

Tobias Grill: For “Red October”, against the Bolsheviks: Isaac Steinberg’s struggle for a socialism with a human face

Abstract

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Shortly after the October Revolution, the Left Social Revolutionary, Isaac Steinberg (1888–1957), a leading member of his party, held the post of Peoples’ Commissar of Justice in a coalition government with the Bolsheviks; he did so in order to set up a council system in Russia with them. Approximately three months later, this unequal coalition broke up following the ‘separate peace’ of Brest-Litovsk. Subsequently, Steinberg became a bitter opponent of the Bolsheviks. As a representative of ethical socialism, the construction of a socialist society by means of violence and terror, fundamentally contradicted his political self-understanding.

With his ruthless criticism of Bolshevik terrorism in the 1920s and 1930s, Steinberg deliberately distinguished himself from Western intellectuals whose solidarity with the Soviet Union, in his opinion, trivialized the crimes of the Bolsheviks and thus challenged not only the fundamental commitment of socialism to humanity, but ultimately threatened the existence of the socialist movement. Steinberg’s significance lies in the fact that he was one of the few socialists in the 1930s to interpret Stalinism and National Socialism as equally totalitarian and, thus, he urged the German and British public to take up an uncompromising fight against both regimes. At the same time, however, he never abandoned the goal of social revolution and the realization of the ideals of Red October.

Based on Steinberg’s political and journalistic work, the present contribution focuses on the existence of a ‘third way’ between Bolshevism and social democracy, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. The fact that the October Revolution could well have taken a different course is illustrated by the examination of Steinberg’s alternative path, which promoted ethical, anti-statist and revolutionary socialism.

Über den Autor

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