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The Democratic Socialism of Emile Vandervelde

*Between
Reform
and
Revolution*



Janet
Polasky

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suspect that David was a Belgian in some former life, given the ease with which he adapts to life in Leuven, learning math in Dutch and honing his soccer skills in the midst of his circle of Flemish friends. Marta, not as convinced of the need to leave Portsmouth every summer, did assure me that when she grew up she wanted to be a writer; her books however, will have more pictures. Written at the margins of David and Marta's childhood, it is to them that I dedicate this book.

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Figure 1 "Plus de guerre! Plus de militarisme!" by Jean Maillard from *Emile Vandervelde vu par Jean Maillard* (Paris: L'Eglantine, 1932)

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
1 Of Positivism and Peasants	10
2 Parler Belge: The General Strike for Universal Manhood Suffrage	23
3 Defending the Indigenous Peoples of the Congo: Socialism and Colonialism	53
4 Socialist Comrades: The Second International	83
5 The King's Minister and the International: A Socialist Generation at War	113
6 The Russian Revolution Observed	140
7 The Revolution from Within: Governmental Participation	160
8 Internationalism: A Dream Not Revived	191
9 The Insider as Outsider: Socialist Nationalism and the Spanish Civil War	220
Conclusion	259
Chronology	265
Select Bibliography	268
Index	294

In response to my colleagues' bewilderment, I repeat James Joll's original description of the vitality of the first years of a European Socialist movement guided by a remarkable collection of Russian, British, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Austrian, Polish, and Belgian leaders. The Second International did not in fact disappear because the history of European Socialism was decoupled from Communism. And it is precisely because the Soviet empire has collapsed that we need to return to the history of European Socialism.

Our fascination with the ideologies of the two superpowers has obscured the history of an indigenously European Socialism. For seventy-five years, historians and political scientists have recreated the divisions of a post-Russian Revolution bipolar world in their analyses of the Second International. Their histories split the first European Socialists into two irreconcilable blocs – the revisionists, who supported gradual reform, and the orthodox Marxists, who advocated violent revolution.

The Socialists themselves, however, told a different story. The first president of the Second International, Emile Vandervelde, identified three rather than two groups of Marxists within the Second International before the First World War. He distinguished "reformist socialism" and "revolutionary syndicalism" from a third current, which he labeled "democratic socialism" in 1918.⁵ This book takes up that perspective. It is a history of democratic socialism as it evolved at the center of European Socialism between 1889 and 1938.

The "relaunching of Europe" in 1992 lends new urgency to this study. We no longer live in a bipolar world, and yet that perspective still dominates our historiography. Democratic socialists such as Jacques Delors seek their forefathers in a turn-of-the-century Socialist movement that they have been told was divided between two rival camps, the revisionists and the orthodox Marxists.⁶ Not surprisingly, Delors looks to the German Socialist Eduard Bernstein's nineteenth-century critique of Marxist theory to understand the roots of his socialist vision for Europe.⁷ In the curiously circular way in which historians' perspectives are influenced by their own present and then in turn circumscribe the visions of their readers, the possibilities for a socialist future open to social democrats such as Delors have been limited by the bipolar interpretation

5. Emile Vandervelde, *Le Socialisme contre l'état* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1918), p. xxiii. In following Vandervelde's use of democratic socialism as distinct from social democracy, I recognize the ambiguity in both contemporary and current use of the two related terms.

6. See, for example, Jacques Delors, "Europe: A New Frontier for Social Democracy," in Neil Kinnock, ed., *Europe without Frontiers* (London: Mansell, 1989).

7. For an analysis of Bernstein's revisionism, see Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

of their history. Defining democratic socialism as revisionist, Delors confines his vision for the European Union to expanding the free market for labor and capital within Europe.

Democratic socialism did not originate as a critique of Marxist theory, but as an affirmation of Socialists' faith in Marxist revolution. The first democratic socialists accepted Marx's historical dialectic, believing that the revolution was imminent. As the potential of parliamentary democracy unfolded, they stretched their interpretations of Marxist strategy. They adapted Marx's revolutionary strategy pragmatically to meet the different national opportunities and obstacles that they encountered along their way. This book traces the beginning of that uniquely European path as it wended its way from Marx toward social democracy. In telling the story of the first democratic socialists and their struggles to define what they called "revolutionary reformism," it recalls the Marxist origins of democratic socialism.

I have focused on a self-described "major bit player,"⁸ Emile Vandervelde, whose leadership of the European Socialist movement spanned the two critical generations that defined democratic socialism between 1889 and 1938. During the "heroic years" of the Second International, Vandervelde traveled, climbed mountains, dined, and corresponded with German, French, British, Dutch, and Russian Socialist leaders, most of whom were at least a decade his senior. Many of these comrades, including Vandervelde's revered traveling companion Jean Jaurès, perished in the First World War; others died shortly thereafter. Vandervelde subsequently sought the comradeship of a new generation of Socialist leaders. The interwar Socialist movement was dominated by men such as Ramsay MacDonald and Léon Blum, who had risen to prominence within their national parties rather than in the International.

Vandervelde's resolute optimism helped to sustain the democratic socialist movement for fifty years, through war, revolution, and governmental participation. In 1900, as the newly elected president of the Second International, Vandervelde tentatively predicted that the socialist revolution would not be the work of a proletariat degraded by crushing poverty. Instead, workers with the strength to overturn the capitalist system would build the new socialist world. After the First World War, he prophesied that the socialist revolution was at hand. Socialism would not arise from the smoldering ashes of the capitalist apocalypse, he predicted; it would be built on a foundation of hard-won reforms. Throughout, Vandervelde asserted his ties to Marx, citing examples from Marx's later writing to show that Marx too had adapted "Marxism." Nevertheless, by 1930 the

8. Emile Vandervelde, *Souvenirs d'un militant socialiste* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1939), p. 147.

democratic socialists had clearly settled into a strategy that Marx would not have recognized. It is important to remember that their path had been a gradual one, defined en route at a series of critical junctures – sometimes consciously, more often not.

From his place at the geographical as well as the ideological crossroads of Europe, Vandervelde, a Belgian, led the British, German, French, Italian, Polish, Dutch, and Russian Socialists along the democratic socialist path. A typically Belgian amalgam of idealism and pragmatism, Vandervelde forged compromises. He borrowed from the theoretical debates of neighboring Germany, the impressive labor movements of Britain, and especially the revolutionary political traditions of France. In the 1990s, when Brussels is synonymous with the European Union, it should probably not surprise us that it was a Belgian who brought Europeans together and defined democratic socialism as a European strategy for implementing Marxism at the turn of the century.

It is not only their fascination with capitalism and communism that has led historians to ignore the center of the Second International. The cause is geographical as well as ideological. Historians and political scientists tend to migrate to the larger countries of Europe, attracted by the more colorful revolutionary leaders and the more systematic theorists on the periphery of the Socialist movement. Despite the recent revival of comparative history, the history of European Socialism still consists for the most part of a collection of national histories of the larger Socialist movements. Given the explicitly international character of the Second International and the Labour and Socialist International, as it renamed itself after the First World War, it is especially ironic that these histories of British, French, and German Socialism are written in isolation from one another and from the International, and in ignorance of all the smaller national movements.⁹ As a case in point, despite its prominence at the time, the history of Belgian Socialism is virtually unknown outside of Belgium itself.¹⁰

Karl Marx recognized the importance of Belgium as the first industrialized society on the European continent. In the middle of the

9. Even Gary Steenson in his recent comparative study of the Second International admits that he was forced to neglect Belgium because of the language of the sources. Gary Steenson, *After Marx, before Lenin: Marxism and the Socialist Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884–1914* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

10. Belgian histories of Belgian Socialism include Mieke Claeys Van Haegendoren, *25 Jaar Belgische Socialisme* (Antwerp: Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1967); Jan Dhondt, *Geschiedenis van de socialistische Arbeidersbeweging in België* (Antwerp: S. M. Ontwikkeling, 1960–69); Marcel Liebman, *Les Socialistes belges, 1885–1914* (Brussels: Vie Ouvrière, 1979); and Andre Mommen, *De Belgische Werkliedenpartij; Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling van het reformistisch Socialisme, 1880–1914* (Ghent: Masreel-Fonds, 1980).

nineteenth century, he called it “the paradise of European capitalists.” Industrialized at the end of the eighteenth century, the Belgian economy continued to flourish after the establishment of Belgian independence in 1830. Throughout the nineteenth century Belgium’s Liberal government, in quintessential fashion, encouraged but refrained from regulating industrial development – hence Marx’s interest in Belgium.

At the turn of the century, Vandervelde adapted Marx’s description to justify the location of the executive offices of the Second International in Brussels. He reminded German and French Socialists that underneath the Belgian capitalist paradise lurked the hell of the European proletariat. The precocious industrialization that had enriched a class of enterprising capitalists had impoverished the sizable industrial proletariat that had powered it. With its depth of experience, the mature Belgian proletariat was ready to lead the socialist revolution in Europe, setting an example for other countries to follow, Vandervelde suggested.¹¹

Although in several chapters I draw upon the history of the Belgian Workers’ Party, as case studies in the evolution of democratic socialism, this is not a history of the Belgian working class.¹² To complement the growing body of work by labor historians who are writing the history of European Socialism “from the bottom up,” I have approached the Second International “from the top down.” That historiographical division is reflective of rifts within the European Socialist movement itself. Just as the workers relied on the Socialist leaders at the turn of the century and the leaders clearly needed the proletariat, so too the history of European Socialism must be drawn from both sides.

In a review in the *American Historical Review*, Mary Jo Maynes recently referred to what she called “biography in a new key.”¹³ Set in context, she suggests, individual and group biographies allow us to explore significant historical questions. In my book Vandervelde’s struggles for universal manhood suffrage, for the release of the indigenous peoples of the Congo from Leopold’s rule, for the building of comradeship and hence peace in Europe, for an Allied victory in the First World War, for the democratization of the Russian Revolution, and for the rebuilding of war-torn Belgium and the maintenance of peace through diplomacy in interwar Europe serve as a lens through which to view more clearly the history of democratic socialism. Events that were arguably significant to Vandervelde’s life – for example, his participation in a Masonic lodge or his leadership of the temperance movement – are introduced only if they

11. Emile Vandervelde, *La Belgique ouvrière* (Paris: E. Cornely & Cie., 1906).

12. For a history of the Belgian working class, see Patricia Hilden, *Women, Work, and Politics: Belgium, 1830–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

13. Mary Jo Maynes, *American Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (June 1992): 861.

altered the course of the European path to social democracy. If the “personal” can be distinguished from the “political” in the life of Emile Vandervelde, and I am not sure that it can, it enters only at the margins of my story.¹⁴

Conscious of the irony, Belgian workers affectionately called this well-educated son of the Brussels bourgeoisie “Le Patron,” or “The Boss.”¹⁵ Vandervelde shared his middle-class background with most of the leaders of the Second International. His voracious reading of Proudhon, Marx, and Darwin would lead him to discover the proletariat in 1886. But that same reading ultimately distanced Vandervelde from the workers. The first chapter of this book examines the influence of European positivist thinkers on the emergence of democratic socialism at the end of the nineteenth century.

Socialist leaders in Belgium channeled the momentum of the proletariat into their campaign for universal manhood suffrage. The Belgian Workers’ Party pursued its battle to win the vote for the working class through three general strikes with a fervor unmatched anywhere else in Europe. These three general strikes for universal manhood suffrage are the subject of the second chapter. Invoking revolutionary rhetoric to argue for reforms and employing traditional working-class tactics to gain access to the governmental system, the Belgian Workers’ Party embarked on the democratic socialist path. According to Rosa Luxemburg, for better or worse, European Socialists learned “to speak Belgian” at the turn of the century.

Those same Socialists, “who entered, almost as if [they] were burglars, into the most bourgeois Parliament of Europe,” immediately confronted “the new colonialism” of the European powers.¹⁶ The Socialists’ attempt to define their anti-colonial position is the subject of the third chapter. Vandervelde spearheaded the attack against the personal empire ruthlessly carved out by Belgian king Leopold II in the center of Africa. In 1906, he joined the British critics of colonialism in concluding that only annexation of the king’s colony by the Belgian Parliament would rescue the indigenous peoples of the Congo from capitalist exploitation. Vandervelde’s moral

14. Vandervelde seems to have purposefully distanced historians from his private life. Traces of his private life have all but disappeared from the public record. The memoirs that he left reveal the public monument that he wanted to bequeath to future generations. Even more than other examples of this genre of memoirs, Vandervelde consciously chose to tell his story with a public voice. For example, although he recounts at length his mountain retreats with other young male Socialists, he never once mentions his disabled sister for whom he cared in his own home after the death of his mother in 1896. I have used citations from these *Souvenirs* extensively but cautiously, to allow Vandervelde’s own voice to be heard.

15. See, for example, *Le Peuple* 3 May 1925. “Il n’y a qu’un patron qui soit sympathique à la classe ouvrière belge: c’est Emile Vandervelde,” the writer noted.

16. Vandervelde, *Souvenirs*, p. 48.

arguments, documented extensively with “facts” drawn from his readings, correspondence, and travels to the Congo, distanced him not only from the majority of European Socialists, but from the indigenous peoples of Africa as well.¹⁷ Although repudiated at the time, Vandervelde’s “socialist colonialism” did come to define the majority Socialist position toward European colonies after the First World War. Its resonances could be heard, for example, among Dutch Socialists after the Second World War in their discussions of ending the colonial regime in Indonesia.

My fourth chapter focuses on life at the center of the Second International. The debates over militarism and ministerial participation that dominated the congresses of the Second International before the First World War have been well chronicled by a number of historians. They are the backdrop to this story. The significance of the Second International, for Vandervelde as for many of his contemporaries, however, was also to be found in the international comradeship of mountain hikes and late dinners after the meetings of the Bureau of the International. That daily life is the core of this chapter.¹⁸

For decades, the published records of the congresses of the Second International have been our only guide to the history of this organization. My study of the Second International begins with these sources but is based primarily on research in the Camille Huysmans Archief, which according to Georges Haupt, the only historian previously granted access to the bulletins, minutes, and correspondence of the Archief, “restores the interior face of Socialism, which has escaped our investigation.”¹⁹

The First World War shattered the shared Socialist vision just as it destroyed the international comradeship at the center of this European Socialist movement. The first European Socialist to accept a cabinet post – in August 1914 – Vandervelde served simultaneously as president of the International and minister to the Belgian king; his dual role is explored in chapter 5. Cut off from the half of the Socialist movement who supported governments on the other side of the trenches, Vandervelde recovered his sense of comradeship and belonging within the Belgian government in exile. While he publicly charted the course of national commitment that so many European Socialists would follow during and after the war, Vandervelde wrestled privately with his choice in a revealing daily

17. This scientific objectivity resembles that described by Thomas Laqueur in “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

18. This chapter takes seriously Tony Judt’s stricture that we need to reconnect “politics and the private world” in our histories of Socialism. Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 42.

19. Georges Haupt, *La Deuxième internationale, 1889–1914, Étude critique des sources. Essai bibliographique* (Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1964), p. 57.

correspondence with Camille Huysmans.²⁰

The First World War and the Russian Revolution forever altered European Socialism. The October Revolution definitively divided the believers – the Communists – from the now self-defined proponents of national reforms – the social democrats. My sixth chapter begins in the spring of 1917 when Vandervelde, along with Albert Thomas, Arthur Henderson, and Leon Trotsky, arrived at the Finland Station. Unlike Thomas, who joined Kerensky's inner circle, Vandervelde struggled from the outside to understand the Russian Revolution within the framework of his Marxist analysis of the French Revolution. In 1922, Vandervelde returned to Moscow as a lawyer for the Second International to defend the Socialist Revolutionaries. Pilloried by Lenin as the most bourgeois of national socialists, Vandervelde labored for two more decades in a series of articles and speeches to understand the theoretical implications of Lenin's and then Stalin's attempt to stage a political revolution in an economically backward society.

Socialists throughout Europe faced a radically altered political world in 1918. Vandervelde did not hesitate to lead the Belgian Socialists back into the government after the war. Under his influence, the Belgian Workers' Party proceeded further along the path of democratic socialism in the 1920s than any other European Socialist party. This governmental participation is the subject of chapter 7. Not until 1930 did he pause to compare the Belgians' experience in tripartite government with the opposition strategies pursued by their French, German, and British counterparts. Considering Belgium's bold experiment in reformism within a Marxist context, Vandervelde began to conclude that Socialists throughout Europe might be better served by returning to their prewar strategy of the barricades. The experience of the British Fabians who found themselves with an accumulation of reforms but without any ideology was instructive to Vandervelde.

At the same time, Vandervelde agonized over the disintegration of the European Socialist movement. By voting war credits and rallying behind their governments, the former Socialist comrades had generated antagonisms that the Treaty of Versailles did little to assuage. The rivalries over Marx's heritage arising from the Russian Revolution had caused even deeper fissures that could no longer be papered over with compromises negotiated at international congresses. The challenge of rebuilding the International is the focus of my eighth chapter. Vandervelde meanwhile

20. The Camille Huysmans Archief generously opened its large collection of letters between Huysmans and Vandervelde as well as the files of the International to me. I would like to thank Herman Balthazar, Governor of the Province of West Flanders, and Denise DeWeerd, Acting Director of the Belgian Royal Library, for helping me to secure that access.

tried working through the official channels opened by the “new diplomacy” of the 1920s to restore European peace.

In 1929, the growing menace of Fascism convinced Vandervelde to accept the presidency of the International. Together with the Austrian Socialist, Friedrich Adler, who served as secretary of the Labour and Socialist International, Vandervelde alerted French and British Socialists to alarming developments beyond their borders.

In the last years of his life, examined in chapter 9, Vandervelde acknowledged that the weakness of the International was directly related to the strength of the Socialist parties at the national level. The “national socialism” of a younger generation of Belgian Socialists in particular alarmed the seventy-year-old Vandervelde. In 1936, it was in vain that Vandervelde appealed to Socialist leaders throughout Europe to come to the aid of the beleaguered Spanish proletariat. By then, European Socialists had traveled too far along the path toward social democracy; they were too firmly entrenched within their national governments. Unable to dissuade his own party from recognizing Franco’s regime in Burgos, Vandervelde, the consummate insider, died an outsider.

Vandervelde’s principled democratic socialism evolved between revisionism and orthodox Marxism. Throughout his life, he hoped and planned to build a revolution on the foundation of the reforms the Socialists gradually won. The story of Vandervelde’s revolutionary reformism challenges our traditional bipolar division of the Second International.