



Ursula Reuter. *Paul Singer (1844-1911): Eine politische Biographie*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2004. 674 S. EUR 74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7700-5257-8.

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## The Third Man

The portraits of three men—August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht and Paul Singer—graced the banners of many late-nineteenth-century posters depicting the leading lights of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Despite his membership in the party's guiding triumvirate during its golden era, Singer's name has subsequently faded from public memory. The historical record, too, has fallen comparatively silent regarding this important Socialist. The only prior monograph on Singer was written by Heinrich Gemkow in 1957. The causes of Singer's relative obscurity are explored in a new biography by Düsseldorf historian Ursula Reuter.

Paul Singer was born into a comfortable middle-class Jewish home in Berlin in 1844, but the death of his father four years later plunged the family into financial trouble. Singer's career as a self-made man began in 1869 when he and his brother Heinrich founded a women's coat factory. During the boom of the early 1870s, the firm quickly grew into a successful international export business. Singer used his share of the company profits to become German Social Democracy's most prominent benefactor.

With his entrance into commercial life, Singer developed the constellation of public activities typical of mid-century bourgeois civic leaders in Germany. He became involved in multiple agencies of communal self-government, beginning with a local political *Bezirksverein*, extending to commercial bodies and including several charitable ventures, such as an asylum for homeless men. This combination of economic self-help (*Selbsthilfe*) and communal self-government (*Selb-*

*stverwaltung*) formed the backbone of the utopian vision championed at this time by left-liberals such as Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch and Rudolf Virchow.

Unlike Schulze-Delitzsch and Virchow, who had made the journey from 1848 revolutionaries to the inner circle of Berlin's left-liberal Progressive Party, Singer's political socialization began in the dissident wing of this party and veered further left. In 1867 he became involved in efforts undertaken by Johann Jacoby, the Königsberg physician and hero of 1848, to resurrect an autonomous party of radical republicans (known in Germany as *Demokraten*). Between 1869 and the early 1870s, Singer (like fellow Democrats Jacoby, Franz Mehring, Carl August Schramm and Eduard Bernstein) entered into close alliances with the growing Eisenach Social Democratic movement around Bebel and Liebknecht. Although not always in agreement on the solution to the "social question," they all shared a utopian internationalism, a hostility to Prussian militarism and an antipathy for Berlin's two largest workers' organizations that was inspired by Schulze-Delitzsch and Lassalle respectively. Reuter surmises that poor health and overwork led Singer to withdraw from politics between 1870 and 1875. However, this hiatus corresponds to the reticence of many Democrats to accept the demise of their movement and its complete absorption into Social Democracy (the last straggler, Franz Mehring, did not join the SPD until 1890/91).

Between the mid-1870s and the mid-1880s, Singer rose to become the most important SPD organizer in Berlin. He founded a socialist publishing empire—with

*Vorwärts* as its centerpiece—and won seats in the Reichstag and Berlin City Council. A great achievement of Reuter's study has been to show how Singer pioneered socialist communal politics. This material is a welcome and needed addition to the growing literature on communal self-government, which has primarily focused on the dominant liberal Progressives.[1]

Singer was among the first four socialists to overcome the discriminatory three-class voting system and gain a seat in the Berlin City Council in 1883. Unlike some of his socialist colleagues, who used their position as a bully pulpit to assail liberal "hypocrisy," Singer's comportment was largely in the tradition of the bourgeois *Honoratioren*. The respect of many of his left-liberal colleagues enabled Singer to spearhead the constructive—though limited—engagement of socialists in the administration of Germany's capital.

Reuter's study deftly and effortlessly recapitulates important debates (over revisionism, coalition with bourgeois parties, and so on) within Social Democracy and shows Singer's place within each. Yet, Reuter's command of party history corresponds to a problematic aspect of the study. Readers of political biographies may expect them to offer new perspectives on political history. The genre of biography enables the historian to demonstrate the complex interactions of religious, intellectual, social and psychological motivations in political actions. And, of course, readers hope to gain access to the personality of a historically important individual. In Reuter's study, however, Singer does not stand out from SPD history. Nor does the reader gain the feeling of "knowing" the man.

This lack of personal detail is, in part, a source problem. Singer's personal papers were presumably among those archival materials lost following the seizure of the Amsterdam IISG by the Amt Rosenberg in 1940. However, it seems unlikely that these papers would have significantly opened up new perspectives, for Singer was a private man and "neither in spoken or written form did he reveal his personal memories" (p. 19). Nor did Singer leave behind a corpus of theoretical writings, like those that have formed the basis of the biographies of his colleagues, such as Mehring, Bernstein, Liebknecht and Kautsky. Reuter concludes that Singer "was no theoretician, no innovative ... let alone visionary politician, nor [was he] a brilliant rhetorician.... He was a man of the daily political grind [*des politischen Alltagsgeschäfts*]" (p. 594).

The difficulty that the reader has in gaining a clear

profile of Singer's personality thus stems, in part, from his identity as the consummate party functionary. Neither a charismatic leader like Bebel, nor a theoretician like Kautsky, Singer was the gavel-wielding president of the party congresses. His viewpoint was hard to differentiate from that of the party mainstream, precisely because "in cases of conflict, party reason took first place" for him (p. 357).

Reuter does discuss an important structural reason both for Singer's identification with the party and for his self-reserve regarding his personal life—his status as a confessional outsider in German society. Those Jews, like Singer, who were prominent among the few wealthy supporters of socialism, found an analog to their confessional exclusion in the social exclusion of workers. The universalizing discourse of the socialist movement offered hope for the historical redemption of both types of exclusion.

Reuter surmises that Singer expected socialism to complete Jewish emancipation and end antisemitism. Informally, Singer did state that "the only cure for anti-Semitism ... would be the supersession of capitalism by the socialist state" (p. 531). Singer's career was accompanied by frequent antisemitic attacks, and he spoke continuously against the antisemitic "Berliner Bewegung" and Court Chaplain Adolf Stoecker, the leader of the Christian Social Party. Despite this willingness to take a stand against antisemitism, Singer resisted publicly articulating the relationship between his Jewish identity and his socialism. Particularly insightful is Reuter's account of an incident at the 1891 International Workers' Congress in Brussels (pp. 289-291). An American Jewish delegate had petitioned to put the formulation of a socialist position against antisemitism on the agenda. Singer and the leading Austrian socialist Viktor Adler (who was also Jewish) sought out the American in private to pressure him to withdraw his petition, with the argument that it would only confirm antisemitic charges that socialism served Jewish interests.

Reuter deserves credit for drawing our attention to the role of Jewish identity in the biography and historical memory of one of Germany's leading socialists.[2] She notes, for instance, that it was the state-sponsored antisemitism of the Third Reich that led the worker's movement to repress the memory of Singer, a memory that largely failed to reemerge in the post-1945 socialist parties (pp. 13-14). However, out of respect to her subject and her sources, Reuter chose not push this point into a more substantive discussion. A deeper inquiry into

the Jewish socialist milieu of Berlin, for example, would have provided one means of prying the figure of Paul Singer from the background of socialist party history and thereby giving his biography stronger contours. This caveat aside, Reuter's biography is to be recommended as an elegantly and succinctly written account of an exemplary socialist career.

#### Notes

[1]. See the exemplary biographical study, Constantin Goschler, *Rudolf Virchow. Mediziner, Anthropologe, Politiker* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2002). See also Berthold Grzywatz, *Stadt, Bürgertum und Staat im*

*19. Jahrhundert. Selbstverwaltung, Partizipation und Repräsentation in Berlin und Preußen 1806 bis 1918* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003).

[2]. By comparison, William Smaldone's biography of Rudolf Hilferding made only passing reference to his subject's Jewish identity (pp. 10-11, 13, 148), while Gary Steenson apparently considered Karl Kautsky's Jewish background irrelevant to his biography. See William Smaldone, *Rudolf Hilferding: The Tragedy of a German Social Democrat* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998); Gary Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854-1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978).

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