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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND STATE FOUNDATION

The emergence of a new European state landscape after the First World War

DIETZ

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TOBIAS MÖRSCHEL

AN INTRODUCTION

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the First World War was a key event in European history. Its end led to a reconfiguration of the map of Europe and a surge of democratisation across the board. The large multi-nation states disintegrated and many states in northern, central and eastern Europe won (nation) statehood for the first time or regained it, in some cases after centuries. Social democratic parties were among the principal driving forces of this Europe-wide democratisation of state and society, as well as state formation.

Even though in some cases the newly won sovereignty was short-lived or lasted only until the late 1930s or early 1940s, when the map of Europe was redrawn because of the Second World War, attaining statehood for these countries, sometimes for the first time, was a decisive event as regards both their historical and contemporary identity. Furthermore, it was a crucial reference point in the creation of a new European state order when the Cold War ended. Accordingly, centenary celebrations were held in many of these states in 2018.

The aim of the present volume is to highlight the contribution of social democratic parties to the emergence and formation of the new democratic nation states in the wake of the First World War. The countries within our remit range from Iceland to Georgia, encompassing Austria, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

The principal questions that bind this enterprise together include the following. What are the role and significance of social democrats in the various state formation processes? What social democratic values and ideas managed to find their way into the constitutional orders of the new states? How successful was social democracy in elections and in government? What kind of exchange processes were there with social democratic parties from other countries? And finally, what is the legacy of that period?

Underpinning this book is the observation that, while in the countries presented in it the respective social democratic parties have made a crucial contribution to the founding of the new states their historical role and achievements are all but forgotten today. There are many reasons for this, often specific to the country concerned. Crucial, however, are the instability and discontinuity besetting states in eastern Europe. If one bisects the map of Europe along the 10° eastern latitude the state landscape (which is not the same thing as its forms of state) west of it has remained unchanged between 1900 and today.[1] The European map east of parallel 10° is another matter entirely. Over the same period it has changed repeatedly. The defeat of the German Empire in the First World War, the implosion of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian monarchy and Russia's October revolution and the demise of the multi-ethnic Tsarist empire that came with it brought into being a unique political balance of power in central and eastern Europe, which enabled national freedom and independence movements in this geographical area to realise what they had been striving for since the late nineteenth century: the founding of independent nation states. Of course not all the states that emerged after the First World War were entirely new: some, such as Poland, Lithuania and Georgia, had vanished from the map over the centuries but could now be re-established. Others, such as Belarus, Estonia and Latvia, by contrast, had never previously existed as independent sovereign structures, while a third group, such as Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, were compelled to establish new state structures and territorial borders after the Habsburg Monarchy had been blown apart after so many centuries.

Needless to say, this new (eastern) European state landscape did not simply fall into place after the end of the First World War. Territories and borders had to be defined and the newly founded states underwent a process of formation, establishment and stabilisation. Often this exacted a heavy price in blood. Many states had declared their independence even before the end

of the First World War,[2] but the armistice of 11 November 1918 did not bring military violence to a close in eastern Europe, where the First World War in some instances transitioned seamlessly into cruel civil wars and wars between the newly founded states. The wrangling about the establishment of state sovereignty both internally and externally swept the states of eastern Europe into a vortex of (civil) war and violence into the early 1920s, which has largely been forgotten in central and western Europe.

Besides the often intensely violent domestic conflicts the communist Soviet Russia was a veritable hot spot for conflict due to its refusal to accept the independence of former Russian territories. Finland had already extracted itself successfully from the Tsarist empire in 1917, but the transition was much more difficult for Estonia and Latvia. For example, Soviet Russia recognised Estonia's sovereignty, in the Peace of Tartu of 2 February 1920, only after numerous military clashes. Just under six months later a peace agreement ended the war between Latvia and Soviet Russia and guaranteed the former's statehood and territorial integrity. War also prevailed between Soviet Russia and the reborn Poland, which was also fighting against Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. Only the Peace of Riga, concluded on 18 March 1921, ended the conflict with Soviet Russia. It procured Poland a considerable increase in territory and a defined eastern border, appropriating a little later on the annexed Lithuanian territory around Vilnius.

At the time of the Riga peace agreement, however, Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia had already lost their sovereignty once again and were integrated in Soviet Russia as socialist republics. Further bloody conflicts included the wars between Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1918 and the Hungarian–Romanian war of 1919–1920. The new state landscape that emerged in central and eastern Europe in the wake of the First World War was fragile and extremely prone to conflict. Only 20 years later the map of Europe had been fundamentally transformed once again as a result of the Second World War. In common with Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine in the early 1920s now the Baltic states were permanently incorporated by the Soviet Union and Poland's territory shifted west after the end of the Second World War. What important sites of remembrance and reference points these state foundations of 1918 were for (historical) identity became evident at the latest after the peaceful revolutions in eastern Europe when those states that had been part of the Soviet Union were once again able to attain their independence.

The Baltic states were the first to regain their sovereignty, followed by Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine. In the 1990s all the states that had been newly founded after the First World War returned – even if sometimes with different borders – to the political map. Further changes occurred due to the peaceful separation of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics, while the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes founded in 1918, which later formed the basis of Yugoslavia, split into a number of states after severe conflicts. Finland is something of a special case. In contrast to the states of central and eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s this young democracy did not transform itself into an authoritarian regime and was able to retain its state integrity and independence, even though Finland had to cede some territory to the Soviet Union in the wake of the winter war of 1939.

But the history of the countries we are concerned with here is much more than a tale of violence and conflict. Rather it is the history of an across-the-board surge of democratisation, accompanied by state foundations. In all these countries outdated structures were eliminated and systems of parliamentary government established. The modern era had arrived. The democratisation of state and society was the aim. Key actors in all the countries dealt with here were the local social democratic parties, which saw their task as providing answers to both the national and the social question.

The social democratic parties were founded mainly at the end of the nineteenth century or in the early twentieth century. In most of the countries we are interested in there were initially a number of social democratic or socialist parties and movements in competition with one another. Over the course of time mergers and amalgamations ensued, although there were also splits and fragmentations. In the multi-ethnic states there were often several social democratic parties oriented to a particular linguistic or ethnic "clientele". The German Social Democrats played an important role in many countries as a point of orientation for party programmes. The SPD's Erfurt Programme of 1891 met with particular international acclaim. Lassalle, Bebel and Bernstein were extremely popular in central and eastern Europe.

Even when social democracy aspired to be internationalist and the relationship between class and nation was often found to be contradictory and even antagonistic, in practice it was possible to establish some sort of coexistence and various forms of cooperation between social democrats, the nation state, parliamentary democracy and class consciousness in most central

and eastern European countries. Social democracy was an integral part of national liberation movements and support from left-wing forces was decisive in establishing new statehood. The aim was not revolutionary upheaval but the peaceful establishment of independent democratic and parliamentary nation states. Anarchistic-revolutionary efforts or attempted communist coups were consistently resisted. The communist parties were regarded as opponents or enemies. In particular in the neighbouring states of Soviet Russia social democrats had to battle both domestic communists and the foreign Soviet threat. Hungary was something of a special case. There the social democrats and the communists formed a brief union, which formed the basis for the short-lived Hungarian "council republic" – the first one after Soviet ["Council"] Russia.

The central goal of social democratic parties was to establish parliamentary democracies in nation states. The idea was to improve living standards not through revolution but by means of gradual progress. A plethora of political and social reforms were instigated, achieving varying degrees of realisation in individual countries. But a number of things were common to social democrats in all countries:

- the establishment of general, equal, secret and free suffrage for men and women;
- implementation of the eight-hour day;
- strengthening of workers' rights;
- the establishment and expansion of social security systems (such as unemployment, sickness and pension insurance);
- comprehensive school and education reforms.

The social democrats saw themselves as representing the interests of the workers, even though in many, primarily agricultural eastern European countries industrialisation was still in its infancy. In eastern Europe in particular the peasantry were the social democrats' key constituency and their social plight was at least as urgent as that of the workers. In response, land reforms – far-reaching in some instances – were implemented with the expropriation of large holdings and redistribution to the peasants.

Social democratic parties did not accede to government in all countries but they did make key contributions to state foundation and state forma-

tion even so. The fact that by no means all issues could be addressed and demands met, or that most of these states were transformed into authoritarian regimes in the course of the 1930s – if they had managed to maintain state independence at all – takes nothing away from their historic achievements. Historical developments should be considered not only in terms of their end results, but also in terms of their origins.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The contributions to the present volume are arranged on the basis of geographical-political criteria. First we present the states that managed to detach themselves from the Russian empire at the end of the First World War. Finland opens the proceedings, having achieved its independence as early as 1917. Then follow the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia. The volume then turns to the newly founded states in central Europe. The territory of the newly restored Poland had previously been divided up between the Russian Tsardom, Austria-Hungary and the German Empire. On the lands of the former KUK ("*kaiserlich und königlich*" or imperial and royal) monarchy emerged the Republics of Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The founding of Czechoslovakia is addressed in two contributions, first from the standpoint of Czech and then from that of Slovak social democracy. The new states were almost invariably constituted as parliamentary republics. An exception was the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which emerged from former Habsburg territories and the Kingdom of Serbia. The volume concludes with a contribution on Iceland, which seems somewhat out of place geographically but was included here because this often neglected island state also managed to free itself, from Denmark, in 1918 and become a sovereign state.

The contributions gathered here are oriented towards a number of pivotal questions. First, the social democratic parties' historical circumstances are presented in terms of their foundation, membership development, party platforms and social policy goals. The main focus is on the role and influence of social democrats in state foundation and state formation processes. The aim is to clarify the extent to which social democratic policies and ideas found their way into the new states' constitutional orders. What key concerns could be satisfied and which ones not? Who were the outstanding so-

cial democratic actors of the time? Another point of interest is how successful social democratic parties were in elections, in their involvement in the parliamentary process and in government. A further focus is their relationship with communist parties, as well as their international relations and exchanges between social democratic parties. The contributions conclude with the question of historical context and an evaluation of the legacy of that period. The idea is to present, in a grand panorama, the multifarious paths, detours and some false trails, as well as the similarities and differences between the various state foundation processes 100 years ago and in that way to identify social democracy's historic role. The volume is also intended as a foundation for further comparative analyses.

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1 Unaffected by this are Germany's cessions of territory to Denmark, Belgium and in particular France after the First World War and the secession of the Republic of Ireland from the United Kingdom.

2 Finland 6.12.1917, Ukraine 22.1.1918, Lithuania 16.2.1918, Estonia 24.2.1918, Belarus 25.3.1918, Georgia 26.5.1918, Czechoslovakia 28.10.1918; them after the end of the war: Austria 12.11.1918, Hungary 16.11.1918 and Latvia 18.11.1918.