

# OUR HISTORY

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## THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION AND THE BOER WAR



*"Ave Ciesus" Morituri te salutant!"*

General Roberts asks for another 90,000 men to be sent to South Africa.

There are £20,000,000 worth of diamonds in Kimberley, where Cecil Rhodes sits "as safe as in Piccadilly," enjoying "nice little champagne dinners."

The Highland Brigade, the finest body of troops in the world, was decimated at Magersfontein in a valorous but mad and useless effort to break through the Boer lines to the relief of Cecil Rhodes.

by **BILL BAKER**

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In the next issue Mick Jenkins will examine the struggle against the Bedaux time and motion system in the Manchester wire-drawing industry, 1933-4.

#### THIS ISSUE

Bill Baker's study sheds important light on the emergence of internationalist forces within the Social Democratic Federation, Britain's first Marxist socialist organisation, which later in 1920-1 merged with other groupings to form the Communist Party. The cover cartoon comes from the Federation's weekly paper JUSTICE for 10 February 1900. At the side Hyndman addresses a Trafalgar Square meeting in 1906.

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## THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION AND THE BOER WAR

Bill Baker

From its inception in 1881 the Social Democratic Federation had been very much aware of imperialist issues. It waged a campaign against 'the bondholders war in the Sudan', and actively sympathised with the movement for Irish Home Rule as well as the plight of India. It was the Social Democratic Federation that first introduced the issue of colonialism to the Second International in 1896, when, without discussion, it was unanimously condemned.

This was largely because H.M. Hyndman, the founder and leader of the Federation had himself come to politics through an interest in foreign policy. His first book, 'England for All'<sup>1</sup>, was two fifths devoted to a review of foreign and colonial affairs. It is surprising how many ideas in it remained with Hyndman for the rest of his life. He advocated Home Rule for Ireland. There was much about India. On the question of the colonies he pre-empted Joseph Chamberlain in advocating 'a customs union of the British Empire', and he linked it with the idea of socialism by declaring 'The Anglo-Saxon race, which has shown the world how to reconcile freedom and order with steady progress, can secure for themselves and their children the leadership in the social changes and reforms which are close at hand'. Here stood the original Hyndman who went beyond Tory democracy (before Tory democracy was proclaimed) to Tory socialism; a socialism that had a strong colouring of nationalism, a deep belief in the liberal principle of the rights of small nations, more than a touch of germanophobia, and a profound belief in the British navy. Although Hyndman grew into a deeper understanding of socialism than he possessed in 1881, nevertheless the ideas he expressed then he was never to lose. As international tension mounted in the era of imperialism, so these nationalistic idiosyncracies of Hyndman's socialism acquired a new significance.

### 1 THE JAMESON RAID

In 1884, when Belfort Bax, William Morris and company split from the Social Democratic Federation, this trait of Hyndman had played its part in the split. The Socialist League, under the influence of Bax and Morris, as well as Engels' friends, was steadfastly anti-imperialist and internationalist. By 1892 Bax had rejoined the Federation, and by 1895 William Morris and Hyndman were reconciled after the collapse of the Socialist League: the internationalists were back in force. At the Federation's New Year's gathering in 1896, William Morris, in one of his last speeches, referred to the Transvaal situation<sup>2</sup> as 'a case of a pack of thieves quarrelling about their booty'.<sup>3</sup> In deference to Morris the Social Democratic Federation felt obliged to condemn the Jameson raid. However, in the Federation's weekly *Justice* for 11 January 1896 an unsigned editorial (in Hyndman's style) while calling the raid 'iniquitous', declared 'thanks to Mr Chamberlain's active interference ... we were clear... as a nation, of responsibility' for the raid, and continued to suggest that the 'whole affair, on the German side, was a plot'. The editorial throughout was bellicose and very anti-German.

The next week, however, *Justice* carried a manifesto on 'Foreign and Colonial Policy', issued by the executive committee of the Federation. It little resembled the previous week's chauvinistic editorial, yet it still retained many of Hyndman's ideas. It was written from a national point of view, seeing foreign policy as a question of 'national dealings', of which 'we are compelled to bear our share'. But, most startling of all, it, in effect, called for an increase in the navy which, it assured its readers, 'was not an anti-democratic force'. This despite the fact that it appreciated that military domination (abroad) 'fostered jingoism at home'. However, it did implicitly recognise the existence of the 'new imperialism' in the phrase 'we are face to face with difficulty in every corner of the globe', but, significantly, the word 'imperialism' was not used once in the manifesto. There was no hint of any concept of class either. 'Gangs' and 'cliques' were mentioned more often, and many points mirrored those the non-socialist Hyndman had advocated back in 1881.

In a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, reprinted in *Justice*, Hyndman gave a useful clue to his conception of England's place in the struggle for socialism. He hoped, he wrote, that 'The unrivalled sea power which we possess ... might well serve to turn the scale in the vast conflict which is manifestly approaching all over the world'. In other words he wanted a powerful Britain with a big navy so that when she became socialist she could spread enlightenment throughout her empire, and use her vast influence among the nations in favour of socialism. This was the unique way in which he married his socialism to his nationalism! In doing so he completely obscured any distinction between capitalist Britain and a post-revolutionary Britain. It was this error that was at the basis of his advocacy of a militarily strong nation. But this plea for a strong navy did not go unchallenged. Because of the repeated emphasis on this point there were letters of protest and members complained that the question had never been discussed by the Party rank and file.

As a counter to Hyndman's always incipient nationalism there was Belfort Bax, intellectual, friend of William Morris and Engels, as well as of Hyndman. Bax was little use as a practical politician. However, he was particularly interested in foreign affairs and a fervent internationalist. As early as 1885 he had written an article called 'imperialism versus Socialism', and characterised the colonial fever as a 'race for a share of the world market'. 'The end of all foreign policy, as of colonial expansion, is to provide fields for the relief of native surplus capital and merchandise'. So, he concluded, it was the duty of international socialism to break up the empires, beginning at home. The socialists' task was to 'urge on any movement tending to dislocate the commercial relations of the world'.

In the May Day issue of *Justice* in 1896 Bax published an article declaring that 'the sole benefit of imperialist expansion accrued in the long run to the large capitalist'. He pointed out how 'rival governing classes will stand together against the barbarian, just as they will against the proletarian'. Thus he concluded that it was in the interests of the working-class movement to make common cause with primitive peoples against capitalism; 'one in the rear, one in the front', he even advocated the 'organisation of native resistance in drilling', or at least the mobilisation of anti-imperialist working-class opinion at home, and he promised to introduce a resolution to the 1896 International on these lines. Both these articles were remarkable for their clear conception of an alliance between the working-class in the imperialist countries and the primitive peoples resisting the onslaught of capitalism. It was a conception that demanded as a

pre-requisite an international position; so clearly put by Bax when he talked of the rival governing classes uniting against the workers and primitive peoples. Such a conception was beyond the ken of the top-hatted English gentleman, Hyndman, whose view was strictly anglo-centric. In the programme of the Social Democratic Federation only 'legislative independence for all parts of the Empire' was demanded. However, the resolution passed in July 1896, by the Federation's executive, bore Bax's imprint. It protested against 'the application of the names 'rebels' and 'murderers' to the Matabele and Mashonas who are courageously fighting to free their country'.

Despite Hyndman's nationalistic aberrations and the differences between his view point and that of Bax, *Justice* was undoubtedly an anti-imperialist newspaper. Since the majority of its readers considered foreign affairs to be none of their business anyway, most would not have been worried by the intellectual weaknesses and inconsistencies behind its stands on foreign affairs. And in the years between the Jameson raid and the outbreak of the South African War, *Justice* continued this tradition. It kept its readers informed of imperialism's doings throughout the world, for, although the developments in South Africa were to prove crucial ones for British imperialism, leading as they did to a major war, to contemporaries it cannot have been so obvious that the flash point would be there. However, in April 1897, a *Justice* editorial did warn that Britain 'was making ready for a war in South Africa'.

## 2 ANTI-SEMITISM

Although Hyndman was forced to take up a position against the Jameson Raid, his chauvinistic tendency found outlet in an attack upon the cosmopolitan character of the people who precipitated the raid. It was not enough to presume Chamberlain exonerated, to express his indignation against Germany instead of Britain. The names of Beit, Barnato, Echstein, Rothschild and Oppenheim, Hyndman could not resist. He relished them in article after article. They were 'a pretty set indeed', 'a loathsome set of Jewish capitalists and Christian financiers' who 'control the destinies of Englishmen at home and of the Empire abroad', the raid itself was only 'part of a great project for the constitution of an Anglo-Hebraic Empire in Africa'.

It was, of course, not only Hyndman who was affected by the lure of anti-semitism. Later, J A Hobson's book, 'The War in South Africa', was full of anti-semitic allusions. The phenomenon also occurred independently of Hyndman in the Social Democratic Federation over an article by 'Sandy Macfarlane', published in 1898 on the Dreyfus affair in France, which, approvingly, took up the ideas of the notorious French anti-semitic, Drumont. This occasioned a long letter from Theodore Rothstein, demanding an apology from Macfarlane. And it was Rothstein, supported by Bax and others, who was to lead the opposition to Hyndman's anti-semitism, which, after the editorial of 1896, remained latent, save for the odd allusion, until the actual outbreak of war against the South African Republics. Then Hyndman's prejudices were in a state of contradiction. He felt sympathy for the Boers because of his belief in the rights of small nations, yet he did not like appearing anti-British. The result was that the 7 October 1899 issue of *Justice* carried a full page editorial by Hyndman under the

heading, **The Jews' War on the Transvaal**. In it he called the imminent war 'unjust, 'infamous' and 'criminal', while finding little to say in favour of the 'coarse, cruel and bigoted' Boers. But the real venom was reserved for those 'true born Britons who are dragging us common Englishmen into the war', 'Beit, Bamato and so on'. The British jingo press became the 'Jew-jingo press'. The ruling class was stated to be controlled by 'their masters, the capitalist Jews'. His apologia at the end, that 'we have no animosity for Jews', only pointed the real effect of the article, which was to entirely forget about capitalists or capitalism, and point the finger only at the Jews.

Immediately protests poured in to *Justice*, for in fact the Federation had a strong Jewish element in it and was particularly influential in the East End of London. The longest letter, nearly two columns of small print, came from Theodore Rothstein, himself a Jew and a Russian emigre, who joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1895. He made the point that Hyndman had forgotten about both class and capitalism in his fever of anti-semitism. Belfort Bax weighed in in support and against Hyndman, with a long article, which 'is published', inserted the editor, 'to show how little fear there is of the Socialist movement drifting into anti-semitism'. In this article Bax repudiated the anti-semitism of Hyndman, laughed at his assertion that Chamberlain, Milner and so on were tools of the Jews, and declared 'I am pro-Boer'. He went on to pose the question, 'What is this modern patriotism; that lies behind 'the attempt to throw the blame of the war on the Jews?: It was, he answered, simply an accidental affection towards one particular capitalist state, 'an enthusiasm for ... spreadeagles', 'wholly unreal', and 'a fraud'. 'If there is one doctrine fundamental to Socialism', stated Bax, 'it is of the class struggle superseding the national struggle'. And thus Englishmen should be more concerned with their own capitalists, he asserted. A socialist was not pro-Boer because he was patriotic from the Boers' standpoint, but rather he was pro-Boer because they were resisting 'the violence of Great Britain and international capitalism', which 'the more rapid its expansion, the further off the end'.

Despite all the correspondence, especially Bax's lucid exposition of a tenable Marxist position,<sup>9</sup> and the fact that there were very few letters supporting the anti-semitic line, the anti-semitism continued, if somewhat slightly subdued. At the annual conference of the Federation in 1900 it was felt necessary to pass a motion explicitly denying any anti-semitic bias in *Justice* or in the Federation.

### 3 THE WAR

On 30 June 1899, the Social Democratic Federation had issued a manifesto, calling on the 'People of London' to join in a demonstration against the policy of 'piratical Jingoism' and the threatened aggression of the Government against the South African Republic. Six thousand people had turned up in Trafalgar Square, and 'passed resolutions strongly maintaining that peace should be preserved at all hazards, and protesting against Mr Chamberlain being left in sole control of the situation'<sup>11</sup>. Then, in the September, on the eve of war, another demonstration was called, but this time by the anti-war radicals. Whereas the July demonstration had passed off peaceably enough feeling by this time had become very hot indeed. The result was that the anti-war sup-

porters were completely outnumbered, and the platform speakers, Hyndman included, were subject not only to abuse, but to a barrage of missiles, including open knives: a well liquored mob having been brought up from the East End. Hyndman considered himself lucky to escape, and did so only thanks to the intervention of the police, who escorted him first to a nearby hotel, where the porter slammed the door in his face and the guests jeered at him, and then to the only safe refuge, the local police station. This was a dramatic example of the type of situation which faced those campaigning against the war. The establishment, through the yellow press, emotively, and with a typical disregard for fact, whipped up a pro-war hysteria, and attempted to brand anyone against the war not only as a 'little Englander', but as a traitor to his country. In the resultant atmosphere it needed considerable courage to stand out against the war.

In January 1900, the Social Democratic Federation put out a definitive manifesto, headed 'War in South Africa', which was clearly and uncompromisingly anti-war. It branded the war as 'a war of aggression waged on behalf of cosmopolitan millionaires'. Then, after arguing against the current jingoist propaganda, it called for opposition to conscription, and the substitution of a democratically controlled force instead of a professional army. It concluded by declaring, 'If fight you must, fight here', 'take the control of your own country into your own hands'. This, in the words of the manifesto, was the way of 'true patriotism'. The manifesto was greeted by the membership with enthusiasm, as just what was needed, and an effort to give it a wide distribution was called for.

The membership might well feel enthusiastic, for the manifesto did not come out of the blue, but was an urgent necessity by January, due to the different strands of feeling about the war within the ranks of the Federation. One such strand has been dealt with separately—the anti-semitism introduced into the anti-war commitment by Hyndman. It is noticeable that the manifesto steers clear of this particular aberration, except for the occurrence once of the word 'cosmopolitan'. The other argument that had taken place after the declaration of war was the more obvious one of whether the Federation should be against the war or not. There only appeared two letters advocating support for the war from October to January, and there is no indication that the editor suppressed any. One of these argued from the premise that Britain would have to fight for supremacy in South Africa one day, so why not now, and the other simply found *Justice* 'bluntly determined' to be pro-Boer.

Yet, although the weight of correspondence in the columns of *Justice* did not indicate any real division, the general jingoist atmosphere and the conversion ] of people like Robert Blatchford worried socialists. *But Justice* remarkably failed to carry out any polemic against Blatchford's position or against that of the Fabians. In addition, readers must have been disturbed by the arguments *Justice*, influenced by Hyndman, was using against the war. There was a lengthy correspondence of socialists writing against 'socialist jingoism' and attempting to construct a socialist case against it. In fact, the correspondence in these months was not against *Justice's* opposition to the war, but against the *basis*, or lack of it, of that opposition. In this correspondence appeared the germs of ideas which in later years would be hotly debated in the International itself. It was pointed out that the South African war was a class war, waged for the ruling class, not the people, and from such a standpoint terms like the 'British nation' or 'British Government' were meaningless. It was not a question of war between nations, for the nation as a solid entity did not exist, and such terms should not be used by socialists.<sup>12</sup> The argument had been advanced in the Federation that,

since the British had obtained/ the least odious form of government, socialists should be happy to see it spread, since, in any case, it contained the seeds of its own destruction and replacement by socialism. This correspondence produced the counter thesis<sup>13</sup> that the strengthening of the British Empire did not by any means mechanically bring socialism nearer. In any case it was argued, it was quite possible 'for some countries to pass from a semi-barbarous condition into a form of socialism under the guidance of some existing strong socialist state', without having to undergo a stage in between, of capitalism. The latter proposition was a new and most important emphasis, although Bax, of course, had long been battling against those who, under any pretext, wanted to let British Capitalism have its head.

But whatever the arguments over the rationale of its anti-war stand, the manifesto in practical terms had a healthy effect on the Social Democratic Federation, for it encouraged it to increase the intensity of its anti-war campaign. It carried out this campaign in several ways, apart from simply distributing the manifesto.

Firstly, of course, it used its press. Every issue of *Justice* in 1900 was dominated by the question of war. Most of the leading articles were on the subject. The columnist, 'Tattler', in his often page-long articles, answered and ridiculed jingoist arguments and assertions, and consistently and entertainingly put the anti-war position. His column, written with a journalistic flair, not often in evidence in the rest of the paper, was probably very popular, and therefore most likely had a loyal following who savoured it first, and possibly more than the other items. It was therefore of some importance that 'Tattler' should take such an undeviating anti-war line. And the other articles in each issue all reflected an attitude that was well summed up in a cartoon picturing British troops marching off to fight in South Africa past the throne of England on which sat the familiar caricature of the evil capitalist, slightly hook-nosed, with top hat, tails, money-bags and all. The *Social Democrat*, the monthly review of the Federation, carried digests of anti-war articles, factual articles on the Boers, and featured the Boer leaders, together with their photographs.

Secondly, the Social Democratic Federation organised a series of anti-war meetings and sent speakers to similar meetings organised by other groups. It was not easy, as the 1899 demonstration had proved. At Northampton, at one of the first meetings organised once again by the Radicals, Hyndman and Labouchers were unable to get a hearing. Often it was impossible even to hire a hall for an anti-war meeting because of the prevalent hysterically chauvinistic atmosphere. However, when the Social Democratic Federation organised meetings themselves, they saw that they were properly stewarded, and these meetings were very successful, despite efforts to disrupt them.<sup>15</sup> So much so, in fact, that the Radicals! often requested the Federation's help in stewarding their own meetings, and on most occasions the Federation stewards obliged. Because of this effective stewarding, Social Democratic Federation meetings tended to be left alone, except where the jingoists had plenty of pugilists on their side. And so it was that, at a meeting organised by the Social Democratic Federation in Battersea, the famous pro-Boer Cronwright Schreiner was first able to speak in England, although, of course, Battersea, John Burns' constituency, and an old Federation stronghold, was in itself an exception.



Thirdly, there were pamphlets. Hyndman wrote one, entitled 'The Transvaal War and the Degradation of England', and pamphlets by W. Diack and Reginald Statham were also sold. These pamphlets were usually reprints of articles which had first appeared in *Justice*, or, more often, the *Social Democrat*. They were often quite long and complicatedly factual, setting out to counter the jingoist hysteria with facts about what the Boers and the Boer Republics were really like and what had really happened. They were often disarmingly liberal. One ended: 'The British Empire has been built on a foundation of justice and constitutional liberty', and therefore the writer argued, the war was wrong, and Britain should take the first opportunity to achieve peace and friendship with the South African republics. By April 1900, *Justice* was also carrying long advertisements for the material published by the Stop-the-War Committee, so the Social Democratic Federation and its membership must have been familiar with these publications and probably used them to supplement their own.

The dissidents in England who actively opposed the war were, however, loud-voiced, a tiny minority. It was not surprising, therefore, that the elements within the minority drew closer together in the common effort. The radical element formed the National Democratic League, which was apparently Lib-Lab in tendency, but really strongly Liberal underneath. It arose out of the fight against the official Liberal equivocation over the war. Both the Independent Labour Party and the Social Democratic Federation refused to join it, but affiliated instead to the Labour Representation Committee. This body was by no means socialist, and it was highly significant that; the Social Democratic Federation, which had no time for Trade Unions at all, joined it. It was a sign of the pressures towards cohesion; an indication of the centripetal forces inevitably driving towards some kind of unity between the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party especially. These pressures were reflected in the co-operation of the two organisations in the 'Khaki election'.<sup>17</sup> In one seat they ran a joint ILP-SDF ticket; consisting of someone called Allen Clarke for the Social Democratic Federation and Philip Snowden for the Independent Labour Party. Apart from this the Federation ran two of its own candidates: George Lansbury in Bow and Bromley, and Will Thome in South West Ham. The Khaki election was, of course, a terrific defeat for the anti-war forces, as the Government meant it to be, and in the general inundation of jingo success the Social Democratic Federation's candidates decisively failed to get elected, even though Will Thome had been the sitting MP for his constituency. In an article in the *Social Democrat*, entitled 'Democratic Purity versus Election Trickery',<sup>18</sup> the conclusion was drawn (which was to be drawn often by sections of the Labour movement in the future) that 'It has now been practically demonstrated that any government... may utterly disregard all the promises by which they achieved power by embarking the nation in some war-like enterprise, so distracting public attention from their shortcomings as to obtain a fresh lease of power'. In more practical organisational terms, the failure was blamed on 'over-confidence', 'bad organisation', 'Khaki', and, revealingly, 'internal jealousies'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, despite the impetus to unity, all was not easy, even at the grass roots of the socialist movement.

#### 4 THE SPLIT

Despite its vigorous campaign against the war during the year 1900, the Federation itself lost ground within the socialist movement, and its membership declined. The war still dragged on, and, although by 1901 it appeared won in the traditional sense, the guerrilla **struggle of the Boers postponed actual** victory, and made it look as if the war could last for years, and even end in a defeat for Britain. In May 1901, the executive of the Federation issued another manifesto, reiterating its anti-war stand, and prophesying that the Boer War might cause the downfall of the Government. It was a brave statement, but if the time for action was not far ahead—as *Justice* also foretold—it was not a happy outlook for the Federation, because the response of the membership to the call to distribute the manifesto was poor, and appeals had to be made through *Justice* to rally the Federation's adherents to the job.

It was in this situation that Hyndman who, despite his anti-semitism and his nationalism, had consistently campaigned against the war in its first year, began to have doubts. An interesting insight is given, through his correspondence, into the way his mind was working. He wrote in 1901: 'I fear the decay of our Empire has begun in earnest'. In September he was in an even more pessimistic vein. 'Those, however, who study the general aspect of affairs', he recounted,... 'regard the future with the greatest alarms, as I do myself. I begin to doubt whether we shall win this South African War; whether, in fact, it will turn out the beginning of; the downfall of the British Empire'. This was how the leader of the most Marxist socialist movement in Britain thought; deeply pessimistic about the future because 'our' British Empire seemed threatened! The idea that this might be a good opportunity for socialism does not occur anywhere, and of even the suspicion of a class analysis, such as had been made, with Hyndman's full support at the previous year's International Socialist Congress, not a hint crept in.

At that Congress imperialism had really hit the international socialist movement for the first time as one of the most urgent problems of the day. In every country colonialism and imperialism were burning issues. The Paris Congress had been held in a world that had not recovered from the shock of the Anglo-French confrontation at Fashoda, the scramble for annexations in China, and it had, of course, above all, been overshadowed by the British war in South Africa. And in this situation the International had been faced with a split in its own ranks, for E. Bernstein had called for 'a realistic attitude' towards colonial policy and the Fabians had in effect approved the Boer War. But Congress had taken what appeared to be a militantly anti-imperialist stand, and both Hyndman and Quelch had taken part in the debate on colonialism on the side of the militants. Hyndman had declared 'that British Socialists were filled with mourning and shame' at the war. Then Congress had passed a motion condemning all colonialism because it prolonged the existence of capitalism. After which a motion had been carried straightforwardly condemning the British atrocities against the Boers. And finally the militant anti-imperialist atmosphere of the majority of the International had been strengthened by a resolution from Rosa Luxemburg who considered that militarism and colonialism were just two aspects of a new phenomenon whose 'paroxysms had unleashed four bloody wars during the past six years and threatens the world with a state of permanent war'. Practically her resolution had advised all socialists to vote against military and naval expenditure, especially in cases of colonial aggression.<sup>22</sup>

Now, forgetting the motions that had been passed, the stand the International had taken, and indeed his own role in the debates, Hyndman, in his new mood, persuaded the Federation's executive to pass a resolution to the effect that further anti-war agitation was a waste of time and money. In the same frame of mind, on 11 July 1901, Hyndman penned a letter to *Justice*, declaring that 'the business of the Social Democratic Federation is to spread socialism'. 'This was the Social Democratic Federation's own work', and there was nothing to be gained for it 'by helping the Liberals'. The Federation had devoted 'quite enough time to South Africa'. It was 'Socialism alone' that could 'check similar vampirist outbreaks in the future', and it was to spreading socialism that they should return. Then Hyndman turned to the war itself, and declared that in any case it was only 'a struggle between two burglars', and 'seventeenth century piracy and slave driving' was no better than 'twentieth century capitalism' and that the only people worth agitating for were 'the splendid native tribes'.

It was Theodore Rothstein once again who, together with Bax, led a determined minority of the executive (to which he had been elected in the interim since the 1900 Conference) in opposing Hyndman's switch of policy. A year before—in June 1900—with the question of anti-semitism still unsolved, Rothstein had already become impatient with the Federation's approach to its work. Arguing that the war had speeded up political development, particularly the decline of Liberalism, he had urged a more militant and unsectarian fight against the war. This appeal, however, had found no echo amongst the leadership. Now, in the face of Hyndman's volte-face, a fierce and acrimonious controversy broke out in the columns of *Justice*. Among the letters that appeared Bax wrote, regretting 'that comrade Hyndman ... should allow the weak and beggarly elements of British chauvinism within him to run away with his feelings'.

However, Rothstein's was the most telling reply. He laughed at the idea 'that to fight against coercion in Ireland or the manifestation of famine in India or the war in South Africa, is not the proper business of socialists, but their proper business is... 'to spread socialism''. 'In the name of common sense, if nothing else', asked Rothstein, 'who is going to do the other work?' Then he nailed precisely the error that led Hyndman to this position, and repudiated it in the strongest terms. 'And yet I say most deliberately and emphatically that *socialism cannot be spread but must be fought for and won*. It is not by preaching the *gospel* of discontent but by fighting the *cause* of the discontented that socialism becomes the all conquering living force that it is.' Rothstein had pinpointed Hyndman's error, an error which was quite consistent with his other misunderstanding mentioned already, that what was good for capitalist Britain was good for socialist Britain. Both positions followed from a failure to appreciate perhaps the necessity, but certainly the nature of a revolution. He created an opposition between the achievement of socialism and the fight against imperialism. Socialism he envisaged, as many did at that time, as coming because the message, the gospel, had been sufficiently preached. When enough believed, then the era would dawn, for a Socialist Party would be voted in. It was only a question of proselytising. Imperialism, on the other hand, was a question of the moment which would only be solved by socialism but on which, in the meanwhile, every socialist should have an attitude. Holding this view, separating the two completely, it was logical to take the position that working against imperialism was a waste of time when the only real solution was socialism; which meant preaching, not protesting, against the Boer War.

Hyndman replied that Rothstein's letter was 'exceedingly prolix and rather dictatorial in tone' and he disliked the 'air of continental superiority' about it. It had not made any difference to his position 'in the slightest degree'.

At the Social Democratic Federation conference the following month Hyndman resigned and Rothstein was elected top of the poll for the new executive. It was a victory for the internationalist class conscious section of the Federation. The anti-war agitation would be carried on. It was remarkable, perhaps significant, that the only man capable of challenging Hyndman should have been an emigre. It was Rothstein's masterly polemic against any withdrawal from the anti-war agitation that forced Hyndman's resignation and secured his own victory. But, as has been indicated above, he had long established for himself a political reputation (through the *Social Democrat*, *Justice* and *Neue Zeit*) and, furthermore, he was wordily wise enough, unlike Bax, to be a practical alternative to Hyndman. But could Rothstein really provide or stimulate the production of a coherent analysis of the contemporary situation, and that meant a coherent theory of imperialism—which the Federation lacked?

It was surprising that no attempt had been made up to this moment. Bax had developed an elementary theory of imperialism as far back as the 1880s. In 1898 Kautsky produced a similar theory in Germany. At the 1900 International Congress the motion passed on colonialism made essentially the same analysis as Bax had done. And Rosa Luxemburg's motion quite clearly introduced into the International the concept of imperialism as a new phenomenon, of which colonialism and militarism were but manifestations. Since the resolutions of the Paris Congress were printed for all the membership to read, it is strange that they provoked no new thinking. In fact the germs of ideas were there in the Social Democratic Federation, as had been illustrated by the correspondence at the end of 1899. It was at this time that Bax himself took his own analysis a stage further, recognising the increasing role of international finance, but he failed to follow his insight through. The lack of theory is surprising, not only because the Federation received stimulation through the international socialist movement, but also because it was quite intimately connected, through Tattler and Hyndman particularly, with the group around the *Ethical World* which included J.A. Hobson. However, no comprehensive work on imperialism was produced, and Rothstein's victory did not change anything, although he himself produced a highly perceptive article within the limited sphere in which it was dealing, called 'The Coming of the State'. This was a remarkable piece of work which set out to describe what imperialism really meant. It recognised that the era of imperialism was a new era, when the liberal conception of laissez-faire had no validity, and thus one in which the Liberal Party decayed. It posited that imperialism 'was bound up with some sort of state and municipal socialism' and even hazarded that this might extend to a certain degree of nationalisation. But the main feature would be the enhancement of the power of the state against that of the individual, and the use of it extensively by the ruling class for their ends, such as protective tariffs, a reformed conscript army, and so on. However the article did not appear to cause any stir and seemed to be disregarded. Rothstein had shown his capacity as a theoretician, as had Bax, yet they both failed, as did the entire Social Democratic Federation, to produce any comprehensive work on the subject they discussed most, and that affected them most closely, as, for a short time, it affected no other socialist party. If all the ideas lying around in the Federation had been compiled

a valuable work on imperialism would have emerged. Instead, it was the Liberal, J.A. Hobson, who produced 'Imperialism: A Study',<sup>26</sup> and, fittingly, its publication evoked no reaction from the Social Democratic Federation.

But, of course, to have expected Rothstein's victory to presage great changes in the Federation would have been quite wrong. In fact, Rothstein's victory was only a moral one. Although the opposition to his attitude to the war had played a decisive part in Hyndman's resignation, it was only one of many factors. In his letter of resignation Hyndman did not even mention the dispute over the war specifically; he was suffering from a general sense of disillusionment. When, by March 1903, his spirits revived, he was back in control again; and even while he was off the executive, his influence remained strong due to his personal status and the absolute support he had from the bureaucracy, such as it was. Rothstein's victory was significant only as a sign of things to come, and as an indication of the Social Democratic Federation's strongly embedded anti-war feeling. By 1904 Hyndman's unideological approach was paramount once more.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This article has shown the depth of the Social Democratic Federation's anti-imperialist tradition. It is also necessary to remember its extent. It embraced not only the issue of the South African War, but other aspects of imperialism too, particularly the exploitation of India. So deep was this tradition of anti-imperialism in the Federation that, despite Hyndman's almost papal pre-eminence, he was forced to resign when he wanted to end the Federation's active opposition to the Boer War, and the most militant anti-imperialist was elected in his place. It is true to say that, of all the organisations that comprised the British Labour Movement in this period, the Social Democratic Federation stood apart in its emphasis on the importance of socialists and working men interesting themselves in foreign affairs. The entire Labour press had always been anti-imperialist in its sympathies, but it was only the Social Democratic Federation that, as an organisation, felt foreign affairs to be of great importance, and organised campaigns around them.

Yet, behind this tradition, lay an ideological void, penetrated sometimes by flashes of insight. But the void itself was never tilled. An attempt at a comprehensive analysis of imperialism had to come from the radical liberals, while the socialist movement had only revisionist treatises to its credit. This was largely due to Hyndman's dominance in the Federation, which tended to impose an orthodoxy: in this case his sterile compartmentalisation of the problems of the moment, of imperialism, from the achievement of socialism. It also meant that what discussion there was tended to stagnate in a defensive attitude against some unsocialist aberration of Hyndman's, rather than to develop in any way. Consequently discussion in the Federation, in the realm of theory, took place on quite a different ideological plane from that in the International. Thus there seemed to be little mutual stimulation between the two spheres. Equally, the Social Democratic Federation seemed to be insulated against stimulation from the wider radical movement in Britain.

So the Social Democratic Federation's **agitation against British** imperialism in South Africa can be seen both as its triumph **and its failure. Against all** unpopularity it championed the anti-war cause. That was its triumph. But, dominant behind the anti-imperialist activity, lay an unimaginative attitude to imperialism that was not Marxist but 'Hyndmanesque'. This was its failure. From this stemmed its further failure to provide the nascent socialist movement in Britain with any theory of imperialism. And this failure was compounded by the Federation's gigantic political errors (in particular its withdrawal from the Labour Representation Committee) which reversed the centripetal forces of the Boer War agitation and isolated the Social Democratic Federation from the mainstream of the British Labour Movement, thus depriving the movement even of the full benefit of its anti-imperialist instinct.

So the Social Democratic Federation's anti-imperialist struggle against the Boer War can be remembered with pride by Marxists today, but its failure in the realm of ideology must serve as a salutary warning, for this failure was pregnant with consequences for the future of socialism in Britain, the foremost imperial power.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 H Hyndman, **The Textbook of Democracy—England for All** (E.W. Allen 1881)
- 2 Rhodes' force, led by Jameson, had just invaded the independent Boer Republic, a prologue to the war of 1899-1902.
3. C. Tsunoda, **H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism**, p. 125 (Oxford University Press 1961)
- 4 Justice, Editorial, 25 April 1896.
- h Thougthful criticism of Hyndman's attitude towards the Boers seems to have been a permanent feature of his character vide Max Beer, **Fifty Years of International Socialism**, p. 167.
- l. Justice, 7 July 1898.
- 7 Justice, 21 October 1899
8. Justice, 25 October and 4 November, 1899.
- 9 The article, 'Jews, Boers, Patriots', 28 October and 4 November 1899.
- 10 Annual Congress Report of the SDF in Justice, 11 August 1900.
- 1 1 H Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences*, p. 157 (London 1912)
- '? Justice, 9 December 1899. p.3.
- >:>, **Justice**, 16 December, 1899, p.3.
- 14 Justice, 10 February, 1900
- 15 *Further Reminiscences*. Of the Federation Stewards, Hyndman remarks, 'some of them boxed beautifully<sup>1</sup>.'
- 16 R. Statham, **South Africa, Past and Present**.
- 17 The general election of 1900, so called, because of the government's use of the patriotism engendered by the war, to get votes.
18. **Social Democrat**, November 1900.

19. **Justice**, 3 November 1900.  
The jealousies may well have arisen over the SDF's citizen army proposals, which the rest of the Labour movement regarded with the utmost suspicion, especially in view of Hyndman's known nationalist tendencies, and also because Kipling and the imperialists were campaigning for conscription. Co-operation in any case was difficult, since the ILP was very suspicious of Hyndman and also of the general ambience of the SDF, which was so typical of the British socialist movement: being Tory inclined rather Liberal, unaffected by non-conformism, and not at all temperance biased.
20. Letter to Gay lord Wiltshire, 1901.
21. Letter to Gaylord Wiltshire, 20 September 1901.
22. J. Braunthal, **History of the International, 1864-1914**, (Nelson 2966) p.300-18.
- 23 **Justice**, 17 August 1901.
- 24 **Justice**, 27 July. 1901.
25. **Social Democrat**, December 1901.
26. Which of course Lenin was to use as one of the chief sources of his work; **Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism**



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