

## ***The Dawn of Social Threefolding***

*Events and Circumstances at the Birth of Rudolf Steiner's New Social Conception*

>> A useful graphic [Timeline handout](https://livingbridge.ca/dawn) that accompanies this article is available at [livingbridge.ca/dawn](https://livingbridge.ca/dawn).

So how did social threefolding begin? What events and circumstances surrounded the birth of Rudolf Steiner's new idea for organizing society?

### **Part 1 – Before and During World War I**

The story of social threefolding began not long after Rudolf Steiner<sup>1</sup> published his *Philosophy of Freedom* in 1894.<sup>2</sup> After moving to Berlin,<sup>3</sup> he acquired a small newspaper, the *Magazin für Literatur*, and in 1898 wrote essays titled “The Social Question” and “Freedom and Society.”<sup>4</sup>

A few years after that, as leader of the German Theosophical Society, Steiner published a pair of essays called “Spiritual Science and the Social Question.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, theosophists showed little interest in this topic, so this series was discontinued – and Steiner did not return to the social question until many years later.

Clearly, Steiner took a personal interest in the *social question* – which was a much-discussed issue in his day – and this became the topic of his important book on social threefolding, *Towards Social Renewal*.<sup>6</sup>

So, what is this *social question*?

The social question concerns how the struggling working class relates to the ruling, capitalist class. Given the Dickensian living conditions of workers in the late nineteenth century –

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<sup>1</sup> A concise biography of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, 1861–1925, can be found here: <https://goetheanum.ch/en/society/rudolf-steiner>

<sup>2</sup> *The Philosophy of Freedom* (CW 4) is Steiner's most significant philosophic work. It is also translated under the title *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner moved from Weimar, Germany, to Berlin in 1897, after completing his work on Goethe's scientific works at the Goethe-Schiller Archives. He resided in Berlin until 1913 when he relocated to Dornach, Switzerland.

<sup>4</sup> Steiner (CW 31). “Die soziale Frage” [The Social Question] was printed in the *Magazin für Literatur* [Magazine for Literature], 67th year, No. 28, 16 July 1898. “Freiheit und Gesellschaft” [Freedom and Society] was printed in two parts in the *Magazin für Literatur*, 67th year, No. 29 & 30, 23 & 30 July 1898.

<sup>5</sup> Steiner (CW 34). “Geisteswissenschaft und soziale Frage” [Spiritual Science and Social Question] was printed in *Lucifer-Gnosis* [The Light Bearer – Knowledge] in two parts: No. 30, October 1905, and No. 32, 1906.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner (CW 23).

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how might things be better? This question, this need for social change, was crucial to socialists, Marxists, and communists – people that Steiner came into close contact with when he was a teacher at the socialist School for Workers' Education in Berlin.<sup>7</sup>

A decade later, World War I broke out. In 1914, German Chief of Staff, General Helmuth von Moltke – who, like his wife Eliza, was a follower of Steiner and a personal friend – had the task of enacting the Schlieffen Plan that would deploy German troops quickly westwards to take Paris, then reverse to the east, to engage the advancing Russian army before it could reach the German border. However, the German army failed to encircle Paris and immediately became locked in a prolonged two-front war. During this period, Steiner – through General Moltke – had a kind of front-row seat to all these events.

Later, when the Treaty of Versailles was being negotiated after the War, Steiner was adamant that Germany was not solely to blame, and that the reparations payments imposed upon Germany were not entirely fair. Also, rather than the League of Nations proposed by US President Woodrow Wilson, Steiner believed in a kind of *national-psychological* approach to international politics – one that would give each nation a valid place in the world due to its cultural contributions, in contrast to the conventional hierarchical approach based on economic and military dominance.<sup>8</sup>

During the War years, Steiner conceived the idea of the threefold human being for his book *Riddles of the Soul*.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, he developed the idea of a three-membered society. Initially – as a first strategy – Steiner attempted to bring these new social ideas as a peace initiative to key politicians. So he wrote a pair of private memorandums that he tried to pass to Emperor Karl I of Austria and to Richard von Kühlmann, who was the German State Secretary for Foreign Affairs who led the peace negotiations with Soviet Russia at Brest-Litovsk following Lenin's October Revolution in November 1917. In Steiner's mind, a threefold society would be a better way to bring about peace between these two culturally unique nations – compared to the rather harsh peace deal that was, in fact, negotiated.

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<sup>7</sup> The Arbeiterbildungsschule [School for Workers' Education] in Berlin was founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1891. Steiner taught various courses there from 1899 to 1904.

<sup>8</sup> Steiner articulated his views about national psychology in *The Mission of the Folk Souls*, an edited series of lectures originally given in Christiania [Oslo], Norway, in 1910 (CW 121).

<sup>9</sup> *Vom Seelenrätsel* (CW 21), translated into English as *Riddles of the Soul*, was published by Steiner in September 1917.

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Additionally, in January 1918, Steiner had a personal conversation about social threefolding with German Prince Max von Baden, who later became the German Chancellor – but who also failed to introduce social threefolding to Germany at the end of the War.

Ultimately, Steiner’s initial top-down strategy failed. No powerful politicians took up the cause of social threefolding during this chaotic time of potential social reformation.

### **Part 2 – Immediately After World War I**

In the final weeks of the War, as the agreed-upon armistice date of 11 November 1918 approached, commanders of the German navy wanted to organize one last, massive offensive against the British fleet. However, the German sailors – who did not want to become cannon fodder – decided to stage a mass mutiny in Kiel, with support from dockworkers and others.

This event was connected to the social question, as members of the working class across Germany rose up against the ruling class – in what became known as the German November Revolution. Fortunately, the majority Social-Democratic Party<sup>10</sup> intervened, and found a way to prevent a full-blown communistic takeover of Germany, like the recent one in Russia. Germany’s Independent Social-Democratic Party<sup>11</sup> supported the creation of workers’ councils that would give workers decision-making power over capital and labour – giving them a lot of say over production, prices, and wages – without having to bring the means of production under the ownership and control of the state. As these workers’ councils were adopted, dissatisfaction among the working class tapered off.

Around this time, Steiner turned to a new strategy, which he later referred to as getting “the threefold idea into as many human heads as possible.”<sup>12</sup> He wanted to get the word out about social threefolding, to try to induce a popular upswelling that would see threefolding as a positive solution within the uncertain postwar chaos.

Starting in November 1918, Steiner gave a host of lectures in different places in Switzerland about the social question and threefolding.<sup>13</sup> Four lectures in particular – given in

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<sup>10</sup> Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands [SPD].

<sup>11</sup> Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands [USPD].

<sup>12</sup> From the first lecture of Steiner’s national economics course, given on 24 July 1922 (CW 340).

<sup>13</sup> Steiner (CW 185a, CW 186, CW 328).

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February 1919 in Zurich<sup>14</sup> – are considered to have formed the basis for the book about the social question Steiner began writing at the time.

In January 1919, some friends from Stuttgart, Germany, visited Steiner at the Goetheanum under construction in Dornach, Switzerland.<sup>15</sup> Among these was Emil Molt, director of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Factory<sup>16</sup> – a business that had done very well during the War, especially after morale-boosting cigarettes had been declared an essential good by the German government. As a result of this visit, Steiner decided to write a public *Appeal to the German People and the Cultural World* – which he passed along to many friends, who then fanned out to find signatories. The group managed to obtain over 300 signatures of support, including some famous people like Hermann Hesse. Steiner's *Appeal* made quite a big splash in March 1919 when it was published in newspapers across the German-speaking world.

On 20 April 1919, Steiner arrived in Stuttgart – which owing to its industrial base, had become a kind of centre for the sometimes-tumultuous workers' council movement. During this trip – sometimes known as the “Stuttgart weeks”<sup>17</sup> – Steiner gave a lecture to Molt's factory workers on 23 April.<sup>18</sup> Afterwards, people approached him about founding a new school for the workers' children, and a few months later, the Free Waldorf School opened.

This historic lecture occurred less than a week before Steiner's book on social threefolding, *Towards Social Renewal*, was released to the public.<sup>19</sup>

Steiner built on all this momentum with study evenings, discussions with workers' councils, and a host of lectures in Switzerland and Germany about social threefolding. Sometimes Steiner spoke in smoke-filled beer houses, sometimes in large factory halls. In German-speaking Europe, Steiner gained popularity and started to become a household name.

His book sold very well, and in January 1920 he put out a revised edition with an added *Preface* and footnotes, including his famous fair price formula.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Social Question* (CW 328). See also the note by Steiner's archivists in GA 23, p.163.

<sup>15</sup> Emil Molt, Roman Boos, and Hans Kühn. Notes from these private meetings held on 25 and 27 January 1919 were taken by Boos and published in Molt's autobiography (1972, pp. 223-236).

<sup>16</sup> The *Waldorf-Astoria-Zigarettenfabrik*, established in 1906, was co-owned by Emil Molt and others. He, together with his wife Berta, began attending lectures by Rudolf Steiner in 1904. According to Herbert Hahn (Adams et al., 1970, p. 83-84), Molt had been interested in child education since before the War.

<sup>17</sup> Tautz (1982, p. 22).

<sup>18</sup> Steiner (CW 330).

<sup>19</sup> On 28 April 1919.

<sup>20</sup> For an English translation and discussion of this formula, see *Money for a Threefold Society* (Cox, pp. 64-65).

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Meanwhile, with the proclamation of the new Weimar Republic in August 1919, the political chaos in Germany began to subside, largely reverting to how things were before the War. The call for a new and different kind of society had become less urgent.

At this time, Steiner took up several practical initiatives. He began working on the founding of Der Kommende Tag – The Coming Day Corporation – an association that included factories, asset managers, a bank, wholesaler, medical clinic, the Waldorf School, a research institute, book publisher, and other businesses.<sup>21</sup> From the start, Steiner described this group as a “surrogate” economic association, a kind of first attempt – since it was admittedly not possible at present to implement the full idea of an association, because the economy and cultural life were still tied to the state.<sup>22</sup>

In mid-1921,<sup>23</sup> Steiner declared that, due to opposition, the public-promotion strategy begun in 1919 was now over – and instead suggested that emphasis be placed on freeing the cultural life – through his current initiatives in religion, art, science, and presumably also education, eurythmy, and medicine. In any case, Steiner continued giving public lectures, sometimes drawing huge crowds numbering in the thousands – particularly in early 1922 on his two lecture tours promoted by the famous Berlin concert agency Wolff & Sachs.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, however, a great many people were being drawn to National Socialism and its boisterous, populist leader Adolf Hitler – who promised to make Germany great again.

### Part 3 – The Rise of Opposition

In March 1921, in his newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Hitler published a short article that referred to Steiner’s social threefolding as “one of the many completely Jewish methods of destroying the peoples’ normal state of mind.”<sup>25</sup> Hitler began to gain popularity by fanning

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<sup>21</sup> Der Kommende Tag AG [Aktiengesellschaft] was established in Stuttgart on 13 March 1920. On 16 June 1920, Steiner personally founded and chaired a parallel organization in Dornach, Switzerland, called Futurum Corp [Futurum AG]. Both corporations suffered from financial difficulties and eventually had to be dissolved by 1925.

<sup>22</sup> Steiner (CW 337a, p. 170, 183).

<sup>23</sup> On 16 June 1921 Steiner was speaking to priests of the Christian Community (CW 342). He clarified that the social threefolding movement itself was “enduring,” but the strategy must shift for the time being – towards achieving what is possible at a time of rising opposition, namely, the preservation and liberation of the cultural life.

<sup>24</sup> Steiner (CW 80a).

<sup>25</sup> An English translation of Hitler’s 15 March 1921 article from the *Völkischer Beobachter* [Folkish Observer] is available at: <https://www.defendingsteiner.com/sources/hitler-steiner.php>.

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resentment against the reparations imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles – just as people began feeling the effects of inflation in their pocketbooks.

On 15 May 1922, at the end of a lecture Steiner gave in Munich, nationalistic-populist hooligans reportedly stormed the podium, intending to do harm to Steiner, who narrowly managed to escape.<sup>26</sup> Steiner did not return to Munich after that.

Two months later, back in Dornach, Steiner held his course on national economics – translated as *World Economy*.<sup>27</sup> In the first lecture he spoke about the hyperinflation going on in Germany and explained how many people who *thought* they had understood social threefolding since 1919 *really had not, in fact*. – For if they had, he said, they would have understood how to prevent inflation in the money supply. So now he wanted to speak to young people using “another language.”<sup>28</sup> He went on in these lectures to discuss price formation and the economic cycle – and ended with indications for a new kind of money.<sup>29</sup>

A few weeks after that, in Oxford, England, Steiner declared that the threefolding movement must be temporarily suspended in Central Europe due to hyperinflation – but can continue in Russia and the West.<sup>30</sup> This was his last public statement about social threefolding.

Just a few months later, unidentified arsonists set fire to the Goetheanum at Dornach. The subsequent year, 1923, was a time of disarray for the Anthroposophical Society. Steiner tried to bring people back together and continued to give lectures about a variety of topics – but did not speak further about threefolding.

Finally, shortly after Hitler’s failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in November 1923, the Christmas Conference was held in Dornach. At that event, Steiner claimed he was poisoned,<sup>31</sup> and although he was able to fight off serious illness for over a year – during which time he gave many important lectures – he eventually succumbed and died on 30 March 1925.

Based on these events and circumstances surrounding the dawn of social threefolding, one might well believe that it all ended in failure in 1922. However, despite the failure of several

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<sup>26</sup> See Vögele, W.G. (2019 April 10). *Rudolf Steiner – The Sensation of his Day*. Nexus News Agency (NNA) – NNA News. <https://www.nna-news.org/news/article/rudolf-steiner-the-sensation-of-his-day>.

<sup>27</sup> Steiner (CW 340). Steiner gave 14 lectures to students of economics from 24 July to 6 August 1922.

<sup>28</sup> Steiner (CW 340, p. 15.)

<sup>29</sup> The broader societal repercussions of Steiner’s indications about money have been explored in *Money for a Threefold Society* (Cox, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> Steiner (CW 305).

<sup>31</sup> According to eye-witness Ilona Schubert.

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*strategies* – the *movement* itself endures. Steiner, for his part, always did whatever he could, right to the end. Indeed, we may imagine how he – had he lived longer – might perhaps have continued onwards, with a renewed push for social threefolding under some new strategy after hyperinflation in Germany finally abated in 1925.

According to Steiner’s *sociological fundamental law*,<sup>32</sup> humanity is evolving towards increasing individual freedom – so we must work against restrictive group-generic forms, and instead develop new social forms that support diversity. This idea leads directly to the premise of social threefolding – that the free cultural life should become the foundation for society, not the economy or state.<sup>33</sup> Since social threefolding lives within evolving humanity as an unconscious impulse, there is no way, in fact, to stop it. Therefore now, more than ever, we are called upon to continue to drive the threefolding movement forward with new strategies – with a *goal-oriented social will*.<sup>34</sup>

- T. Michael Cox, 09 June 2024

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<sup>32</sup> Steiner (CW 31, p. 255ff).

<sup>33</sup> Steiner describes this as the task of his book in the *Preface to the Fourth German Edition* of 1920 (CW 23).

<sup>34</sup> In the *Preliminary Remarks* to his book on social threefolding (CW 23), Steiner emphasizes several times the need for a “zielbewußtes soziales Wollen” [goal-oriented social will].

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