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## John Most

Max Nettlau

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The sad news of the death of John Most came to us early last month from Cincinnati. An indefatigable propagandist of Socialism and Anarchism for nearly forty years, one of the-most persecuted and maligned men of our time, and a good comrade, working hard for his ideas up to the last, we will tell something of his life and his work.

Johann Most was born in the old Bavarian town of Augsburg on February 6th, 1846. A bookbinder by trade, he delighted in breaking spells of work by tramping from town to town and country to country in the interval, and thus saw a good deal of Central Europe in his early years. This brought him into contact with the working class movement, and he eagerly adopted Socialism, Republicanism, and Atheism. He spent some time in the Swiss Jura, at Locle, in 1868, when the International Working Men's Association was already established there, but not yet separated from politics. Had he known enough French to participate in that movement, and had he stayed there a few months longer, he would have met Bakunin on his first visit there in February 1869; and an independent spirit like Most's would have embraced Bakunin's ideas with full ardor, and German Anarchist propaganda might have been begun by him at

that time. As it was, he knew nothing of the ideas, inaccessible to him at the time; but he was always far in advance of the average Social Democrat, and was the *enfant terrible* of his party from the beginning, for he had not the slightest leaning towards compromise and diplomacy, and as he then considered Social Democracy to mean Socialism, Republicanism, Atheism, triumphing by means of the Social Revolution, he said so whenever he could, to the dismay of cautious party politicians. Besides, he had the right sense of humor and immense pluck, and knew how to hit hard in the right place. His habitual place of residence soon became the prison cell, with intervals of liberty during which he committed over and over again the heinous crime of *free speech*, for which nearly ten years of his life were stolen from him by condemnations in various countries.

From the Jura, he went to Vienna (1869), where just then a very active Socialist movement was going on, though the energy of the young party was piteously wasted on demanding a reform of the franchise. Most had indulged in some plain talk about the Republic, and spent his first months in prison. Then he took part in preparing the demonstration of December, 1869, by which about 20,000 working men, marching before the House of Parliament, demanded manhood suffrage. They got nothing, and their leaders were tried for high treason, among them J. Most and Andreas Scheu. By the way, in November, 1905, not 20,000 but 200,000 working men and women marched before that Parliament for the same purpose, and this time got fine Ministerial promises. Their leader, Dr. Adler, declared shortly afterwards at a meeting that they were now, for the first time being, a Government party (*Regierungs partei*), and just now the Austrian parliament is debating the caricature of manhood suffrage which the Government offers them. It was not for this that the men of 1869 had worked, and after a long trial (June 1870) there were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Most, whose pluck and humor were conspicuous at the trial, received a sentence of six years, and went to Luben, where he was relatively well treated as

a political prisoner. In February next an unexpected amnesty liberated the victims of that trial; Most was, of course, expelled from Austria!

He went to Leipzig, where he had his first encounter with official Parliamentary Social Democracy in the form of Liebknecht, who instinctively abhorred the fresh enthusiasm of Most. He told him coolly that in that country they had adopted *scientific* Socialism, and would have nothing to do with revolutionary phraseology. Most, always detested by these leaders, whose little game of moderation and statesmanship he continually upset, was immensely liked by the workers wherever he went, as he expressed their wants in plain language. He was invited to come to Chemnitz to edit the *Chemnitz Free Press*. In this Saxonian industrial town he spent some years in prison and out of prison, if we may say so; and when he had, perhaps, had enough of Saxonian prisons, he went to Mainz to edit the Social Democratic paper there. The workers wanted him to become a member of the German Parliament, and he accepted, believing he could do some plain talking there before new and large audiences. He has told himself in his "Recollection" how utterly disappointing Parliament was to him—a feeling which some of our new Labour Members may also experience some day, Parliament is like a huge machine, full of cogs and cranks, directed by Government and the party wire-pullers, who themselves are directed by money and other vested interests. There is no place for an independent Member, and Most, who entered it believing he could speak up for Socialism and explain the misery of the workers, never got a word in, and was permitted to speak only once or twice, when he had to pretend to speak on some very practical subject, perhaps the twenty-second amendment to a Bill for the vaccination of dogs or the like, and then the Speaker forced him to stick to the subject! So he himself experienced the futility of Parliament as a revolutionary platform—in Parliamentary reform—work he never, I imagine, believed.

A speech on the Paris Commune (Berlin, March, 1874) meant for him nearly two years in the Prussian prison of Ploetzensee, near Berlin. Later he edited the *Berlin Free Press*, the largest organ of German Socialism, which was not much liked at Leipzig, where Liebknecht published the official organ, *Volksstaat*, afterwards *Vorwaerts*. The Berlin movement had been given up to the struggle between the Lassalleans and the group of Bebel and Liebknecht. Most was the right man there, being affiliated to neither of these sects. A so-called Christian Socialist movement had begun there, the inevitable forerunner of Antisemitism and Conservative corruption of the Labour movement. Most replied by a determined Freethought propaganda among Socialists, an idea the neglect of which largely explains, the great hold which priests of all sorts still have on the workers under pretext of Christian Socialism! At that time Eugen Duehring had challenged Marxist Socialism, and was replied to by F. Engels in interminable articles spread over the *Vorwaerts* for years. Most did not believe that Marx and Engels had said the last word on Socialism, and that henceforth we all have but to learn their catechism by heart and cease to doubt or discuss even. He saw dogmas in it. He kept his mind open in regard to Duehring's heresy, not accepting it either, as it was certainly not revolutionary. But all this showed to the official leaders that he was not one of their own kind, who would say white or black at their dictation. One may ask, Did he not hear of Anarchism during these years? I sincerely believe he did not; the little paper, published at Berne (1876-77) may never have reached him, and the very few propagandists, who came from Switzerland, like Reinsdorf and Werner, seem not to have known him then. Besides this, Marx, Engels, Liebknecht, Hirsch, and others had published the vilest anti-Anarchist tracts distorting everything, so he had no chance to know.

The Anti-Socialist Law of 1878, was passed when he was in prison again. After his liberation he was expelled from Berlin, and he could see at once that for years no word of Socialism would be

these years. It is, in face of the untimely death of Most, an item of consolation to me that he died before the *Freiheit*, and that his life's work has not died before him.

Death at barely sixty is untimely indeed, and with him a comrade died of uncompromising tenacity and purpose, plenty of good sense, real intellectual faculties, and good humor to boot; we have not many to lose like him.

permitted to be printed or spoken in public in the whole country. The official party met this brutal repression by their famous so-called tactics. (*Taktik*); they started papers with inoffensive names (e.g., "The Little Lamp") which, contained not a word on Socialism, but as the editors, writers, and printers got their living by them, everything was all right for them, and many have indeed lived for years as Labour parasites of this description. Most was not one of them; he never had been. He went to London, where the German Communistic Working Men's Club soon enabled him to publish that paper which became his real life's work, the *Freiheit* (Freedom), issued regularly since January 4th, 1879.

The *Freiheit* began as a Social Democratic paper, and was written with verve, energy, enthusiasm, in strong, graphic language, which gave it at once a first place in German Socialist literature. It was strictly prohibited in Germany, but was smuggled into the country with so much greater diligence. The German workers liked it immensely. It had to record, besides the infamous police persecutions, no small number of acts of cowardice and wavering on the part of some Social Democrats. Besides, Most came into close contact with revolutionists of other countries, and soon the Social Democratic organ paper became a Social *Revolutionary* paper. It is said that Karl Marx himself was disgusted with the famous tactics of feigned submission, and was glad to see Most stand up and speak freely. But the official party — Liebkecht, Bebel, Hasendener, etc. — put their heads together to find a remedy for the growth of revolutionary Socialism, which upset their tactics. They had denounced Most as speaking with impunity from a safe asylum (we shall soon see how safe this asylum was); they now did the same thing, founding the *Socialdemokrat* (Zurich, September 28th, 1879), opposing that Swiss paper, edited by von Vollmar, later by Edward Bernstein, to the *Freiheit*. Then began a royal fight between Most and his friends and the official party. Most's commonsense, good humour, and real indignation are in striking contrast to the lame, impotent defence of his opponents, who, however, felt safe in relying

on the desire for peace and quietness of the majority of their electors, who still wielded the party machinery and held the funds, and who, as old Marxists and Lassalleans, were past masters in the underhand, warfare of intrigues and slanders. Wherever Most could personally speak to the workers, he carried the day; but the police made his agitation on the Continent impossible for him. He had to leave Paris immediately after his speech at a German meeting there; he could stay but a short time in Switzerland, and was expelled from Belgium on arriving there. The official party meanwhile held a Congress at Wyden, Switzerland (1880), which was managed in such a way that Most and the delegates who might be in his favour had no chance of being there. Of course, this Congress excommunicated him.

The real reason why Most and his friends could not vanquish the official party, which just then was at its worst period, was that their own ideas were rapidly developing from Revolutionary Socialism to something very near Anarchism, and by-and-by to real Anarchism. This evolution, which was clear enough to them—in the absence of all direct means of propaganda, when only here and there a smuggled copy of the *Freiheit* could with difficulty reach them—this evolution, then, could not be made sufficiently clear to the Socialists in Germany, who knew nothing whatever about Anarchism, and had only heard or read the Marxist calumnies against Bakunin and the like. Anarchism was first mentioned in the *Freiheit* in some letters written by A. Reinsdorf (decapitated in Halle, 1885), who had been a member of the Jurassian Federation. Most was hitting hard against enemies all round, and could not at the same time theoretically propagate ideas which were new also to him. In this way the greater part of the German and Austrian readers could no longer follow the paper, and took no further interest in it. They wanted a thoroughgoing Social Democratic party, and were disgusted with the waverers and cowards; —but they had no desire to go further; and gradually joined again the old flock.

Most fell out with a great many people, but, a few instances excepted, his opinion was usually justified some time later by facts. He welcomed all genuine efforts of American propaganda, e.g., John Turner's first American tour. It was touching, to read. P. Kropotkin's personal visit had delighted him. We all regret that he could never find the means to visit Europe again. He made many lecturing tours all over America, and the *Freiheit* was regularly published until his death. in 1886-7 it had to migrate to New Jersey; in the nineties it went for a short time to Rochester, NY, where Most then edited the daily German paper of that town, but soon found that a daily paper is a money matter and cannot be a propagandist paper. All the rest of the time the *Freiheit* was published at New York, and with the *Revolte (Temps Nouveaux*, born also in 1879); Tucker's *Liberty* (1881), *Worker's Friend* (1885), and *Freedom* (1886), it was one of the oldest Anarchist papers.

Most was the author of Socialist songs which are still popular in Germany and Austria; he is said to have been impressive as an actor in "The Weavers," etc. and when he began to tell of his early of other less abstract subjects in the *Freiheit*, a poetic vein will not be denied him, I believe. His pamphlets are numerous; the "Deistic Pestilence and Religious Plague of Man" is translated into many languages; in religious matters he was from first to last uncompromisingly atheistic and materialistic, and set his foot on all those modern humbugging efforts which in a roundabout way lead back to religious mental enslavement. His life work cannot be guessed from the inspection of these pamphlets, but is before us in the twenty-seven volumes of the *Freiheit*; some day a couple volumes of well selected articles will make him better and more lastingly known than he was of late years.

For the *Freiheit*, which had come to America as a refugee paper and had been unable to leave when many of its original supporters left or retired, had been too uncompromising to cater for local American popularity, and Most and his friends had to strive hard to keep together those who enabled the paper to live through all

erties are written in golden letters in the statute books, but must not be used by the people, or they will be imprisoned or hanged just as in despotic countries. Thus the real difficulties of popular movements are the same in every country, and Most, who had had a warning of this in London soon got other warnings in the United States.

Had he been found anywhere in Illinois in May, 1886, the time of the Haymarket meeting, he would have been hanged like Spies, Parsons and their comrades. He happened to have delivered at that time a lecture at New York, and a lying press report of that lecture supported by the testimony of journalist scoundrels, served to send him for a year to the New York Penitentiary. On one or two other occasions he was sent there again; for the last time he was thrown into prison after the death of McKinley. Whenever a revolutionary act was committed in the United States, the New York press called for the imprisonment or hanging of Most, and a pretext for another prosecution was soon found. But the old man treated all this with scorn and indifference, and kept his good humour.

It is to be regretted that this shameful treatment by the mass of the Americans, and the unfavourable impression which he obtained of the Labour movement on the whole, made him overlook the one redeeming factor in American life—the existence of numbers of independent, free men and women who work for their ideas by their example and by their serious discussion; it is those who began the Abolitionist, the early Anarchist, and many other progressive movements. Most, a born agitator, had no patience for their methods, which imply a degree of toleration towards opponents, whilst his natural impulse was to hit hard. In this way he remained separated from the American progressive elements who endeavour to convince individuals to act for themselves, whilst he strove to rouse the masses to destroy the system. It must be said, however, that the fault was not entirely on his side, that these Americans did nothing to meet him, nay, did worse—witness the “firebug” article of *Liberty*.

A small number of men, however, enthusiastically accepted Anarchism, and in Austria during the years 1882 to 1884 the great majority of the party instinctively followed them, though any theoretical propaganda was almost impossible. They believed in a Social Revolution in the near future, and endeavoured to rouse the people by individual acts of violence, preceding by nearly ten years Ravachol and his comrades in France. The people did not follow them, and their small numbers were almost exterminated in batches—the gallows, long terms of penal servitude, or some escapes to England and America.

Most had found in London some excellent comrades who helped the *Freiheit* with enthusiastic determination. The best of all was John Neve, indefatigably devoted to Anarchist propaganda, until his arrest in 1887, when he entered a German prison which he never left alive. Later, in 1886, J. Trunk, V. Dave, and others from Paris. There was life and spirit in this propaganda as seldom in a movement, and all seemed going well when the English Government came to the help of Bismarck, put Most in jail, and in 1882 made the further publication of the *Freiheit* in London impossible.

A spirited article headed “At Last!” (*Endlich!*) which Most had written on hearing of the execution of Alexander II of Russia by the Executive Committee of the *Narodnaya Volya*, served as pretext. Most was arrested and charged with inciting to the murder of kings in general (March, 1881). The indignation of English Radicals and Socialists at this Press persecution will still be remembered. An English paper called *Freiheit* was started (April 4th—June 15th, seven numbers), and our old comrade F. Kitz will perhaps, give us a more graphic account of the trial the pamphlet, “The ‘Freiheit’ Prosecution: The Trial of Herr John Most” (London, 1881, 30 pp.), might be read containing Mr. A. M. Sullivan, M.P.’s, speech for the defence. Lord Coleridge sentenced Most to *eighteen months hard labour*, and the legend of English free speech and Press, upheld by English juries, was destroyed.

When, at the time of Orsini, Palmerston had Simon Bernard tried, the London jury acquitted him (1858). The most compromised refugees of the Commune were let alone in England. But John Most went to hard labour, a task which never had been imposed on him in his years of prison as a political offender in Austria and Germany. Since that time the trials of the printers of the *Freiheit* in 1882, of Cantwell and Quinn in 1894, of V. Bourtzeff in 1897, and of the Italian comrades of the *Insurrezione* in 1905, did away with the last remnants of the the beautiful legend.

Most's imprisonment (April, 1881—October 1882) no more interrupted the regular publication of the *Freiheit* by the comrades who set up the paper, and others whose names scarcely came before the public, than did his years of prison life in America; moreover, he always succeeded in remaining the principal contributor by smuggling his copy through the prison bars. He was an expert in prison life, so to speak, always keeping his spirits up, and by gymnastics and mental exercise evading physical degradation. Thus he left prison, as a rule, in full vigour, and immediately took his place on the platform and in the editor's office.

Anarchism made further progress in the *Freiheit* of 1881 and 1882; but in 1882 new persecutions taxed the determined devotion of the publishing group to the utmost. An article approving the killing of Cavendish and Burke in Phoenix Park, Dublin, was the cause of the prosecution (April, 1882), and this time the composers of the paper, Schwelm and Merten, were sentenced to long terms, of hard labour. After this, the English police, seeing that they could not, kill the paper, felt that they were hampered by the formalities of "mere law" and adopted arbitrary measures throughout, giving out that all who took any part whatever in printing and distributing further issues of the *Freiheit* would be arrested. After keeping front for months to these continuous vexations, an opportunity offered itself to have the paper printed at Schaffhausen, in Switzerland, and by the intermediary of Stellmacher, an Anarchist who in 1884 was hanged in Vienna, this was done (summer, 1882).

independent Socialists who in 1890 had left the official German party, accepted Anarchism, and began to replace secret by public propaganda in Berlin since 1891. Most welcomed this movement, and the *Autonomie* ceased publication. Since that time the scope of the *Freiheit* was limited to the Germans in the United States.

But here the Chicago tragedy had destroyed all illusions. As to Most he scarcely ever had any illusions about the Americans. Their mechanical skill is indeed immense; San Francisco will be rebuilt before the ashes are swept away from the alleys of Naples! But the hunt for the almighty dollar absorbs all other faculties, arid that immense continent, the invaluable natural resources of which fell after the splendid War of Independence into the hands of the sturdy free citizens of those days, is now under the control of trusts and millionaires, assisted by the vilest press on earth and by the fullest bloom, of religious cant. Civilisation is but skin-deep, freedom a mockery, human feeling totally absent as negro lynching, the immigration laws and the Gorki incident show up to date. The Labour movement has always suffered by this general disposition of minds; successful trade unions think no further of solidarity, but establish monopolies of their own; successful labour leaders use their position often as the political "bosses" do, and their action in the labour struggle is but a stepping stone for their future advancement. In the days of Most's arrival the Powderleys and Van Pattens were at the head of the unionist and Socialist movements, what has become of them? Most, who, with all his cynical way of talk, in which he often indulged, was a German idealist of the old days which are gone for that country too, was disgusted at what he saw in America. Those who come from a country where a great part of the labour and political struggle is waged to obtain free speech, the full right of association; etc, overrate the power of these factors, and think that in England or the the United States, where these liberties obtain, they would be continually used by all to the utmost for revolutionary propaganda until the people is roused to action. But in reality capitalism decrees in these free countries that these beautiful lib-



were but a pretext and the outer form of a deeper intrigue against his influence in Germany and Austria. For in 1884 a great number of refugees from Austria, expelled from Switzerland, had come to London, and centered round Joseph Peukert, and Austrian Anarchist, the editor of *Die Zukunft*, and the uncontested leader of the Austrian revolutionary revival of 1882-84. Driven to London, surrounded by friends and admirers, used to power, so to speak, by the past years in Austria, he became a rival to Most, and instead of finding a way to co-operate with him, endeavored to crust him and to step into his place. His prestige with the Austrians served him for this purpose as well as the better theoretical knowledge of Anarchism which he, Rinke, and others had picked up in France and in Switzerland. Under these circumstances *Der Rebell* was restarted (1884-86) and continued by *Die Autonomie* (1886-92). They certainly made Communist Anarchism better known by means of translation of P. Kropotkin's and other pamphlets and articles, but Peukert and his friends themselves did not know how to write; dulness and absolute lack of humor characterize them; Most's verve, humor, common sense, irrepressible cheerfulness,—all the are sadly absent. If they had not interfered, who knows whether Most in the early nineties—when Anarchism was first propagated in Germany by publication published in the country itself (*Der Socialist*, Berlin, etc.)—would not have found means to take a more direct part in this new movement, and might have returned to Europe, which was always so much nearer to him than America. As it was, this London opposition against the *Freiheit* took the most hateful forms, and was also the cause of the drama the victim of which was Most's truest friend and best of comrades, John Neve, arrested in Belgium in 1887, handed over to Germany, and deceased in a prison cell nine years later. The sequel of Neve's arrest was that Peukert was discredited to the utmost degree with Most and his friends, that Peukert's friends stuck to him the more, and the struggle was embittered. Finally, also, Peukert left London and edited the New York *Anarchist*. In the end things ended well in this way, that part of the

The fact that in these transactions—details of which the London group could not, of course, regulate from a distance—an individual took part in Switzerland whom the German Social Democrats five years later found out to have been a police spy—this fact still serves Social Democratic historians as the basis of their assertion that the *Freshet* was a police paper!

When Most left prison (autumn, 1882) he did the best thing that could be done under the circumstances: he accepted the invitation of Justus Schwab and the New York German comrades to come to America, and to publish the *Freiheit* at New York. That this temporary measure had to become a permanent one is the tragedy of his life. He then, and, I believe, for many years, perhaps until his death, dreamed that he should never more return to his real field of action, Europe.

The native American Socialist movement of the epoch of the International had become almost extinct in the early eighties; only in Chicago and in California new efforts began to be made. The German movement had been discredited by the quarrelsome pedantry of Sorge and others to whom Karl Marx had confided the care of the remnant of the remnant of *his* followers in the International. The German expulsions of Socialists in 1878 and 1879 brought many Social Democrats over to the States, and the numerous local societies all took sides and mostly split over the differences between and the *Freiheit* and the official party. The Chicago Socialists, A. Spies, the editor of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, and others of the murdered of November, 1887, and many New York Socialists, Justus Schwab, etc., took part with *Freiheit*, and Most stepped at once on to well-prepared ground. When in Austria and Germany, his appearances on the platform were but few and far between, as each speech usually led to a spell of imprisonment; when in London in 1879-80 much of the time was taken up by polemics, personal questions, embittered encounters with tenacious opponents. In America in those early years he really enjoyed free speech on his large lecturing tours, he came into contact with numerous comrades,

and had reasons to believe a hopeful, growing movement ahead. At first all went well; the Pittsburgh Convention, in the autumn of 1883 formed a federation of existing groups, the International Working People's Association, and adopted a platform worded by Most. The Chicago movement made rapid progress, and Parson's *Alarm* restarted the English movement, this time as a revolutionary and Anarchist one. Most himself now first formulated his ideas on Anarchism in a series of articles, reprinted as a pamphlet ("Free Society").

The early eighties were, like the early seventies and the early nineties; periods of growing Anarchist agitation and action until brute force, that highly intellectual weapon of modern as well as primitive society, repressed once more the then but small numbers of those who rose for freedom. As no idea was ever crushed by repression, and no progress was ever won save by overthrowing hosts of brutal and stupid obstacles, these early defeats are but inevitable episodes and stepping stones. The French and Swiss Governments meant to stamp out Anarchism in the early eighties by expelling Anarchists from Switzerland, rendering the publication of the *Revolte* impossible in Geneva; hunting down the Lyons Anarchist papers and imprisoning the Lyons Anarchisms, P. Kropotkin and others. The real result of these persecutions was, however that the *Revolte* was boldly transplanted to Paris and from this centre made Anarchism more firmly rooted in France than the Geneva propaganda could have done. The *Freiheit*, which in London might not have been able to live after the years of excitement were over, was driven to America where it prospered for many years. In Austria, since 1883, the whole German and Bohemian speaking party—a small clique excepted—was in favour of Most, and evolving towards Anarchism, though their papers, *Zukunft* ("The Future") and others, could scarcely print a line on the subject that was not confiscated, and the fate meted out to those who read Most's papers was ten years, or even more, of penal servitude. This led to a series of acts of violence, and early in 1884 a period of savage repression

crushed all external manifestations of propaganda in Austria and Hungary for years. In Germany the friends of Most were hunted down to such a degree by police and Social Democrats that they could not keep their ground; there also a few of the best perished after violent attempts (Reinsdorf and others). For some time refugees from Germany and Austria swarmed to Switzerland, but persecutions and numerous expulsions (1883-85) destroyed this new centre of propaganda. Thus London and the United States only remained where Most's paper could be openly supported by subscribers; everywhere else it had to be circulated as a secret paper, at great personal risk.

During these years, 1882-85, the *Freiheit*, to my impression, was at its best. It is really stirring reading. Most, ever cheerful, ever bold hits hard. Then came times of disappointment. American "liberty" suddenly, threw off the mask, and the infamous horrors of the Chicago hunt for Anarchists' blood followed (1886-87); on the other side, internal dissensions paralysed the movement; of the latter I will speak first.

Most's Anarchism, as expressed in the edition of his "Free Society" was entirely home-made; it was Federalist Socialism, hardly anything else. He had hardly any access at that, I believe, to real Anarchist literature, which was not so readily accessible then as it is to-day. Some German Anarchists, like Rinke, who had lived in Switzerland as members of the Jurassian Federation, and who had closely followed the elaboration of Communist Anarchism in the *Revolte*, looked, of course, askance at the uncouth authoritarian Communism of Most in 1882-83. If only they had been patient enough to explain matters to Most in a quiet way! For the latter by-and-by

modified his views, and accepted Communist Anarchism fully the moment he really knew it from its proper sources. But they made their better knowledge a means of correcting and reproving, and Most's temper was too Anarchistic to stand this. Moreover, he had reason at the time to believe that these theoretical polemics