

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35285-7 - Strikes, Wars, and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike
Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Edited by Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly

Excerpt

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I

Introductions

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Theories and realities

CHARLES TILLY

Connections and comparisons

In what ways does the tide shape the beach, and the beach contain the tide? Clearly they depend on each other somehow, yet their interdependency is as subtle and hard to trace as is the connection between industrial and political conflict. Anyone who examines the history of World War I and its settlement in Europe, for example, notices the interplay among warmaking, wartime control of labor, mass strikes, and socialist bids for power. But in what sense, and how, did these varieties of conflict shape each other?

Formidable obstacles stand in the way of any straightforward answer to the question: the vagueness of such terms as “industrial and political conflict”; the variability of experience among countries, regions, and industries; the likelihood of further causes such as fluctuations in production and military expenditure; the probable complexity of any such causal web. Still, the relations badly need untangling. Our book follows some strands of the web within an important but relatively restricted frame: Europe and North America from 1890 to the early 1920s. It examines the interplay of politics and industrial conflict in Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Great Britain, and the United States.

Within that frame, we have a chance to make new, important comparisons. Fresh evidence concerning industrial conflict in Russia before the 1917 Revolution prompted the work that eventually produced this volume. Over the last decade, through research decribed in several papers appearing later in the book, it has become possible to document Russian strike activity by locality, industry, and period from 1890 to 1917 with far greater richness and accuracy than earlier researchers had managed. The availability of the new evidence raised the possibility of comparisons between Russian experience and that of other countries for which good documentation and interesting analyses already existed.

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The broad comparison, in its turn, led to further questions: to what extent each country had a distinctive history of industrial conflict that grew from the character of its state and the nature of its working classes, whether skilled workers and capital-intensive industries generally played an exceptional role in the politicization of strike activity, how strike waves articulated with large-scale political conflicts, and so on. It led back to an old, unresolved question: how distinctive a path to revolution did Russia follow? To what extent did other countries follow similar paths, only to turn away from them? What accounts for the differences between the Russian path and the others? Such questions and comparisons inform all parts of our book.

If the book reports international comparisons, it also results from international cooperation. The authors currently work in France, the United States, Italy, the Soviet Union, the German Federal Republic, and the United Kingdom. They examine the same set of countries, but not in neat congruence between country of origin and object of study; in nine of the twenty-one papers, authors report on countries other than their own. Even when scrutinizing their home ground, the authors typically do so with deliberate *Entfremdung* – standing off and placing familiar experience in comparative perspective in order to see its essential characteristics more clearly.

Why 1890 to the early 1920s? No doubt World War I and the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 give anyone who finds the interaction of industrial and political conflict interesting reason enough to examine the period with care. But many more wars and domestic conflicts engaged our six countries during those years. The list of major events by the year they began (Small and Singer 1982, 79–80, 225–7) includes:

<i>Year</i>	<i>International wars</i>	<i>Revolutions and civil wars</i>
1894	Franco–Madagascan	
1895	Italo–Ethiopian	
1898	Spanish–American	
1904	Russo–Japanese	
1905		Russia
1911	Italo–Turkish	
1914	World War I	
1917		Russia
1919	Russo–Polish	Russia
	Hungarian–Allies	Hungary

Our six countries also were involved indirectly in a number of other wars. The United States, for example, hovered over the Cuban insurrection of 1895 and the Philippine wars of 1896 and 1899. Russia attempted to mediate in the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. And all of our countries carried on military actions in their colonies.

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International and civil wars, to qualify for the Small–Singer catalog, had to involve at least 1,000 deaths from battle. Many less lethal events occurred in both categories. In Italy, for instance, important conflicts of our period included the Sicilian Fasci (1893–4), the Massa–Carrara insurrection (1894), the Fatti di Maggio (1898), Red Week (1914), the Fatti di Agosto (1917), the factory occupations (1920), and the repeated struggles between Fascists and their enemies (1919 onward). In Germany, major confrontations included the worker–police battles of Berlin (1980), Polish resistance to Prussian schools (1901), anti-Prussian actions in Alsace (1913), not to mention the mutinies and socialist insurrections of 1918 and 1919. If we then interpolate the multiple waves of strikes over the same span of time, the problem begins to define itself: How did these various forms of conflict interlock? To what extent did they flow from common causes? To what degree, and how, did one struggle – international or domestic, industrial or political, lethal or not – lead to another? Did all states face an opportunity for revolution at the end of World War I? If so, why did the struggle work itself out so differently in Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, France, and the United States?

In order to get at such questions, we clearly must learn a great deal about local and national histories. But we must also compare across national boundaries. The varied revolutionary movements in Western Europe from 1918 to 1920, for instance, become more intelligible in comparison, and in connection, with the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. A comparison between Britain and Germany, on the other hand, establishes that the presence of a large number of workers in capital-concentrated industry alone did not suffice to produce a widespread revolutionary movement after World War I. Again anarchism, syndicalism, and their amalgams played larger parts in the working-class politics of Italy and France (not to mention Spain) than in Russia, Great Britain, or the United States; here a comparison suggests examining the influence of organized agricultural workers and small-town artisans on working-class political temper.

Our six countries deserve comparison. Broad similarities among their experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries make comparisons at least thinkable. The United States, Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, and Russia all went through considerable industrialization, urbanization, capital concentration, and population growth after 1860 – even though differences in the pace, timing, and character of those changes usually attract our attention first. Seen in the context of all the world’s nations, these six countries also had relatively similar experiences with economic growth. As Figure 1 shows, all of them reached 1900 with GNP per capita above 200 U.S. dollars (1960), when “developed countries” as a whole stood at 475 dollars and Third World countries having market economies at 170 dollars (Bairoch 1981). As Figure 1 shows, GNP per capita rose in all six countries between 1860 and 1929, and was rising

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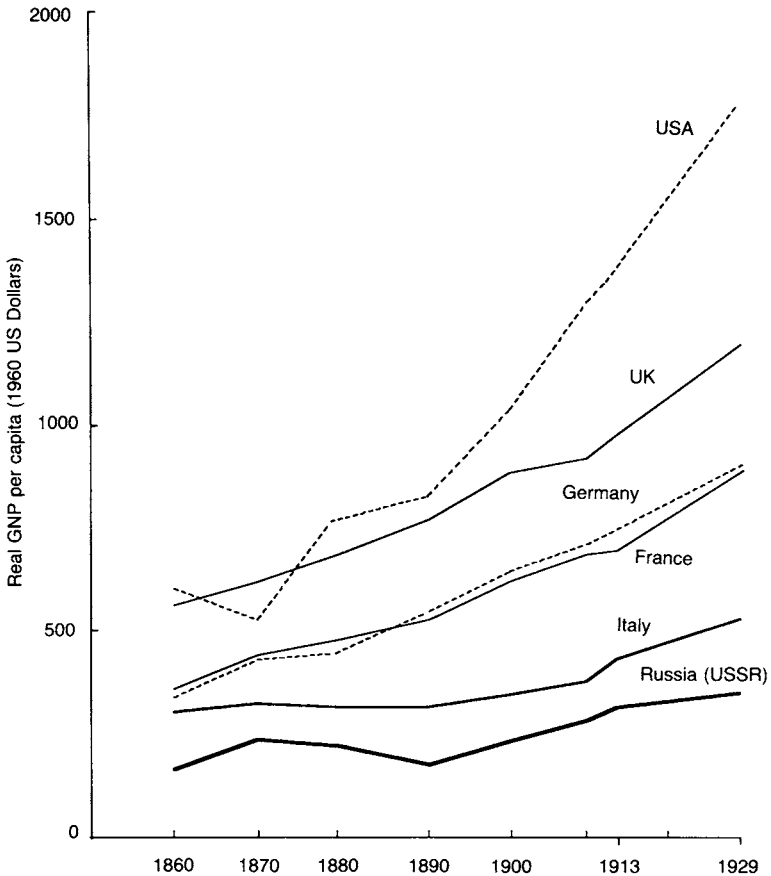
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Figure 1. Real GNP per capita in six countries, 1860–1929 (Source: Bairoch 1976:286; Bairoch 1981:10)

more rapidly than usual over the period that concerns us most, 1890–1924. Russia and Italy started lowest and experienced the least growth in per capita production, while the United Kingdom and the United States led the way. Thus we have both similarities and differences to explain.

In the realm of industrial conflict, we likewise have significant differences among countries to place in the context of broad similarity. We can, for example, compute number of strikes and number of strikers per 100,000 workers in all industries for dates around 1900. (In the case of Russia, the numbers of strikes and of strikers involved in the two estimates are those reported by the factory inspectors only; the low estimate compares those

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<i>Country</i>	<i>Strikes/ 100,000</i>	<i>Strikers/ 100,000</i>	<i>Percentage of workers in manufacturing</i>
Great Britain	4.0	1159	37.6
Germany	8.6	1883	28.5
France	3.7	900	25.4
Italy	3.8	831	23.7
U.S.A.	6.5	1993	21.8
Russia	0.5–7.2	207–1703	13.2

numbers to the entire labor force and the high estimate to the labor force in the firms covered by the factory inspectors. The true rates should lie between these two extremes.) Since strikes tended to concentrate in manufacturing, some of the differences are undoubtedly due to variations in the proportion of national labor forces in manufacturing. We cannot, however, simply exclude nonmanufacturing workers from consideration; in Italy and France, for instance, agricultural laborers struck fairly often. Thus the broad national differences immediately call forth finer comparisons.

Yet comparison poses its own difficulties: not only the obvious requirements of making the evidence and the categories comparable, but the more obscure choices of logic and scale of comparison. If the efforts of bureaucrats and scholars have put strike data into ostensibly similar forms, for example, the legal definitions separating strikes from other forms of conflict (such as demonstrations and “riots”) themselves result from previous struggles among workers, employers, and government officials. They vary from one country and era to another. Other complications follow: Workers in different countries sometimes pursue similar ends by very different means (including strikes, demonstrations, and what authorities call riots), and in moments of deep political division, observers and participants assign different meaning to strikes than in moments of relative tranquility.

It is not certain, furthermore, that national states provide coherent frames for the comparative study of industrial conflict; if we want to get at the relationship between the structure of capital and the character of conflict, for example, a comparison between the coal and textile regions that span the borders of France and Belgium may well serve us better than a global comparison of France and Belgium. At a minimum, any analyst who insists on comparing national states must take into account profound national differences in industrial composition, regional distribution, labor force characteristics, and political control over industry. Often a comparison of industries and localities within and across national boundaries will yield more understanding than an equally extensive comparison of national aggregates. Both sorts of comparisons, will occupy us as this book proceeds.

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Theoretically, much is at stake in such comparisons. The study of industrial and political conflict from 1890 to 1922 can draw on four main literatures:

1. political and economic history at the level of the historical era;
2. economic analyses of strikes at the individual level;
3. treatments of political mobilization at the group level;
4. theories of revolution at the level of states.

Political and economic history of the period 1890–1922 generally organizes around a few major events and processes: the transformation of capitalism, the development of big industry, the rise of Fascism, World War I, the Russian revolutions. To the extent that it goes beyond narrative, it stresses the causes and consequences of these events and processes. The literature rumbles with controversy over such questions as the causes, consequences, and avoidability of World War I. By examining the diverse trajectories of industrial and political conflict in six countries during the three decades after 1890, we will necessarily join many of the controversies.

Economic analyses of strikes characteristically seek to identify the sufficient conditions for workers' decisions to strike, drawing on such factors as the organization of production, the structure of labor markets, the business cycle, and changes in the political climate. Although most theories, strictly speaking, concern individual strikes, empirical work rarely deals with one strike at a time. Research in this field often involves the statistical estimation of equations representing a hypothetical set of relations among those factors, using aggregate strike data as evidence. One of the controversies in the field – as we shall see – concerns the degree to which (or conditions in which) strikes connect with struggles for control of the state and therefore acquire a political edge.

Treatments of *political mobilization* commonly seek to explain why groups of people vary so widely in their readiness to organize and act together on their shared interests. Theories of political mobilization divide roughly into *cumulative* and *constructive*. On the cumulative side, the typical model sees individuals responding to the stresses and cleavages produced by rapid social change, developing personal grievances, and joining with other likeminded individuals (often under the leadership of charismatic figures) in some organization or collective action that expresses the common grievances; shared consciousness thus becomes the sine qua non of collective action.

On the constructive side, the quintessential scheme treats interests as resting on the everyday organization of production and coercion, portrays a carryover of existing social ties into collective action, and stresses strategic interaction among parties characterized by well-defined divisions of interest. Controversies concerning political mobilization therefore occur at several levels: the nature of

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the phenomenon in general, the relevance of different social changes to particular kinds of mobilization, the explanation of group differences with respect to involvement in crucial conflicts and collective actions.

Theories of *revolution* customarily operate at the level of national states. The division between cumulative and constructive analyses that appears in studies of political mobilization reappears, unsurprisingly, in discussions of revolution. Theories of revolution differ, broadly speaking, according to whether they imagine a massive, aggrieved, simultaneous popular response to disruption or the transformation of existing interests and social cleavages into a struggle for national power. But they also differ with respect to scope. As Jack Goldstone puts it:

In the first part of this century, one group of theorists, the natural-history school, defined revolution narrowly. They examined only the great revolutions and sought regularities in the way such revolutions occurred. In reply, later theorists argued that to develop and test generalizations about social behavior one must study large numbers of events. As the number of great revolutions was rather small, this general-theory school sought to include revolutions within the framework of more common events. Grouping great revolutions with peasant revolts, riots, unsuccessful revolutions, and sometimes civil wars, they sought to ground the common causes of all these events in a general theory of collective political violence.

Recently a third generation of theorists, the structural-theory school, has sought to avoid either too narrow or too broad a definition. They have insisted that although the various forms of collective political violence are in some sense similar, they are still different kinds of events, and develop from quite different circumstances. Thus they have separated these events into distinct clusters – successful revolutions, unsuccessful revolutions, revolutionary coups, etc. – and asked: What kinds of states have a political structure that is vulnerable to revolution? What kinds of government and social organization are prone to revolutionary coups? What kinds of states are so structured that they are likely to be stable, or likely to experience only unsuccessful revolutions? In sum, this school is interested in the vulnerability of different kinds of states and social organization to different kinds of events (Goldstone 1982: 189).

Since the Russian Revolution of 1917 initiated much of this theorizing about revolution, and invariably figures in comparisons of great revolutions, the literature bears directly on our book's subject matter.

The study of industrial and political conflict from 1890 to 1922 promises to draw on and contribute to all four of these lines of thought: political and economic history, economic analyses of strikes, treatments of political mobilization, and theories of revolution. All four converge at a precise point when we ask about the role of industrial conflict in revolution. How much, and how, does the pattern of conflict among workers, employers, and government officials

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reflect or constrain the character and likelihood of revolutionary struggles for power? the outcome of those struggles? Is it true (as Koenker and Rosenberg say later in this book) that revolution “inverts the relationship between strikes and the system of industrial relations,” since revolutionary strikes themselves alter the terms and stakes of industrial conflict? These questions – long standard in Marxist analyses of revolution – turn out to be pivotal for our whole enterprise.

Other questions also matter: Who are the actors? What difference does their action make? In analyzing strikes, it is easy to slip into the supposition that all that has to be explained is the action of workers. A little reflection on the forms of industrial conflict, however, dispels that illusion. During our period, the industrial conflicts of our six countries most often took the forms of firm-by-firm strikes; communitywide turnouts of all the workers in a trade; employer-initiated lockouts; attacks on owners, employers, strikebreakers, or their property; demonstrations; public meetings; electoral campaigns; and similar events. A number of forms that had often appeared early in the nineteenth century – including shaming ceremonies and retaliatory destruction of machines – had by then become rare. But the old forms and the new all involved at least two parties in sustained interaction.

The politics of industrial conflict

In the long run, each of the more recent forms of conflict acquired a kind of legal standing through repetition, negotiation, and compromise. Workers, employers, officials, police, judges, and other parties to the conflicts fought out rules and understandings. The rules and understandings were often implicit but powerful; no country, for example, explicitly legalized demonstrations as such, but in all our countries, police, troops, officials, and demonstrators hammered out limits within which some groups could voice demands and grievances by assembling at their own initiative in public space – that is, demonstrate – without great danger of immediate repression.

Sometimes the rules and understandings were explicit; with many qualifications, all our countries except Russia established a legal right to strike at some time before 1900. In the United States, courts construed the eighteenth-century Bill of Rights as granting a limited right to strike. Great Britain first legalized some forms of the strike in 1824, Saxony in 1861, France in 1864, Prussia in 1869, Italy in 1889 (very restricted, with fuller rights in 1901). As guarantors, monitors, and repressors, governments remained parties to industrial conflict throughout our period.

In the short run, to be sure, both governmental intervention and the involvement of governments as the objects of strikes varied from one circumstance to another. From 1890 to 1922, workers rarely aimed their strikes directly at