

Anton Pannekoek, Destruction as a Means of Struggle (1933)

The left-wing communist press's assessments of the Reichstag fire raise a few questions. Can destruction or devastation be a means in the workers' struggle for liberation?

First, it's worth noting that no one will miss the Reichstag building. It was one of the ugliest buildings in modern Germany and entirely in keeping with the ostentatious image of the 1871 Empire. However, there are other, more beautiful buildings and museums with art treasures. What if an embittered proletariat destroys something valuable to take revenge for capitalist oppression? From a revolutionary point of view, this would be worthless and, in many respects, a misdeed. It wouldn't affect the bourgeoisie; they have destroyed much in pursuit of profit, and they value money above all else. This mainly affects a small group of people: artists and lovers of beautiful things. The best of these people often felt anti-capitalist, and some of them, such as William Morris and Herman Gorter, fought alongside the workers. Moreover, is there any reason to seek revenge on the bourgeoisie? Do they have a duty to establish socialism instead of capitalism? Capitalism's nature is to maintain itself with all its might. It is the workers' task to destroy it. Therefore, if anyone is to be held responsible for capitalism's continued existence, it is the working class itself, which has neglected the struggle too much. Finally, who is deprived of anything by destruction? The victorious workers, who will one day be masters of it all.

Of course, a revolutionary class struggle that takes the form of a civil war will always bring destruction. Destroying the enemy's strongholds is necessary in any war. While the winning side tries to spare the losing side, the latter, in its bitterness, may engage in unnecessary destruction. We must expect that the declining bourgeoisie will cause enormous destruction, especially at the end of the struggle. Conversely, the working class, as the ultimate victors, will not use destruction as a means of struggle. For the future of humanity, its descendants, it will try to hand over a world that is as rich and intact as possible. This applies not only to technical aids, which the working class will be able to build better and more perfectly, but also to monuments and memories of earlier generations that cannot be recreated.

On the other hand, one could argue that the new humanity, bearing a freedom and brotherhood unlike anything before, will create works far more beautiful and grander than those of any previous century. Furthermore, the newly liberated humanity will feel the need to eliminate all remnants of the past that symbolize its former enslavement. The revolutionary bourgeoisie did this - or at least attempted to - ; viewing all previous history as a thick darkness of ignorance and slavery. But now, through the revolution, reason, knowledge, virtue, and freedom had been enthroned for good. The proletariat, however, views the history of its ancestors with very different eyes. Guided by Marx's teachings on the development of society through successive forms of production, the proletariat sees this as a gradual evolution of humanity based on the growth of labor, tools, and forms of labor leading to greater productivity. First, there is primitive savagery, then class societies with class struggle, and finally, communism, where man becomes master of his own destiny. In every era of development, the proletariat finds traits related to its own nature. In barbaric times, it sees the fraternal feelings and moral teachings of

primitive communism's solidarity. In petty bourgeois craftsmanship, it sees the love of labor expressed in the beauty of buildings and utensils. These were ordinary work for them, but posterity admired them as inimitable art. In the emerging bourgeoisie, it sees a proud sense of freedom that proclaimed human rights and expressed itself in the greatest works of world literature. In capitalism, it sees the knowledge of nature and the natural sciences, which enable man to become master of nature and his destiny through technology. All of these characteristics were associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with cruelty, superstition, and selfishness. These are the very things we now fight against because they hinder us and are therefore hated. However, our view of history teaches us to see the imperfections of previous generations as natural steps in the growth process, as expressions of people's difficult struggle for life in the face of overwhelming nature and incomprehensible society, before they had grown into full humanity. What they created will not symbolize their weakness, but their strength. It is worthy of being preserved with care. The bourgeoisie has now taken possession of all this, but we consider it the property of the community and will try to pass it on to our descendants intact.

Source

[Vernieling als strijdmiddel](#) in Persdienst Internationale Communisten, 1933. Transcription with adaptation to modern Dutch spelling by F.C., 9/8/2025. US-English translation by DeepL Translate and Write.