In 1899, at the height of the revisionist controversy, Franz Mehring defended the theory of permanent revolution against Bernstein’s attacks in the pages of Die Neue Zeit. Against Bernstein’s accusation that Marx and Engels had pursued a ‘Blanquist’ (i.e. putschist) tactic during the revolutionary years 1848–9, Mehring pointed out that they had never over-estimated the ‘creative power of revolutionary violence for the socialist transformation of modern society’. For them, the important thing was to seize as many positions as possible from the counter-revolutionary powers; in that sense they opposed the cowardly Philistine clamour for the ‘closing of the revolution’ and demanded instead the ‘revolution in permanence’.

Mehring went on to defend the March 1850 circular (where Marx and Engels first formulated the theory of permanent revolution) against Bernstein’s criticisms:

---

1 Mehring 1899, pp. 147–54, 208–15, 239–47.
2 Mehring 1899, pp. 244.
3 Marx and Engels 1850.
In March 1850 they issued a circular to the League of Communists that inspires special anger in Bernstein, because in it ‘the Blanquist spirit manifests itself more sharply and unrestrainedly’ than anywhere else. Bernstein closes a long condemnation of this circular with the indignant sentence: ‘All economic understanding vanishes before this program; no newly arrived salon revolutionary could have drawn up a more illusory one.’ In order to appreciate this circular correctly, one must picture for oneself the whole historical context in which it originated. When the German revolution broke out in March 1848, Marx and Engels believed that it would run its course through decades-long struggles, like the English Revolution of the seventeenth and the French Revolution of the eighteenth century. But very quickly it became evident that the German bourgeoisie differed from the English and French bourgeoisie in a very essential respect, namely, in the fact that out of fear of the incomparably more highly developed working class of the nineteenth century, it was ready to accept the ‘closure of the revolution’ at any moment, even at the price of the most ignominious concessions to absolutism and feudalism. From this followed a change of tactics on the part of the working class, and already in April 1849 Marx and his close followers retired from the democratic district committees in Köln because they saw the necessity for a close union of the workers’ associations against the weaknesses and treacheries of the bourgeoisie. At the same time they decided to attend the workers’ congress planned for June 1849, which had been convoked in Leipzig by the workers’ movement east of the Elbe, to whom the Neue Rheinische Zeitung had not paid much attention until then. Subsequently, the miserable cowardice of the German bourgeoisie became even more evident, and so the circular of March 1850 [the ‘Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League’] gave precise instructions, in the event of an imminent new outbreak of the revolution, for the Communists everywhere to mobilise the workers in order to make the revolution ‘permanent’. Since Marx and Engels proceeded from the assumption that the revolution would be accomplished through thirty or fifty years of class and national struggles, the basic principles of revolutionary proletarian policy were indicated there in a perfectly correct way – even if no newly arrived Blanquist or ‘newly arrived salon revolutionary’ could have drawn up the policy so clearly and precisely.4

4 Mehring 1899, pp. 244–5.