The Bolsheviks envisioned the October Revolution as the first in a series of proletarian revolutions. The Communist or Third International was to be a new, revolutionary international born from the wreckage of the social-democratic Second International. They sought to forge this international with what they saw as the best elements of the international working-class movement, those that had not betrayed socialism by supporting the war. The Comintern was to be a complete and definite break with the social-democratic politics of the Second International. In the face of the support of World War I by many labour and social-democratic leaders, significant sections of the workers’ movement rallied to the Bolsheviks.¹

This was most pronounced in Italy and France, but in the United States as well the first Bolshevik supporters came from the left wing of the labour movement. In much of Europe, the social-democratic leaders either openly supported the militarism and imperialism of their ‘own’ ruling classes (such as when the German Social Democratic representatives voted for war credits on 4 August 1914) or (in the case of Karl Kautsky) provided ‘left’ cover to open social-chauvinists. In the United States, which entered the war late in the day, the party leadership as a whole opposed the war. However, the American socialist movement was still infected with electoral reformism, and a significant number of influential Socialists downplayed the party’s official opposition to the war.

This chapter examines how the American Communist movement developed out of these antecedents. The Comintern and its Bolshevik leadership were crucial in cohering a unified party, first by supplying the ideological basis for a Communist Party (CP) and then by forcing its supporters into one organisation. The Comintern was essential in the creation of a revolutionary left in the United States in the 1920s: without its intervention and guidance, the American Communists would not have been able to unify and American Communism would have been stillborn.

¹ Nation 1989.
America’s Revolutionary Heritage

Most American socialists were grouped around three organisations. Divisions among these groups were fluid; militants and leaders often belonged to more than one or switched membership more than once. The Communist movement would draw from and be influenced by all three. The oldest, most orthodox and smallest was the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), led by Daniel De Leon (who died in 1914). His lasting contribution to left socialism in the United States was opposition to ‘palliative’ reforms, and his emphasis on dual revolutionary unions counterposed to American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions. In 1900, Morris Hillquit and Job Harriman split from the SLP, and a year later merged with another group led by Eugene V. Debs and Victor Berger to form the Socialist Party (SP). By the 1910s, the SP was larger than the SLP, and comprised socialists of various types and tendencies.2

The third organisation was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose most visible leaders were William D. Haywood and Vincent St. John. The IWW was founded in opposition to the ‘pure and simple’ craft unionism (exemplified by the AFL’s leadership under Samuel Gompers) that accepted capitalism and left many workers unorganised. Wobblies also opposed electoral reformism: although both De Leon and Debs were among the IWW’s founders in 1905, by World War I the group espoused a version of syndicalism, opposing ‘politics’ in favour of militant unionism.3

The SP was a broad tent, and by the early 1910s a right wing had crystallised, represented by leaders such as Berger. Called ‘sewer socialists’ (for their emphasis on municipal reforms), right-wing Socialists supported electoral campaigns and reformism; leaders in several AFL unions supported this tendency. By 1912, the SP had 118,000 members, received 900,000 votes in the presidential election, and counted among its ranks more than a thousand office holders, including Berger (the Party’s sole Congressman), several state legislators, 56 mayors and more than 300 aldermen.4

At the same time, an amorphous left wing in the American socialist movement had developed around the International Socialist Review, published by Charles H. Kerr. In 1910–13, the left- and right-wings of the Socialist movement

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2 On De Leon and the SLP, see Buhle 1987; Coleman 1979; Herreshoff 1967, Chapter 5; Reeve 1972; Seretan 1979.
3 On De Leon and the IWW, see De Leon 1966; see also Coleman 1979, Chapter 5; Salerno 1989, pp. 66, 121.