Rudolf Hilferding's Correspondence

Rudolf Hilferding (1877-1941) was both a major Marxist theorist and a politician heavily engaged in practical political work. Author of a landmark theoretical study of finance capital (1910) that was a foundational text for Marxist theory on imperialism, his political activities spanned Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic in which he served as a finance minister, and exile politics during the Nazi dictatorship. William Smaldone’s edition of Hilferding’s letters to three other prominent socialists well reflects the breadth of Hilferding’s intellectual and political activities. Smaldone is eminently well qualified for the task of editing Hilferding’s correspondence. He has written a standard biography of the Austrian-born Marxist theorist, as well as editing substantial volumes of Austro-Marxist theoretical writings.[1] The present volume contains correspondence between Hilferding and three of his socialist contemporaries: Karl Kautsky, Leon Trotsky, and the prominent Weimar and exile Social Democratic Party (SPD) figure Paul Hertz. The original letters can now be found online on the website of the International Institute for Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, that mecca of labor movement historians.[2]

Karl Kautsky was the leading Marxist theoretician of the Second International after the death of Friedrich Engels in 1895, and principal editor of the highly regarded socialist periodical Die Neue Zeit. In 1902, Hilferding, a newly qualified medical doctor in Vienna with a growing passion for political economy, first wrote to Kautsky, offering him an article for Die Neue Zeit. A close mentoring relationship grew between Kautsky and Hilferding, which inspired Hilferding to move to Berlin to work more closely with Kautsky, who found him a post at the Social Democratic Party School. The letters from 1902 to 1907 document this relationship.
After Hilferding moved to Berlin, he was in constant contact with Kautsky, hence the absence of letters from this period. The correspondence resumes in 1915, when Hilferding was called up to serve in the Austrian army's medical corps, and continues until 1918. Sadly, there are no letters from the period of the German revolution of 1918-19, when Kautsky and Hilferding collaborated on the Socialization Commission, which sought to draw up plans for the socialization of sectors of the German economy, again for the reason that the two were in regular personal contact. By the 1920s, Hilferding was a prominent politician in the German Social Democratic Party, serving as finance minister in 1923, at the height of the German inflation, and again in 1928-29, and as a member of the Reichstag from 1924 to 1933. Meanwhile, Kautsky, who turned seventy in 1924, withdrew from active political life and moved to Vienna, where he worked on his late opus *The Materialist Conception of History*. The intellectual partnership between Hilferding and Kautsky continued until not long before Kautsky's death in 1938.

Unfortunately, we only have Hilferding's letters to Kautsky, so this is a one-sided correspondence. One letter from Kautsky to Hilferding is extant and in the IISH, from June 28, 1928, in which Kautsky declines Hilferding's suggestion that he write an article commenting on the latest program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, because he was preoccupied with trying to complete his book on social democracy and war.[3] Perhaps Smaldone could have made room for this short letter in this edition, although it seems ungracious to complain of omissions when there are so many riches in the five hundred pages of this book. The section including Leon Trotsky's letters is by far the shortest part of the book, comprising just twenty-two letters and postcards from Trotsky to Hilferding from 1907 to 1912, but is nonetheless fascinating for the glimpses it offers of the brilliant and mercurial Russian revolutionary. Initially, Trotsky is almost courting Hilferding, seeking assistance in getting his articles published as he struggles with the German language. The letters end with a lengthy, incompletely preserved letter in which Trotsky berates Hilferding for the latter's reluctance to intervene in the internal conflicts within Russian socialism. Trotsky wrote: “In regard to Russian party politics you have always taken my side—but—purely platonically” (p. 213). The largest part of the book consists of Hilferding's correspondence with Paul Hertz from 1933 to 1938. Hertz is the least well known of the personages found in this volume, but he played a crucial role in Weimar social democracy and in social democratic exile politics. He was a close ally of Hilferding in the latter's efforts to edit a socialist journal in the difficult conditions of exile, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialismus*, backing Hilferding against the skeptical opposition of the SPD's right-wing leaders, who saw little value in this intellectual labor.

In the limited space of a book review, it is impossible to do justice to the richness of this source edition. There are striking insights here into Hilferding's political thought, for example, Hilferding's emphasis on the importance of parliamentary work. Writing to Kautsky in 1903, Hilferding wrote that “parliament, and its ultimate conquest, is the most suitable means of bringing about the victory of the proletariat,” because parliament was “the terrain where economic power is transformed into political power” (p. 34). This belief in the power of parliamentary work did not mean that Hilferding leaned to the right of the Social Democratic Party. During the 1905 miners' strike in the Ruhr, Hilferding was critical of the union leadership for breaking off the strike too quickly and failing to grasp the dimensions of the class struggle that the strike involved. Hilferding lamented the separation of the unions from the party and the political neutrality espoused by union leaders. During World War I, Hilferding initially hoped to avoid a split in the Social Democratic Party, but joined Kautsky in the newly founded an-
tiwar Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in early 1917.

As Smaldone writes, Hilferding began his period of exile from Nazi Germany “with a sharp turn to the left” (p. 225). Hilferding stressed the need for a “clear commitment to revolution” as the guiding principle of the exiled SPD (p. 258). At the same time, Hilferding was deeply opposed to a united front with the Communist Party (KPD), viewing the Stalinized KPD as antithetical to democracy. For Hilferding, socialism and freedom had to be inseparable. A quotation from a letter to Hertz from August 1935 provides this volume with its title: “freedom is indivisible” (p. 368).

The Hilferding-Hertz correspondence gives a moving reflection of the strains of exile politics. Hilferding became increasingly pessimistic as the Zeitschrift für Sozialismus struggled for money and contributors, and as news filtered through of the Nazi repression of social democratic networks in Germany. The letters also document the eventual estrangement of Hilferding and Hertz. Hilferding died from taking poison in a Gestapo prison in Paris in 1941. This volume will be of great value to anyone interested in the history of Marxist theory, German social democracy, the politics of the Weimar Republic, or exile politics during the Nazi period. Readers with the necessary linguistic and paleographical skills can read the original letters in digitized form on the IISH website, with the exception of the Trotsky letters. But they, along with other readers, will benefit from Smaldone’s fine editorial work, along with his introductions that draw on many years of specialist expertise on Hilferding and the history of socialism in Germany.

Notes

[2]. See the online inventory of the Kautsky papers, with links to scanned correspondence with Hilferding and others: https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/ARCH00712#Acf44083532; link to Rudolf Hilferding Papers (including Trotsky’s letters to Hilferding): https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/ARCH00573; and inventory of Paul Hertz Papers, https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/ARCH00563. The Kautsky and Hertz collections are digitized.

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