – was the final act of the International as it had been conceived and constructed over the years. Engels stood up to speak and, to the astonishment of those present, proposed that “the seat of the General Council [should] be transferred to New York for the year 1872–1873, and that it should be formed by members of the American federal council.”⁷¹ Thus, Marx and other “founders” of the International would no longer be part of its central body, which would consist of people whose very names were unknown. The delegate Maltman Barry, a GC member who supported Marx’s positions, described better than anyone the reaction from the floor:

Consternation and discomfiture stood plainly written on the faces of the party of dissension as [Engels] uttered the last words. . . . It was some time before anyone rose to speak. It was a *coup d’état*, and each looked to his neighbour to break the spell.⁷²

Engels argued that “inter-group conflicts in London had reached such a pitch that [the GC] had to be transferred elsewhere,”⁷³ and that New York was the best choice in times of repression. But the Blanquists were violently opposed to the move, on the grounds that “the International should first of all be the permanent insurrectionary organization of the proletariat”⁷⁴ and that “when a party unites for struggle . . . its action is all the greater, the more its leadership committee is active, well armed and powerful.” Vaillant and other followers of Blanqui present at The Hague thus felt betrayed when they saw “the head” being shipped “to the other side of the Atlantic [while] the armed body was fighting in [Europe].”⁷⁵ Based on the assumption that “the International had had an initiating role of economic struggle,”

71. Friedrich Engels, 5 September 1872, in PI, II, 355.

72. Maltman Barry, “Report of the Fifth Annual General Congress of the International Working Men’s Association, Held at The Hague, Holland, September 2–9, 1872,” in Hans Gerth, *The First International: Minutes of The Hague Congress of 1872*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, 279–280. This report does not appear in *The Hague Congress*, vol. 1.

73. Friedrich Engels, 5 September 1872, in PI, II, 356.

74. Édouard Vaillant, *Internationale et Révolution. A propos du Congrès de La Haye*, in PI, III, 140.

75. *Ibid.*, 142.

they wanted it to play “a similar role with respect to political struggle” and its transformation into an “international workers’ revolutionary party.”⁷⁶ Realizing that it would no longer be possible to exercise control over the GC, they left the congress and shortly afterwards the International.

Many even in the ranks of the majority voted against the move to New York as tantamount to the end of the International as an operational structure. The decision, approved by a margin of only three votes (26 for, 23 against), eventually depended on nine abstentions and the fact that some members of the minority were happy to see the GC relocated far from their own centres of activity. Another factor in the move was certainly Marx’s view that it was better to give up the International than to see it end up as a sectarian organization in the hands of his opponents. The demise of the International, which would certainly follow the transfer of the GC to New York, was infinitely preferable to a long and wasteful succession of fratricidal struggles.

Still, it is not convincing to argue – as many have done⁷⁷ – that the key reason for the decline of the International was the conflict between its two currents, or even between two men, Marx and Bakunin, however great their stature. Rather, it was the changes taking place in the world around it that rendered the International obsolete. The growth and transformation of the organizations of the workers’ movement, the strengthening of the nation-state as a result of Italian and German unification, the expansion of the International in countries like Spain and Italy (where the economic and social conditions were very different from those in Britain or France), the drift towards even greater moderation in the British trade union movement, the repression following the Paris Commune: all these factors together made the original configuration of the International inappropriate to the new times.

Against this backdrop, with its prevalence of centrifugal trends, developments in the life of the International and its main protagonists naturally also played a role. The London Conference, for instance, was far from the saving event that Marx had hoped it would be; indeed, its rigid conduct significantly aggravated the internal crisis, by failing to take account of the prevailing moods or to display the foresight needed to avoid the strengthening of Bakunin and his

76. *Ibid.*, 144.

77. Miklós Molnár, “Quelques remarques à propos de la crise de l’Internationale en 1872,” in *Colloque International, La Première Internationale*, 439.

group.⁷⁸ It proved a Pyrrhic victory for Marx – one which, in attempting to resolve internal conflicts, ended up accentuating them. It remains the case, however, that the decisions taken in London only speeded up a process that was already under way and impossible to reverse.

In addition to all these historical and organizational considerations, there were others of no lesser weight regarding the chief protagonist. As Marx had reminded delegates at a session of the London Conference in 1871, “the work of the Council had become immense, obliged as it was to tackle both general questions and national questions.”⁷⁹ It was no longer the tiny organization of 1864 walking on an English and a French leg; it was now present in all European countries, each with its particular problems and characteristics. Not only was the organization everywhere wracked by internal conflicts, but the arrival of the Commune exiles in London, with new preoccupations and a variegated baggage of ideas, made it still more arduous for the GC to perform its task of political synthesis.

Marx was sorely tried after eight years of intense activity for the International. Aware that the workers’ forces were on the retreat following the defeat of the Paris Commune – the most important fact of the moment for him – he therefore resolved to devote the years ahead to the attempt to complete *Capital*. When he crossed the North Sea to the Netherlands, he must have felt that the battle awaiting him would be his last major one as a direct protagonist.

From the mute figure he had cut at that first meeting in St Martin’s Hall in 1864, he had become recognized as the leader of the International not only by congress delegates and the GC but also by the wider public. Thus, although the International certainly owed a very great deal to Marx, it had also done much to change his life. Before its foundation, he had been known only in small circles of political activists. Later, and above all after the Paris Commune – as well as the publication of his magnum opus in 1867, of course – his fame spread among revolutionaries in many European countries, to the point where the press referred to him as the “red terror doctor.” The responsibility deriving from his role in the International – which allowed him to experience up close so many economic and political struggles – was a further stimulus for his reflections on communism and profoundly enriched the whole of his anticapitalist theory.

78. Molnár, *Le Déclin de la Première Internationale*, 144.

79. Karl Marx, 22 September 1872, in *PI*, II, 217.

Marx versus Bakunin

The battle between the two camps raged in the months following the Hague Congress, but only in a few cases did it centre on their existing theoretical and ideological differences. Marx often chose to caricature Bakunin's positions, painting him as an advocate of "class equalization" (based on the principles of the 1869 programme of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy) or of political abstentionism *tout court*. The Russian anarchist, for his part, who lacked the theoretical capacities of his adversary, preferred the terrain of personal accusations and insults. The only exception that set forth his positive ideas was the incomplete *Letter to La Liberté* (a Brussels paper) of early October 1872 – a text which, never sent, lay forgotten and was of no use to Bakunin's supporters in the constant round of skirmishes. The political position of the "autonomists" emerges from it clearly enough:

There is only one law binding all the members . . . sections and federations of the International. . . . It is the international solidarity of workers in all jobs and all countries in their economic struggle against the exploiters of labour. It is the real organisation of that solidarity through the spontaneous action of the working classes, and the absolutely free federation . . . which constitutes the real, living unity of the International. Who can doubt that it is out of this increasingly widespread organisation of the militant solidarity of the proletariat against bourgeois exploitation that the political struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie must rise and grow? The Marxists and ourselves are unanimous on this point. But now comes the question that divides us so deeply from the Marxists. We think that the policy of the proletariat must necessarily be a revolutionary one, aimed directly and solely at the destruction of States. We do not see how it is possible to talk about international solidarity and yet to intend preserving States . . . because by its very nature the State is a breach of that solidarity and therefore a permanent cause of war. Nor can we conceive how it is possible to talk about the liberty of the proletariat or the real deliverance of the masses within and by means of the State. State means dominion, and all dominion involves the subjugation of the masses and consequently their exploitation for the sake of some ruling minority. We do not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provincial government or so called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hand of the masses, and that when it is concentrated into those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.⁸⁰

Thus, although Bakunin had in common with Proudhon an intransigent opposition to any form of political authority, especially in the direct form of the state, it would be quite wrong to tar him with the

80. Mikhail Bakunin, "A Letter to the Editorial Board of *La Liberté*," in Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 236–237.

same brush as the mutualists. Whereas the latter had in effect abstained from all political activity, the autonomists – as Guillaume stressed in one of his last interventions at the Hague Congress – fought for “a politics of social revolution, the destruction of bourgeois politics and the state.”⁸¹ It should be recognized that they were among the revolutionary components of the International, and that they offered an interesting critical contribution on the questions of political power, the State and bureaucracy.

How, then, did the “negative politics” that the autonomists saw as the only possible form of action differ from the “positive politics” advocated by the centralists? In the resolutions of the International Congress of Saint-Imier, held 15–16 September 1872 on the proposal of the Italian Federation and attended by other delegates returning from The Hague, it is stated that “all political organization can be nothing other than the organization of domination, to the benefit of one class and the detriment of the masses, and that if the proletariat aimed to seize power, it would itself become a dominant and exploiting class.” Consequently, “the destruction of all political power is the first task of the proletariat,” and “any organization of so-called provisional and revolutionary political power to bring about such destruction can only be a further deception, and would be as dangerous to the proletariat as all governments existing today.”⁸² As Bakunin stressed in “The International and Karl Marx” (another incomplete text), the task of the International was to lead the proletariat “outside the politics of the State and of the bourgeois world”; the true basis of its program should be “quite simple and moderate: the organization of solidarity in the economic struggle of labour against capitalism.”⁸³ In fact, while taking various changes into account, this declaration of principles was close to the original aims of the organization and pointed in a direction very different from the one taken by Marx and the GC after the London Conference of 1871.⁸⁴

This profound opposition of principles and objectives shaped the climate in The Hague. Whereas the majority looked to the “positive” conquest of political power,⁸⁵ the autonomists painted the political

81. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 76.

82. *Ibid.*, Document 78.

83. Mikhail Bakunin, “The International and Karl Marx,” in Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 303.

84. On Bakunin’s rejection of the conquest of the State by the working class organized in a political party, see Lehning, “Introduction” (note 38), cvii.

85. See James Guillaume, *L’Internationale, Documents et Souvenirs (1864–1878)*, vol. II, New York: Burt Franklin, 1969 [1907], 342.

party as an instrument necessarily subordinate to bourgeois institutions and grotesquely likened Marx's conception of communism to the Lassallean *Volksstaat* that he had always tirelessly combated. However, in the few moments when the antagonism left some space for reason, Bakunin and Guillaume recognized that the two sides shared the same aspirations. In *The Alleged Splits in the International*, which he wrote together with Engels, Marx had explained that one of the preconditions of socialist society was the elimination of the power of the state:

All socialists see anarchy as the following program: Once the aim of the proletarian movement – i.e., abolition of classes – is attained, the power of the state, which serves to keep the great majority of producers in bondage to a very small exploiter minority, disappears, and the functions of government become simple administrative functions.

The irreconcilable difference stemmed from the autonomist insistence that the aim must be realized immediately. Indeed, since they considered the International not as an instrument of political struggle but as an ideal model for the society of the future in which no kind of authority would exist, Bakunin and his supporters proclaim (in Marx's description):

... anarchy in proletarian ranks as the most infallible means of breaking the powerful concentration of social and political forces in the hands of the exploiters. Under this pretext, [they ask] the International, at a time when the Old World is seeking a way of crushing it, to replace its organization with anarchy.⁸⁶

Thus, despite their agreement about the need to abolish classes and the political power of the state in socialist society, the two sides differed radically over the fundamental issues of the path to follow and the social forces required to bring about the change. Whereas for Marx the revolutionary subject *par excellence* was a particular class, the factory proletariat, Bakunin turned to the "great rabble of the people," the so-called "lumpenproletariat," which, being "almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, carries in its inner being and in its aspirations, in all the necessities and miseries of its collective life, all the seeds of the socialism of the future."⁸⁷ Marx the communist had learned that social transformation required specific historical conditions, an effective organization and a long process of the formation of class consciousness among the masses;

86. Musto, *Workers Unite!*, Document 75.

87. Bakunin, "The International and Karl Marx" (note 83), 294.

Bakunin the anarchist was convinced that the instincts of the common people, the so-called “rabble,” were both “invincible as well as just,” sufficient by themselves “to inaugurate and bring to triumph the Social Revolution.”⁸⁸

Another disagreement concerned the instruments for the achievement of socialism. Much of Bakunin’s militant activity involved building (or fantasizing about building) small “secret societies,” mostly of intellectuals: a “revolutionary general staff composed of dedicated, energetic, intelligent individuals, sincere friends of the people above all,”⁸⁹ who will prepare the insurrection and carry out the revolution. Marx, on the other hand, believed in the self-emancipation of the working class and was convinced that secret societies conflicted with “the development of the proletarian movement because, instead of instructing the workers, these societies subject them to authoritarian, mystical laws which cramp their independence and distort their powers of reason.”⁹⁰ The Russian exile opposed all political action by the working class that did not directly promote the revolution, whereas the stateless person with a fixed residence in London did not disdain mobilizations for social reforms and partial objectives, while remaining absolutely convinced that these should strengthen the working-class struggle to overcome the capitalist mode of production rather than integrate it into the system.

The differences would not have diminished even after the revolution. For Bakunin, “abolition of the state [was] the precondition or necessary accompaniment of the economic emancipation of the proletariat”;⁹¹ for Marx, the state neither could nor should disappear from one day to the next. In his *Political Indifferentism*, which first appeared in *Almanacco Repubblicano* in December 1873, he challenged the hegemony of the anarchists in Italy’s workers’ movement by asserting that:

... if the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then [according to Bakunin] they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lèse-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of

88. *Ibid.*, 294–295.

89. Mikhail Bakunin, “Programme and Purpose of the Revolutionary Organization of International Brothers,” in Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 155.

90. Karl Marx, “Record of Marx’s speech on Secret Societies,” in MECW, vol. 22, 621.

91. Mikhail Bakunin, “Aux compagnons de la Fédération des sections internationales du Jura,” in Arthur Lehning et al. (eds.), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. II: *Michel Bakounine et les Conflits dans l’Internationale*, (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 75.

laying down their arms and abolishing the state, give to the state a revolutionary and transitory form.⁹²

It should be recognized, however, that despite Bakunin's sometimes exasperating refusal to distinguish between bourgeois and proletarian power, he foresaw some of the dangers of the so-called "transitional period" between capitalism and socialism – particularly the danger of bureaucratic degeneration after the revolution. In his unfinished *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*, on which he worked between 1870 and 1871, he wrote:

But in the People's State of Marx, there will be, we are told, no privileged class at all. All will be equal, not only from the juridical and political point of view, but from the economic point of view. . . . There will therefore be no longer any privileged class, but there will be a government, and, note this well, an extremely complex government, which will not content itself with governing and administering the masses politically, as all governments do today, but which will also administer them economically, concentrating in its own hands the production and the just division of wealth, the cultivation of land, the establishment and development of factories, the organization and direction of commerce, finally the application of capital to production by the only banker, the State. . . . It will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority. . . . All states, even the most republican and most democratic states . . . are in their essence only machines governing the masses from above, through an intelligent and therefore privileged minority, allegedly knowing the genuine interests of the people better than the people themselves.⁹³

Partly because of his scant knowledge of economics, the federalist path indicated by Bakunin offered no really useful guidance on how the question of the future socialist society should be approached. But his critical insights already point ahead to some of the dramas of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The International would never be the same again. The great organization born in 1864, which had successfully supported strikes and struggles for eight years, and had adopted an anticapitalist program and established a presence in all European countries, finally imploded

92. Karl Marx, "Political Indifferentism," MECW, vol. 23, p. 393.

93. Mikhail Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State* (London: Freedom Press, 1950), 21 [translation edited].

at the Hague Congress. In later decades, however, the workers' movement adopted a socialist program, expanded throughout Europe and then the rest of the world, and built new structures of supranational coordination. Beyond the continuity of names (the Second International from 1889–1916, the Third International from 1919 to 1943), each of these structures constantly referred to the values and doctrines of the First International. Thus, its revolutionary message proved extraordinarily fertile, producing results over time still greater than those achieved during its existence.

The International helped workers to grasp that the emancipation of labour could not be won in a single country but was a global objective. It also spread an awareness in their ranks that they had to achieve the goal themselves, through their own capacity for organization, rather than by delegating it to some other force; and that – here Marx's theoretical contribution was fundamental – it was essential to overcome the capitalist mode of production and wage labour, since improvements within the existing system, though necessary to pursue, would not eliminate dependence on employers' oligarchies.

An abyss separates the hopes of those times from the mistrust so characteristic of our own, the antisystemic spirit and solidarity of the age of the International from the ideological subordination and individualism of a world reshaped by neoliberal competition and privatization. The passion for politics among the workers who gathered in London in 1864 contrasts sharply with the apathy and resignation prevalent today.

And yet, as the world of labour reverts now to conditions of exploitation similar to those of the nineteenth century, the project of the International has once again acquired an extraordinary topicality. Today's barbarism of the "world order," ecological disasters produced by the present mode of production, the growing gulf between the wealthy exploitative few and the huge impoverished majority, the oppression of women, and the blustery winds of war, racism and chauvinism, impose upon the contemporary workers' movement the urgent need to reorganize itself on the basis of two key characteristics of the International: the multiplicity of its structure and radicalism in objectives. The aims of the organization founded in London 150 years ago are today more vital than ever. To rise to the challenges of the present, however, the new International cannot evade that twin requirement: it must be plural and it must be anticapitalist.

Translated by Patrick Camiller