**A Short Discussion with World Socialism Scholars on Why First International was Dissolved By Its Leaders?**

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**The Journal of World Socialism Review:** The development of World socialism is closely related to developments in capitalism, and the world proletariat is closely related to the world [bourgeoisie](https://zhidao.baidu.com/search?word=%E8%B5%84%E4%BA%A7%E9%98%B6%E7%BA%A7&fr=iknow_pc_qb_highlight). Therefore, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and their relationship constitute the basic relation in the evolution of capitalist society and development of world socialist movement.

**Wei Dingguang:** Regarding the reasons for the dissolution of the First International, the popular explanations in China in the past has been: the harsh suppression by reactionary governments of various countries after the failure of the Paris Commune. The struggle between different internal ideologies and factions and the resulting split; and the new developments in the European and American workers' movement.  
But as a different view I want to argue that the vigorous development of European nationalism under the conditions of capitalist globalization in the 1860s and 1870s, and the universal establishment and consolidation of nation-states, were the fundamental two reasons that led to the inevitable dissolution of the International. The entire history of modern human civilization is inseparable from the formation, evolution and influence of "nation". Eric Hobsbawm said: If you do not understand the concept of "nation" and the words derived from it, it is simply impossible to explain the history of the last two centuries of mankind. In ancient Europe, the so-called "English", "French", etc. were mainly geographical concepts, not political entities. For the industrially developed nations in Western Europe, global colonial expansion was carried out under the national flag. The need for competition constantly strengthened the economic dependence on the nation-state, and they always experienced the expansion of national superiority in the process of conquering the world. For backward countries, the process of resisting foreign invasion or being colonized is inevitably a period of comprehensive formation and unprecedented rise of national consciousness and "motherland" consciousness.

**Nation or Nationalism issues in Internal Divisons**

It can be said that the struggle between Marxist and non-Marxist ideas and factions that we have summarized in the past was actually mainly revolved around national or nationalism issue. For example, as a major member group of the International, the British Trade Unions obviously disagreed with the views of the International General Committee represented by Marx on the Irish issue.

Marx believed that the task of the International was "to give priority to the conflict between Britain and Ireland everywhere and to openly stand on the side of Ireland everywhere." However, out of the need to safeguard the interests of their own nation, the Trade Unions showed a narrow nationalist position everywhere, which eventually led to a complete break between the International General Committee and the British Trade Unions. For example, one of the important differences of opinion with Proudhonism was how to deal with the Polish issue.

The General Council headed by Marx advocated the independence of Poland, because from the perspective of the International, and wrote: "national independence is the basis of all international cooperation"; the Poles "can only become an international nation when they truly become a national state." However, since Germany belonged to the nation that occupied Poland, the Proudhonists, from the standpoint of "Germans", clearly opposed the Polish people's struggle for national independence and rejected international's support for the Polish national liberation movement.

In addition, in the middle and late stages, workers' organizations of Mediterranean coastal countries represented by Italy became active within the First International, and the Italian group which was prone to nationalism opposed the "decision monopoly and centralized attitude of a few people controlling the International”. Since because "this attitude of the Italian group has been combined with the already inflated nationalism", this attitude resulted in a split and resistance to Marx's views. The reason for the split of the First International was certainly not entirely due to national and nationalist issues, but in any case, it is a fundamental factor that cannot be ignored.

**Germany**

In 1869, the German Social Democratic Workers' Party was established. It was the first proletarian party in the world to exist within the scope of a nation-state. In 1875, it merged with the Lassallean faction. In the "Gotha Program" adopted by the 1875 merger conference of the two factions, this German party clearly positioned itself as "first of all to carry out activities within the scope of the modern nation-state" and regarded "the international fraternal union of all nations" as a secondary or later matter.

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Marx pointed out that this party’s "Program" was colored and permeated with Lassalle's "most narrow national view". Marx criticized: Since the "modern nation-state" "is itself economically within the 'scope of the world market' and politically within the 'scope of the state system'", then as a proletarian party, it cannot ignore its "international responsibilities". Unfortunately, however, the "Program" "does not mention a single word about the international responsibilities of the German working class!" **"In fact, the internationalism of this program is incalculably worse than that of the free trade faction."** If we think about it in the context of the above, we will not find it strange at all about the national positions of the German Social Democratic Party.  
In 1875, the year when the International announced its dissolution, Marx recognized that the International Workingmen's Association was "the first attempt to establish a central organ" for the international unity of the proletariat; at the same time, he also pointed out that "this attempt... after the failure of the Paris Commune, could no longer continue in its first historical form."

**What was the root cause of dissolving?**

Marx did not give a clear explanation, or the matter was not so clear at the time, or Marx was unwilling to admit it.

But looking from today, it seems that it is mainly due to the universal establishment and consolidation of national states. In the late 19th century, not only the major capitalist industrial developed countries in Western Europe and North America were nationalized, but also the industrially underdeveloped countries (such as Eastern Europe and Northern Europe) and underdeveloped countries began to establish modern nation-states.

Under the modern state form, whether it is the competition between developed capitalist countries or the confrontation between developed and underdeveloped countries, it would inevitably form a serious obstacle to the international unity of the proletariat and make the international communist movement continue to be adversely affected by the "narrow national view".

However, because the problem has just begun to emerge, perhaps because of the subjective overemphasis on the international unity of the proletariat, as Hobsbawm pointed out, Marx believed that the issue of nation and its national state was "secondary" to socialists at that time. We certainly cannot be too harsh on Marx, because it is often the case that the understanding and research of practical problems lag behind the development of facts themselves. The national issue has already played an important role in European politics and world politics in the 19th century, and the entire international academic community paid attention to it and conducted in-depth research in the 20th century.

In 1907, Austrian social democratic theorist Otto Bauer pointed out that "science has almost completely left the national question to lyric poets, essayists, and orators in national assemblies, parliaments, and beer tables." However, what was secondary in Marx's thought later became the core of the debate in the Second International. Because it constituted a fundamental challenge and even conflict to the basic theory of socialism and its movement’s development requirements, it was the social democrats in the Second International, such as Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Otto Bauer, and later Lenin, who first conducted scientific research on the issue of nation and nationalism.

Engels later concluded that the International Workingmen's Association "belongs to the Second Empire period" and that this "old form has become outdated."

Engels's summary was linked to the understanding of the newly emerging modern states, but this idea was long ignored by later generations. If we think about the many setbacks and lessons learned in the international communist movement in the 20th century, especially the mistakes of the Third International, we will have a more accurate grasp of the nature of the problem and its consequences. Lenin later commented on the First International in 1919: **"It laid the foundation for the international organization of workers and prepared the workers for a revolutionary attack on capital"; "It laid the foundation for the international proletariat's struggle for socialism".**

**Chen Airi:** The First International was born in the late 1850s and early 1860s when the European workers' movement and democratic movement were re-emerging. After the revolution of 1848, European [capitalism](https://zhidao.baidu.com/search?word=%E8%B5%84%E6%9C%AC%E4%B8%BB%E4%B9%89&fr=iknow_pc_qb_highlight) developed rapidly, the capitalist world market was formed, and the connections between capitalist countries became increasingly international. At the same time, the oppression suffered by the working people all over the world was increasing, and the resistance struggle of [the proletariat](https://zhidao.baidu.com/search?word=%E6%97%A0%E4%BA%A7%E9%98%B6%E7%BA%A7&fr=iknow_pc_qb_highlight) and the oppressed people was constantly intensifying. The practice of the struggle against oppression and exploitation made the proletariat of various countries realize that they had common interests and common enemies, and that the previous scattered struggles often led them to the same defeat. The proletariat must unite on an international scale and use the international solidarity of the proletariat to fight against the international unity of [the bourgeoisie](https://zhidao.baidu.com/search?word=%E8%B5%84%E4%BA%A7%E9%98%B6%E7%BA%A7&fr=iknow_pc_qb_highlight) . This internationalist consciousness promoted the birth of the International Workingmen's Association. In 1871, the French branch of the First International participated in and led the [Paris Commune movement](https://zhidao.baidu.com/search?word=%E5%B7%B4%E9%BB%8E%E5%85%AC%E7%A4%BE%E8%BF%90%E5%8A%A8&fr=iknow_pc_qb_highlight) , but with the failure of the Paris Commune, the organization gradually weakened and in this period also inner struggle became acute which reached its zenith At the Hague Congress in 1872, and in this congress according to Engels' proposal, the center of the First International was moved from London to **Philadelphia**. The reason was to prevent the power of the General Council from being usurped by British trade unionist faction. After the Hague Congress, the General Council also moved to USA, and German socialist Sorge became the general secretary of the International. Sorge kept in touch with Marx and Engels.   
  The congress originally scheduled to be held in Geneva in 1875 could not be held. Because capitalist governments at that time intensified the persecution of revolutionaries, the international branches of various countries failed to send representatives to participate.

In the General Council meeting in New York, a struggle between Marxists and Lassalleans occurred, which further weakened the power of the General Council. In view of the environment at the time, a resolution to dissolve the International was passed at the International Conference held in Philadelphia, USA in 1876.

**Gao Fang:** Although the First International only existed for a short 13 years, it fulfilled its historical mission and made immortal contributions in the history of the international workers' movement.In the vision of [Marx](https://zhidao.baidu.com/search?word=%E9%A9%AC%E5%85%8B%E6%80%9D&fr=iknow_pc_qb_highlight) and Engels, the cause of communism is international or world-wide. This is because the economic situation of the proletariat in the world is international, the class enemies it faces are international, and the conditions for liberation are international. Marx and Engels once pointed out:

“In terms of form, but not its content, the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie is first and foremost a struggle within the scope of a single country. But its content remains international”. **Marx-Engels thought that: The communist revolution will not be a revolution in just one country, but one that will take place simultaneously in all civilized countries, at least in Britain, the United States, France, and Germany. Also** **Marx-Engels paid close attention to the interactive character of the Chinese and Russian revolutions with the European and even the world revolution.**

**After the failure of the Paris Commune, European countries began to persecute the First International. Moreover, due to the serious divisions and struggles within the First International, the General Council was no longer able to establish itself in Europe. In 1872, the Hague Conference of the First International decided to relocate the General Council to** **Philadelphia, USA. Naturally, the United States is far away from the center of the European workers' movement, so in fact the First International’s activities had greatly diminished.**

The reason why the First International was dissolved was that the workers' rebellion movement in various countries weakened, and the reason for the weakening was that the employment situation had greatly improved.

Another important cause was that the large-scale immigration from Europe during this period solved the pressure of unemployment and employment competition in Europe, improved the living conditions of workers, enabled the capitalist economy to move forward, and improved the living conditions of the working class. The large-scale immigration to the colonies had temporarly saved European capitalism.

Chen Airi: There was nothing wrong with the initial activities of the First International. It was just an international workers' organization that coordinated practical issues such as workers' strikes around the world and focused on improving workers' living standards.

But since the middle period, it has become increasingly politicized, condemning the British government's oppression of the Irish nation, supporting Poland's freedom and independence, and supporting the Paris Commune...

These actions were naturally pro-freedom and anti-oppression, but they also made the British, French, German, Austrian, and Russian governments unite to ban the First International and deprive members of the First International of their civil rights (which directly led to most members withdrawing from the International), which is why the First International left Europe and moved to the United States and the attacks of various reactionary governments were fatal to the First International.

Secondly, Bakuninism further divided the already withering and weakening International, and Bakuninism became strong and won the workers in underdeveloped industrial areas and separated the branches from the control of the General Council.

**Gao Fang: I can give a short summary.** The process leading to dissolution was influenced by several factors:

1. The development of globalization and industrialization: in the 1860s and 1870s, the process of globalization had accelerated and the industrialization of European and North American countries became vigorous which promoted new developments, which gave impetus to the emergence of the First International.

2. The rise of modern nation-states and nationalism: The widespread establishment and consolidation of modern nation-states in West and East Europe plus in the American continent further weakened the strength of the internal unity of the First International, which changed the positions of leaders and masses of the First Internaional, making the national and state positions become the basic propositions of workers' organizations in various countries. This led to the international communist movement being constantly influenced by the “narrow national point of view”.

3. Internal contradictions and divisions: In various places of Europe Bakuninist groups used mind control tactics in order to create divisions, especially in 1872 Hague Congress, the centralists led by Marx-Engels won the struugle, but morally the anarchists won the upper hand in this congress. Therefore organizational unity was greatly destructed.

This Congress led the initially neutral Belgians and Dutch to join the anarchist ranks, turning the whole participants of the Congress and public opinion against them.

A Congress observer Podolinskii (Polish) wrote: In reality, the centralists won the struggle, but morally the anarchists won the upper hand, which made, first of all, Marxist faction’s victory far less complete than they had expected, the Belgians and the Dutch, who had initially been neutral, joined the anarchist ranks, and due to a sordid, immoral victory, Marx, Engels and his team turned both congress and public opinion against them, while Bakunin’s follower James Guillaume became a hero.

4. Change in leadership from Marxists to Anarchists: The centralist approach of Marx, Engels and their team at the Congress, as well as the fact that the France-German alliance no longer functioned internationally (in the European continent), exacerbated the contradictions and divisions within the First International.

To sum up, the reasons for the closure of the First International were multifaceted, including a combination of factors such as the impetus of globalization and industrialization, the rise of modern nation-state nationalism, the exacerbation of internal contradictions, and the change in the leadership of First International.

**About social anarchist Guillaume:** James Guillaume was born in London in February 1844. He became interested in anarchism when he was a student in Zurich, and later as a printer in Neuchatel. He became one of the leading members of the Jura Federation Branch of the First International. Having accepted anarchist beliefs, he associated himself with Bakunin, with whom he was expelled from the International at the Hague Congress in 1872. Later he was active in founding the Anarchist St.-Imier International. Guillaume played a decisive role in Kropotkin's conversion to anarchism, and worked with him at anarchist agitation in Switzerland during the later 1870s. Early in the 1880s, Guillaume withdrew from anarchist activity, and twenty years later he become active again in the anarcho-syndicalist movement.

The four-volume work Guillaume wrote during this later period, L'International: Documents et Souvenirs, is the most important source of information from the anarchist point of view relating to the First International. Guillaume also edited Bakunin's Collected Works published in French in 1907.