The Eclipse of Karl Kautsky, 1914-1924

DAVID W. MORGAN

Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

The abrupt decline of Karl Kautsky's influence and reputation during the First World War and German Revolution is traced not only to the gap between his doctrines and the shifting orientation of German and international socialism, but to some specific features of his outlook and situation: his rationalistic, moderate and mediating proclivities, his inability to maintain a connection to any political party on the German scene, and his loss of personal connections to the higher realms of practical politics.

In 1914 KARL KAUTSKY STOOD at the pinnacle of his fame and influence as the leading theoretical spokesman of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the dominant party of the Socialist International. Editor of the influential weekly Die Neue Zeit, frequently consulted by the leadership on party policy, a respected voice at international socialist congresses, Kautsky for three decades before 1914 had been expounding and adapting Marxist doctrine in ways that are still honored (with reservations) by socialists and even by Leninists. But the ensuing era of war and revolutions changed all this. By the end of 1919 Kautsky was effectively a man without a party, clinging to a vestigial International, his editorial career over and his views on most subjects little heeded; by 1924 he had passed into a scholarly retirement in Vienna. Though he wrote extensively after 1914, including some of his largest works, today only his commentaries on the Bolshevik and German Revolutions are known beyond small circles of specialists and admirers. The collapse of his standing before contemporaries and before history was abrupt and dramatic.

The deepest roots of Kautsky's eclipse are plain: the nature and needs of the European socialist movement changed, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, while Kautsky's thought continued along lines established before the war. His thinking belonged to an era of peace and seemingly inexorable progress; of semi-authoritarian institutions and sharply drawn class lines which afforded the workers' sense of justice and formed them into a united movement seeking radical change; of prosperity and political stability that made violent political action seem neither necessary nor possible in the near future. Kautsky's aggressive but fundamentally optimistic, rationalistic, and peaceable thought, which combined prospects for reform and revolution in delicate theoretical balance, was well suited to such times. His emphasis was
on educating and organizing a united working class movement in preparation for the collapse of the bourgeois capitalist order and the dawning of proletarian socialist rule. Already before the war, groups in the party found this waiting, party-centered system excessively passive and sterile. The demands of wartime sharpened these objections, and war and revolution brought new political orders that made pre-war perspectives obsolete: not only twentieth-century dictatorships in their Bolshevik and Fascist forms, but also fragile and often unlovely parliamentary democracies (see Morgan 1984, esp. pp. 9-12). Kautsky addressed the new problems to his own satisfaction, but not to that of most socialist contemporaries. He came, in fact, to seem irrelevant.

But there was more to it than the altered circumstances of the movement and the divergence of both democratic and Leninist socialists from Kautsky's classic orthodoxy. Kautsky's position in the Social Democratic Party and Socialist International of the pre-war years had derived not just from the authority of his ideas, but from less obvious factors: his personal qualities, his relations with people, and his style of political action. These had formed a part of his strength; now these same factors became elements of weakness.

Some might suppose that it was principally old age that brought Kautsky down. When the Great War broke out Kautsky was two months short of his sixtieth birthday; by the time of the revolution in Germany he was sixty-four. But age—except insofar as it made him less adaptable—was not a primary factor in his decline. Certainly it did not lessen his capacity for work during the critical years. From 1914 to 1919 Kautsky was at least as active in party affairs as at any other time in his life, and the quantity of his writings—including some of his most clear-eyed commentaries on contemporary affairs, as well as *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* and his other famous attacks on Bolshevik rule in Russia—would do honor to a much younger man (see Steenson 1978, ch. 6; Salvadori 1979, chs. 6-8; Miller 1974 and 1978, passim). After 1919 he was slowed down less by physical incapacity or failing powers than by political isolation, until his health broke in 1922. Even then he did not stop writing: three of his largest works appeared in the remaining years before his death in 1938, with a fourth ample volume left to come out posthumously (Kautsky 1927, 1932, 1937, and 1960). Kautsky was not old in vigor or determination in 1914, or even in 1919; and while he later aged noticeably, he had an old age full of accomplishment. But it earned him little honor. Kautsky was seen by most people then, as he is now, as essentially a pre-war figure.

At least three specific features of Kautsky's outlook and personal position contributed to the isolation and disrepute of the years after 1914. The first is personality traits and habits of thought that unfitted him for the passionate controversy of crisis times. A second is certain settled convictions about the role of the socialist party that set him adrift when the old party began to break up. And the third is his growing loneliness: the loss of the personal connections that had helped define his special role as quasi-official theorist to the party and the International. Each of the three worked to render Kautsky isolated and ineffectual by the early 1920s.