

# JOSEPH WEYDEMEYER

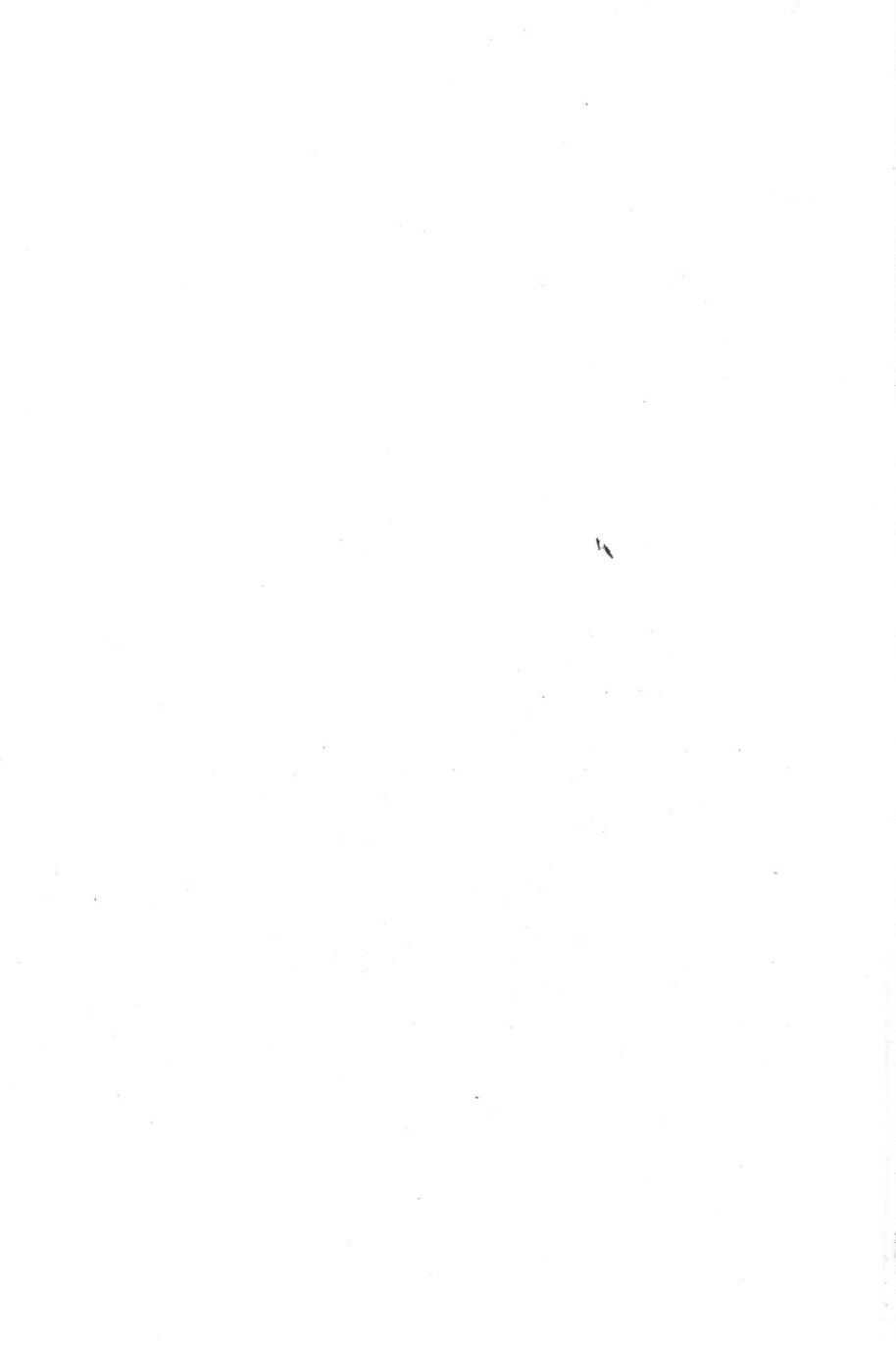
*Pioneer of American Socialism*

BY KARL OBERMANN



INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

JOSEPH WEYDEMEYER



# JOSEPH WEYDEMEYER

*Pioneer of American Socialism*

BY KARL OBERMANN



INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1947, BY  
INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS CO., INC.



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

# CONTENTS

<i>FOREWORD</i>	7
I. FORMATIVE YEARS	11
ARTILLERY LIEUTENANT WEYDEMEYER, 11 . . . DEBUT AS A JOURNALIST, 12 . . . THE AGRARIAN QUESTION IN THE UNITED STATES, 14 . . . THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY, 15 . . . VISIT TO BRUSSELS, 18 . . . THE REVOLUTION OF 1848, 20 . . . EFFORTS TO REORGANIZE THE COMMUNIST LEAGUE, 22 . . . LAST DAYS OF THE "NEUE DEUTSCHE ZEITUNG", 24 . . . PLANS TO EMIGRATE, 26.	
II. AMERICAN BEGINNINGS	31
THE ACTIVITIES OF GERMAN IMMIGRANTS, 31 . . . WEYDEMEYER IN NEW YORK, 35 . . . "DIE REVOLUTION," 37 . . . POLEMICS AGAINST HEINZEN AND OTHERS, 43 . . . "LITERARY AGENT" FOR MARX AND ENGELS, 45 . . . POLITICAL WRITER, 46 . . . AN ECHO OF THE COLOGNE COMMUNIST TRIAL, 53.	
III. REVIVAL OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT	55
THE SPIRITUAL FATHER OF THE AMERICAN WORKERS' LEAGUE, 56 . . . THE AMERICAN WORKERS' LEAGUE AND THE WORKINGMEN'S NATIONAL ASSOCIATION, 66 . . . CO-EDITOR OF "DIE REFORM," 70 . . . THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA CAMPAIGN OF 1854, 78 . . . LECTURES ON THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT, 81 . . . THE HOMESTEAD BILL PROPAGANDA, 82 . . . THE STRUGGLE AGAINST REACTIONARY NATIONALISM, 85.	
IV. POLITICAL REALIGNMENT	88
WEYDEMEYER IN MILWAUKEE, 88 . . . WEYDEMEYER'S LECTURE TOUR, 89 . . . THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE COMMUNIST CLUB (1857-58), 91 . . . THE NEW GENERAL WORKERS' LEAGUE, 93 . . . THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT AND THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR MOVEMENT, 94 . . . WEYDEMEYER AND MARX IN 1859, 99 . . . WEYDEMEYER IN CHICAGO, 104 . . . THE LINCOLN CAMPAIGN IN 1860, 108.	

V. THE CIVIL WAR	114
THE FIGHT AGAINST CONFUSION IN 1861, 114 . . . WEYDEMEYER IN MISSOURI, 117 . . . THE FIGHT AGAINST THE CONFEDERATE GUERRILLAS, 120 . . . THE STRUGGLE TO SAFEGUARD DEMOCRACY, 123 . . . THE FORMATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKINGMEN'S ASSOCIATION, 128 . . . COLONEL IN THE 41ST INFANTRY MISSOURI VOLUNTEERS, 131 . . . NEW TASKS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT AFTER THE CIVIL WAR, 133 . . . LAST YEARS OF WEYDEMEYER'S LIFE, 136.	

<i>WEYDEMEYER'S PREFACE TO THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE</i>	141
--	-----

<i>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES</i>	143
------------------------------	-----

<i>REFERENCE NOTES</i>	150
------------------------	-----

<i>INDEX</i>	158
--------------	-----

## FOREWORD

In the summer of 1944, the International Fur and Leather Workers Union (C.I.O.), with its 100,000 members, was asked to sponsor a Liberty Ship. It was given this honor because of its magnificent efforts during the first four War Loan drives, in the course of which it raised \$22,000,000. The union chose the name "Joseph Weydemeyer" for the ship it sponsored. Joseph Weydemeyer was a German-American, a political exile from Germany, a friend of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and the first Marxist in the United States.

Joseph Weydemeyer was not one of those immigrants who brought with them to this country their prejudices, their stereotypes, superstitions, and illusions and attempted to preserve them in this country, as did so many political, social, and religious sectarians of his day. Nor did he fall victim to that vulgarized conception of American democracy which asserts that the American type of bourgeois democracy has once and for all solved all the problems of human society. This former Prussian artillery officer, who came to the United States in 1851, espoused the ideas of scientific communism, the theory and practice of the liberation of the working class.

He resisted all temptations to look upon the relatively young American bourgeoisie, with its enormous influence on all the other classes in society, and on youthful American capitalism as anything but historically conditioned forces—transitory, not eternal forces. As a Marxist he never allowed himself to be cowed by the power and influence of the ruling classes; nor was he depressed by the weaknesses, the splits, and the confusion in the young American labor movement.

Armed with the theory of Marxism, then so new and far from widely accepted, he avoided the mistakes made by so many other political exiles who called themselves democrats, socialists, and communists. He understood the most important requirement of Marxism, both in its practical and theoretical aspects: always taking into account the specific peculiarities of



a country, which distinguish it from other countries within the same period of history.

Only thus could the thoroughgoing German democrat and communist become a representative of the interests of the American working class; only thus could the German immigrant join the most progressive section of the American working class and become an outstanding fighter in its ranks; only thus could he become an American Marxist.

Weydemeyer came to the United States at a time when the "industrial revolution" was making giant strides. Gold had been discovered in California and people were beginning to flock to the Pacific Coast. The total value of industrial production almost doubled in the decade of 1850-60. Basic changes in the world market were taking place. Unlike Europe with its rigid censorship, America still offered vast possibilities for enlightening the rapidly growing industrial population.

With the growth of the working class and the prospect of sharpening social tensions and conflicts inevitably accompanying the capitalistic concentration in industry, it was of decisive importance to give Marxism a solid foundation in the United States. Only thus could the workers have the clarity and enlightenment so necessary in the social struggles that lay ahead. It was Weydemeyer's merit that in this period of American history he aroused attention to the doctrines of Marxism and defended them against all slanders. As a man who knew how "to study concrete questions in all their concreteness," he was of tremendous assistance to Marx and Engels with whom he collaborated until his death in 1866. However small were the first Marxist groups founded by Weydemeyer and his colleagues, and however great the difficulties in spreading Marxist ideas, this was a vital first step.

Johann Jacoby, a courageous German democrat and political writer, wrote at the time: "The formation of the smallest workers' organization will be of greater value to the future historian of culture than the battle of Sadowa."

It is in this light that we must judge the activity of Joseph Weydemeyer, his work as an organizer and propagandist. These were the first groping steps, the first phase of growth in which the labor movement in the United States became acquainted with Marxism.

Wedemeyer was undoubtedly an outstanding personality. From the day he came to the United States until his untimely death fifteen years later, he participated actively in American life. A clear thinker and a man of action, his activities ranged from political journalism and trade union organization to service in the Northern army and public office in St. Louis.

He was one of those German-Americans whom the annual report of the American Historical Association for 1898 described as follows: "The effect of the activity in their adopted country on the political and social life of large portions of the United States has been very great and is plainly perceptible to the present day. It follows that the nature of their influence and the manner in which they exercised it become highly important subjects of historical investigations." Yet up to now no comprehensive evaluation of Weydemeyer's work and real significance has been written. This book is a first attempt to fill this need. In it the reader will find an account of Weydemeyer's work and thought in relation to the new trade union movement, the fight against slavery, the Civil War, and the organization of the working class as an independent social and political force. His story is an integral part of the history of America and of the formation and development of the labor movement. It is impossible to retrace the life work of this man whose name has remained a living memory without recognizing how genuinely American and yet profoundly international was this first outstanding Marxist on American soil. His tireless activities as a builder of labor organizations; his persistent efforts to fuse the German-American labor movement with the general trade union and political movement of the American working class; his distinguished role in the Union Army in the war against slavery; his political and personal collaboration with his friends, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, were characteristic phases of a life whose guiding thought was Marxism and the cause of progress. When Weydemeyer died the American working class lost one of its great sons and pioneers.

Since Weydemeyer's day, the American labor movement in general and the American Marxist movement in particular have made great progress. The evolution of the United States has confirmed what the founders of scientific socialism, Karl

Marx and Frederick Engels, pointed out a hundred years ago in their *Communist Manifesto*. It has confirmed that the class struggle between capital and labor has become the decisive conflict in society, regardless of the specifically national or historically conditioned forms in which this conflict appears. But the hundred years that have passed since the appearance of the *Communist Manifesto* have also proved beyond a doubt that in the final analysis the working class in every country in the world can only triumph over its class enemies if it adopts Marxism as its theory and guide to action. Otherwise, all its victories will remain but transitory victories.

The reader of this book will be in a position to convince himself of the usefulness of the study of Marxism. In it he will once again find the proof that it is just as ridiculous to identify Marxism with an ideology limited to any one nation as it is to say that the basic laws of natural science are valid only for one special country.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Weydemeyer, the first American Marxist. That German-American, a political exile from his native land, occupies a place of honor in the history of the American labor movement and in the century-old history of the development of Marxism.

K. O.

# I

## FORMATIVE YEARS

In the beginning of the 1840's, after the accession to power in Prussia of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the democratic opposition intensified its demands for freedom of the press and representative government in Germany. In this effort the radical "Young Hegelian" movement played a noteworthy part by striving to raise the level of political consciousness and culture in the country. Among those belonging to the group of "Young Hegelians" were Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. From 1842 on, the *Rheinische Zeitung* (*Rhenish Gazette*) of Cologne became one of the most militant publications of the movement: it was the product of an alliance between representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie of the Rhineland and a number of writers of the "Young Hegelian" school. Marx was among the leading collaborators on this paper and became its editor at the end of 1842.

### ARTILLERY LIEUTENANT WEYDEMEYER

The *Rheinische Zeitung* won a good deal of influence among the young officers stationed in Prussian garrison towns in the Rhineland and Westphalia. Most of them came from bourgeois families employed in government service. Among the officers of the garrison in Minden (Westphalia) who in 1842 came into direct contact with the group around the *Rheinische Zeitung* was the twenty-four-year-old artillery lieutenant, Joseph Weydemeyer.<sup>1</sup>

Weydemeyer, son of a Prussian government official in the Westphalian city of Muenster, who went through high school and the Berlin military academy and now stood on the threshold of a promising career as an army officer, became a constant visitor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* group which had been formed in Cologne in order to discuss social problems. This

fact had a decisive influence on Weydemeyer's future: discussions in this study circle impelled him along the path of social and political activity and fixed his resolve to fight for democracy and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Although banned in 1843, the *Rheinische Zeitung* had sown fertile seeds among the officers and men in many a Rhineland and Westphalian garrison. In Minden, Weydemeyer had won over many of his fellow-officers: the success of his efforts may be gauged by the fact that many prominent figures in the German Revolution of 1848 and later in the American Civil War—such as Fritz Anneke, August Willich, Hermann Korff, and Friedrich von Beust—served with him in Minden where they first became acquainted with progressive and democratic ideas. The officers at Minden began a study circle, and Weydemeyer became so imbued with socialist ideas that he decided to devote himself to writing and journalism. After almost six years as a professional officer, he left the army on the ground that "his position as a Prussian officer no longer jibed with his views."<sup>3</sup>

## DEBUT AS A JOURNALIST

Weydemeyer entered the field of journalism as an assistant editor of the *Triersche Zeitung* (*Trier Gazette*), a radical paper which played an important part in spreading democratic and socialist ideas in the home town of Karl Marx during the years before 1848. Originally inspired by the views of the great utopian socialist Charles Fourier, it espoused in 1844 a vague philosophical socialism and became the organ of Dr. Karl Gruen, one of the theoreticians of so-called "True Socialism" in Germany. The difficulties with which the *Triersche Zeitung* had to cope forced young Weydemeyer to come to grips at once with the daily struggle for freedom of the press and opinion in Germany. Frequently the censors blue-penciled entire pages of the paper and almost daily the editorial board faced the problem of how to bring out their publication despite the censorship.<sup>4</sup>

Mounting social tensions, especially in the Rhineland and Silesia, gradually forced German socialist groups to the realization that exclusively moral principles offered no solution of their problems. It began to dawn upon them that these moral principles would not prove decisive in the achievement of their aims. Rejecting the tenets of philosophical socialism as idealistic chatter, Weydemeyer plunged into a study of basic social and economic questions. At the start of 1845 this trend was given a decided impetus by the publication of the *Holy Family*, the first joint work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, which laid bare the "illusions of speculative philosophy,"<sup>5</sup> and the appearance of Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, written, in the author's words, "to give German socialism, then trotting out empty phrases, a factual basis by describing the social conditions created by modern large-scale industry."<sup>6</sup>

Weydemeyer was among the first to recognize the significance of Engels' book. Shortly after its appearance, he wrote an article of some thirty pages in the second volume of *Dies Buch gehoert dem Volk* (*This Book Belongs to the People*), a year-book issued by his brother-in-law Otto Luening. The article consisted mainly of excerpts from Engels' study, which Weydemeyer described as "one of the most important works in our contemporary literature."<sup>7</sup>

Henceforth Weydemeyer resolved to concentrate on social and economic problems. He was one of the first in Germany to utilize Marx's and Engels' conception of the material basis of social development in the analysis of events.

In the summer of 1845 he became co-editor of the *Westphaelische Dampfboot* (*Westphalian Steamboat*) and was soon its leading collaborator on socio-economic problems. The *Westphaelische Dampfboot*, one of the outstanding monthlies of the socialist movement, was edited by Otto Luening, first in Bielefeld, the center of the Westphalian textile industry, and later in Paderborn. Until 1848 this socialist periodical fought stubbornly against the censorship, and opened its pages generously to the writings of Marx and Engels. In his own ar-

ticles, Weydemeyer defended the point of view of scientific socialism against the idealist and utopian concepts of the philosophical socialists; he saw to it that important contributions by Marx and Engels were printed in the magazine. In fact, he even planned to place the periodical in the hands of the two founders of scientific socialism.<sup>8</sup>

Weydemeyer's first article on economics dealt with a problem which was then in the center of attention: Free Trade or Protection. His point of departure was the question: How can the condition of the workers be improved? This attitude led him to explore the various economic measures and demands then under discussion. Thus he wrote in July 1845: "They [*i.e.*, the business leaders] desire free competition, as they desire freedom of the press; but they desire it for themselves, not against themselves. They want to exploit, but not to be exploited. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

Weydemeyer's articles soon engaged the attention of the bourgeois publications. They were indignant at his method of "exposing existing social evils and deficiencies down to the last detail," and remarked that he was noting only "the negative side of the question." This evoked a reply from Weydemeyer in which he clearly defined social relationships. "It is society," he emphasized, "that creates its own conditions; and it is society alone that transforms them when it recognizes them as evil. The state itself is only a product of society; it is the form in which society has hitherto appeared as long as it has existed as such. It forms the ligament that holds together its component parts."<sup>10</sup>

## THE AGRARIAN QUESTION IN THE UNITED STATES

In the early summer of 1846, Marx and his friends in Brussels found themselves forced to take a stand on events in the United States. Hermann Kriege, a member of their communist group, who had traveled to America in 1845 by way of Brussels, became editor of the *Volkstribun* (*Tribune of the*

*People*), organ of the German-American Social Reform Association. In it, Kriege advanced certain social illusions, particularly on the question of land reform, as principles of communism. Instead of giving a fundamental analysis of the specific peculiarities of the American scene and the social demands arising therefrom, Kriege had fostered the illusion that the only solution for avoiding social misery was to be found in abolishing land rent and giving free land to the poor. On May 11, 1846, Marx and his Brussels friends refuted Kriege's errors in a memorandum and sent their resolution as a lithographed circular to their friends in Germany. This circular came into Weydemeyer's possession a month later.

In order to combat similar illusions then current in Germany, Weydemeyer asked for permission to reprint the document. Before this permission was granted, it appeared almost verbatim in the July issue of the *Westphaelische Dampfboot*. At first, Marx disapproved of too hasty a publication of the text. But on August 19, 1846, Weydemeyer wrote to Marx that in his opinion all other considerations were superfluous since in the meantime Kriege himself had printed the statement in the *Volkstribun*. Furthermore, Weydemeyer pointed out that even the editor of the *Dampfboot*, Otto Luening, had agreed to reprint the text in a self-critical effort to clarify certain ambiguous conceptions in their own ranks. Specifically, Weydemeyer could point to the fact that publication of this document gave them an opportunity to say things to German readers which, in view of the strict censorship, could not be expressed openly and in relation to German conditions.<sup>11</sup>

## THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

In the summer of 1845 Marx and Engels meeting in Brussels set about to "work out in detail the newly formulated approach [the materialist conception of history] in various directions." This had become urgently necessary since the radical followers of Hegel were opposing emphasis on social questions by resorting to philosophical phrases and dogmas and were seek-



ing to divert attention from these questions by means of idealist concepts. A fundamental exposition of the materialist conception of history was all the more essential since "the actual production process" and not ideas and concepts "must be considered the basis of all history."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the working class had to be given proof that "communism did not mean the elaboration in the imagination of a completely perfect ideal society, but signified rather an insight into the nature and the conditions of the struggle led by the proletariat and the general aims arising therefrom."<sup>13</sup>

Laboring about a year and a half at the task, Marx and Engels laid the scientific basis of the materialist conception of history in a study, *The German Ideology*. This study, the full text of which was published only after the Russian Revolution, first became known in Germany through the efforts of Weydemeyer. The latter had moved to the Westphalian city of Bielefeld. At that time the province of Westphalia was a key center of the socialist and communist movement; and in Bielefeld Weydemeyer lost no opportunity in discussing the works of Marx and Engels with his socialist and communist friends.

In April 1846, Weydemeyer received from Marx the manuscript of the completed sections of *The Germany Ideology* so that he could begin negotiations for publication. He fully approved Marx's and Engels' treatment of the "German ideologists" and felt that the cause of labor would not be served by compromises or "the mania of reconciliation." Two letters are extant from Weydemeyer to Marx, in which the former discusses his conversations with his Westphalian friends.<sup>14</sup>

The first letter, dated April 30, 1846, declares:

"On the question you raise that it may be superfluous to criticize Stirner, I have already heard this point of view expressed by several. I have had a particularly long discussion with Buegers about it. But I feel even more strongly than before that such a criticism is necessary. His ideas are still powerfully implanted in people's minds, especially those of the