

The Russian Tragedy (A Review and An Outlook)

Alexander Berkman

1922

Contents

Foreword	3
I	3
II	6
III	8
IV	9
V	14

Foreword

We live at a time when two civilisations are struggling for their existence. Present society is at death grips with the New Ideal. The Russian Revolution was but the first serious combat of the two forces, whose struggle must continue till the final triumph of the one or of the other.

The Russian Revolution has failed — failed of its ultimate purpose. But that failure is a temporary one. In the point of revolutionising the thought and feeling of the masses of Russia and of the world, in undermining the fundamental concepts of existing society, and lighting the torch of faith and hope for the Better Day, the Russian Revolution has been of incalculable educational and inspirational value to mankind.

Though the Russian Revolution failed to achieve its true goal, it will forever remain a most magnificent historic event. And yet — tremendous as it is — it is but an incident in the gigantic war of the two worlds.

That war will go on, is going on. In that war capitalism is already facing its doom. Yet more: with capitalism, centralised political government, the *State*, is also doomed, — and that is the most significant lesson of the Russian Revolution as I see it.

This pamphlet was recently published in the Dutch language, whereupon a Holland critic wrote to me: “You have failed to give the full lesson of the Russian Revolution”.

I agree with him. It will require a great many volumes to give “the full lesson” of so tremendous an event as the Russian Revolution. My purpose is more modest. It will, require the effort of many minds to clarify to the world the full significance of the Russian Revolution, the potentiality ties of the ideals and ideas involved in it. I merely want to contribute my little share.

I have decided to incorporate the result of my two years’ study and observation in Russia in a series of pamphlets under the general caption of the *Russian Revolution Series*.

The Series will comprise a critical review of the most important phases of the Revolution, together with a constructive analysis of some of the vital lessons to be drawn.

If the present Series will help to make things a little clearer in regard to Russia, if it will aid the workers to see the path of liberation a little straighter, then I shall consider my effort fully repaid.

May, 1922

Alexander Berkman

I

It is most surprising how little is known, outside of Russia, about the actual situation and the conditions prevailing in that country. Even intelligent persons, especially among the workers, have the most confused ideas about the character of the Russian Revolution, its development, and its present political, economic and social status. Understanding of Russia and of what has been happening there since 1917 is most inadequate, to say the least. Though the great majority of people side either with or against the Revolution, speak for or against the Bolsheviki, yet almost nowhere is there concrete knowledge and clarity in regard to the vital subjects involved. Generally speaking, the views expressed — friendly or otherwise — are based on very incomplete and unreliable, frequently entirely false, information about the Russian Revolution, its history

and the present phase of the Bolshevik regime But not only are the opinions entertained founded, as a rule, on insufficient or wrong data; too often they are deeply colored — properly speaking, distorted — by partisan feeling, personal prejudice, and class interests. On the whole, it is sheer ignorance, in one form or another, which characterises the attitude of the great majority of people toward Russia and Russian events.

And yet, understanding of the Russian situation is most vital to the future progress and wellbeing of the world. On the correct estimation of the Russian Revolution, the role played in it by the Bolsheviks and by other political parties and movements, and the causes that have brought about the present situation, — in short, on a thorough conception of the whole problem depends what lessons we shall draw from the great historic events of 1917. Those lessons will, for good or evil, affect the opinions and the activities of great masses of mankind. In other words, coming social changes — and the labor and revolutionary efforts preceding and accompanying them — will be profoundly, essentially influenced by the popular understanding of what has really happened in Russia.

It is generally admitted that the Russian Revolution is the most important historic event since the Great French Revolution. I am even inclined to think that, in point of its potential consequences, the Revolution of 1917 is the most significant fact in the whole known history of mankind. It is the only Revolution which aimed, de facto, at social world revolution; it is the only one which actually abolished the capitalist system on a country-wide scale, and fundamentally altered all social relationships existing till then. An event of such human and historic magnitude must not be judged from the narrow viewpoint of partisanship. No subjective feeling or preconception should be consciously permitted to color one's attitude. Above all, every phase of the Revolution must be carefully studied, without bias or prejudice, and all the facts dispassionately considered, to enable us to form a just and adequate opinion. I believe — I am firmly convinced — that only the whole truth about Russia, irrespective of any considerations whatever, can be of ultimate benefit.

Unfortunately, such has not been the case so far, as a general rule. It was natural, of course, for the Russian Revolution to arouse bitterest antagonism, on the one hand, and most passionate defense, on the other. But partisanship, of whatever camp is not an objective judge. To speak plainly, the most atrocious lies, as well as ridiculous fairy tales, have been spread about Russia, and are continuing to be spread, even at this late day. Naturally, it is not to be wondered at that the enemies of the Russian Revolution, the enemies of revolution, as such, the reactionaries and their tools, should have flooded the world with most venomous misrepresentation of events transpiring in Russia. About them and their "information" I need not waste any further words: in the eyes of honest, intelligent people they are discredited long ago.

But, sad to state, it is the would be friends of Russia and of the Russian Revolution who have done the greatest harm to the Revolution, to the Russian people, and to the best interests of the working masses of the world, by their exercise of zeal untempered by truth. Some unconsciously, out of ignorance, but most of them consciously and intentionally have been lying, persistently and cheerfully, in defiance of all facts, in the mistaken notion that they are "helping the Revolution". Reasons of "political expediency", of "Bolshevik diplomacy", of the alleged "necessity of the hour", and frequently motives of less unselfish considerations, have actuated them. The sole legitimate consideration of decent men, of real friends of the Russian Revolution and of man's emancipation, — As well as of reliable history — consideration for truth, they have entirely ignored.

There have been honorable exceptions, unfortunately too few: their voice has almost been lost in the wilderness of misrepresentation, falsehood, and overstatement. But most of those who visited Russia simply lied about the conditions in that country, — I repeat it deliberately. Some lied because they did not know any better: they had had neither the time nor the opportunity to study the situation, to learn the facts. They made “flying trips”, spending ten days or a few weeks in Petrograd and Moscow, unfamiliar with the language, never for a moment coming in direct touch with the real life of the people, hearing and seeing only what was told or shown them by the interested officials accompanying them at every step. In many cases these “students of the Revolution” were veritable innocents abroad, naive to the point of the ludicrous. So unfamiliar were they with the environment that in most cases they had not even the faintest suspicion that their affable “interpreter”, so eager to “show and explain everything”, was in reality a member of the “trusted men”, specially assigned to “guide” important visitors. Many such visitors have since spoken and written voluminously about the Russian Revolution, with little knowledge and less understanding.

Others there were who had the time and the opportunity, and some of them really tried to study the situation seriously, not merely for the purpose of journalistic “copy”. During my two years’ stay in Russia I had occasion to come in personal contact with almost every foreign visitor, with the Labor missions, and with practically every delegate from Europe, Asia, America and Australia, who gathered in Moscow to attend the, International Communist Congress and the Revolutionary Trade Union Congress held there last year. (1921.) Most of them could see and understand what was happening in the country. But it was a rare exception, indeed, that had vision and courage enough to realize that only the whole truth could serve the best interests of the situation.

As a general rule, however, the various visitors to Russia were extremely careless of the truth, systematically so, the moment they began “enlightening” the world. Their assertions frequently bordered on criminal idiocy. Think, for instance, of George Lansbury (publisher of the London “Daily Herald”) stating that the ideas of brotherhood, equality, and love preached by Jesus the Nazarene were being realised in Russia — and that at the very time when Lenin was deploring the “necessity of military communism forced upon us by Allied intervention and blockade”. Consider the “equality” that divided the population of Russia into 36 categories, according to the ration and wages received. Another Englishman, a noted writer, emphatically claimed that everything would be well in Russia, were it not for outside interference — while whole districts in the East, the South, and in Siberia, some of them larger in area than France, were in armed rebellion against the Bolsheviki and their agrarian policy. Other literati were extolling the “free Soviet system” of Russia, while 18,000 of her sons lay dead at Kronstadt in the struggle to achieve free Soviets.

But why enlarge upon this literary prostitution? The reader will easily recall to mind the legion of Ananiases who have been strenuously denying the very existence of the things that Lenin tried to explain as inevitable. I know that many delegates and others believed that the real Russian situation, if known abroad, might strengthen the hand of the reactionists and interventionists. Stith a belief, however, did not necessitate the painting of Russia as a veritable labor Eldorado. But the time when it might have been considered inadvisable to speak fully of the Russian situation is long past, That period has been terminated, relegated into the archives of history, by the introduction of the “new economic policy”. Now the time has come when we must learn the full lesson of the Revolution and the causes of its debacle. That we may avoid the mistakes it made (Lenin

frankly says they were many), that we be enabled to adopt its best features, we must know the whole truth about Russia.

It is therefore that I consider the present activities of certain labor men as positively criminal and a betrayal of the true interests of the workers of the world. I refer to the men and women, some of them delegates to the Congresses held in Moscow in 1921, that still continue to propagate the “friendly” lies about Russia, delude the masses with roseate pictures of labor conditions in that country, and even seek to induce workers of other lands to migrate in large numbers to Russia. They are strengthening [sic] the appalling confusion already existing in the popular mind, deceive the proletariat by false statements of the present and vain promises for the near future. They are perpetuating the dangerous delusion that the Revolution is alive and continuously active in Russia. It is most despicable tactics. Of course, it is easy for an American labor leader, playing to the radical element, to write glowing reports about the condition of the Russian workingmen, while he is being entertained at State expense at the Luxe, the most lucrative hotel in Russia. Indeed, he may insist that “no money is needed”, for does he not receive everything his heart desires, free of charge? Or why should the President of an American needleworkers union not state that the Russian workers enjoy full liberty of speech? He is careful not to mention that only Communists and “trusties” were permitted within speaking distance while the distinguished visitor was “investigating” conditions in the factories.

May history be merciful to them.

II

That the reader may form a just estimate of what I shall say further, I think it necessary to sketch, briefly my mental attitude at the time of my arrival in Russia.

It was two years ago. A democratic government, “the freest on earth”, had deported me — together with 248 other politicals — from the country I had lived in over thirty years. I had protested emphatically against the moral wrong perpetrated by an alleged democracy in resorting to methods it had so vehemently condemned on the part of the Tsarist autocracy. I branded deportation of politicals as an outrage on the most fundamental rights of man, and I fought it as a matter of principle.

But my heart was glad. Already at the outbreak of the February Revolution I had yearned to go to Russia. But the Mooney case had detained me: I was loath to desert the fight. Then I myself was taken prisoner by the United States, and penalised for my opposition to world slaughter. During two years the forced hospitality of the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta, Ga., prevented my departure. Deportation followed.

My heart was glad, did I say? Weak word to express the passion of joy that filled me at the certainty of visiting Russia. Russia! I was going to the country that had swept Tsardom off the map, I was to behold the land of the Social Revolution! Could there be greater joy to one who in his very childhood had been a rebel against tyranny, whose youth’s unformed dreams had visioned human brotherhood and happiness, whose entire life was devoted to the Social Revolution?!

The journey was an inspiration. Though we were prisoners, treated with military severity, and the “Buford” a leaky old tub repeatedly endangering our lives during the month’s Odyssey, yet the thought that we were on the way to the land of revolutionary promise kept the whole company of deportees in high spirits, a tremble with expectation of the great Day soon to come.

Long, long was the voyage, shameful the conditions we were forced to endure: crowded below deck, living in constant wetness and foul air, fed on the poorest rations. Our patience was nigh exhausted, yet our courage unflagging, and at last we reached our destination.

It was the 19th of January, 1920, when we touched the soil of Soviet Russia. A feeling of solemnity, of awe, almost overwhelmed me. Thus must have felt my pious old forefathers on first entering the Holy of Holies. A strong desire was upon me to kneel down and kiss the ground — the ground consecrated by the life-blood of generations of suffering and martyrdom, consecrated anew by the triumphant [sic] revolutionists of my own day. Never before, not even when released from the horrible nightmare of 14 years' prison, had I been stirred so profoundly, — longing to embrace humanity, to lay my heart at its feet, to give my life a thousand times, were it but possible, to the service of the Social Revolution. It was the most sublime day of my life.

We were received with open arms. The revolutionary hymn, played by the military Red Band, greeted us enthusiastically as we crossed the Russian frontier. The hurrahs of the red-capped defenders of the Revolution echoed through the woods, rolling into the distance like threats of thunder. With bowed head I stood in the presence of the visible symbols of the Revolution Triumphant. With bowed head and bowed heart. My spirit was proud, yet meek with the consciousness of actual Social Revolution. What depths, what grandeur lay therein, what incalculable possibilities stretched in its vistas!

I heard the still voice of my soul: "May your past life have contributed, if ever so little, to the realisation of the great human ideal, to this, its successful beginning". And I became conscious of the great happiness it offered me: to do, to work, to help with every fiber of my being the complete revolutionary expression of this wonderful people. They had fought and won. They proclaimed the Social Revolution. It meant that oppression has ceased, that submission and slavery, man's twin curses, were abolished. The hope of generations, of ages, has at last been realised justice has been established upon the earth — at least upon that part of it that was Soviet Russia, and nevermore shall the precious heritage be lost.

But years of war and revolution have exhausted the country. There is suffering and hunger, and much need of stout hearts and willing hands to do and help. My heart sang for joy. Aye, I will give myself fully, completely, to the service of the people; I shall be rejuvenated and grow young again in ever greater effort, in the hardest toil, for the furtherance of the common weal. My very life will I consecrate to the realisation of the world's great hope, the Social Revolution.

At the first Russian army outpost a massmeeting was held to welcome us. The large hall crowded with soldiers and sailors, the nun-dressed women on the speaker's platform, their speeches, the whole atmosphere palpitating with Revolution in action — all made a deep impression on me. Urged to say something, I thanked the Russian comrades for their warm welcome of the American deportees, congratulated them on their heroic struggle, and expressed my great joy at being in their midst. And then my whole thought and feeling fused in one sentence. "Dear Comrades", I said, "we came not to teach but to learn; to learn and to help".

Thus I entered Russia. Thus felt my fellow deportees

I remained two years. What I learned, I learned gradually, day by day, in various parts of the country. I had exceptional opportunities for observation and study. I stood close to the leaders of the Communist Party, associated much with the most active men and women, participated in their work, and travelled extensively through the country under conditions most favorable to personal contact with the life of the workers and peasants. At first I could not believe that what I saw was real. I would not believe my eyes, my ears, my judgment. As those trick mirrors that

make you appear dreadfully monstrous, so Russia seemed to reflect the Revolution as a frightful perversion. It was an appalling caricature of the new life, the world's hope. I shall not now go into detailed description of my first impressions, my investigations, and the long process that resulted in my final conviction. I fought relentlessly, bitterly, against myself. For two years I fought. It is hardest to convince him who does not want to be convinced. And, I admit, I did not want to be convinced that the Revolution in Russia had become a mirage, a dangerous deception. Long and hard I struggled against this conviction. Yet proofs were accumulating, and each day brought more damning testimony. Against my will, against my hopes, against the holy fire of admiration and enthusiasm for Russia which burned within me, I was convinced — convinced that the Russian Revolution had been done to death.

How and by whom?

III

It has been asserted by some writers that Bolshevik accession to power in Russia was due to a coup de main, and doubt has been expressed regarding the social nature of the October change.

Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of historic fact, the great event known as the October Revolution was in the profoundest sense a social revolution. It was characterised by all the essentials of such a fundamental change. It was accomplished, not by any political party, but by the people themselves, in a manner that radically transformed all the heretofore existing economic, political and social relations. But it did not take place in October. That month witnessed only the formal "legal sanction" of the revolutionary events that had preceded it. For weeks and months prior to it, the actual Revolution had been going on all over Russia: the city proletariat was taking possession of the shops and factories, while the peasants expropriated the big estates and turned the land to their own use. At the same time workers' committees, peasant committees and Soviets sprang up all over the country, and there began the gradual transfer of power from the provisional government to the Soviets. That took place, first in Petrograd, then in Moscow, and quickly spread to the Volga region, the Ural district, and to Siberia. The popular will found expression in the slogan, "All power to the Soviets", and it went sweeping through the length and breadth of the land. The people had risen, the actual Revolution was on. The keynote of the situation was struck by the Congress of the Soviets of the North, proclaiming: "The provisional government of Kerensky must go; the Soviets are the sole power!"

That was on October 10th. Practically all the real power was already with the Soviets. In July the Petrograd uprising against Kerensky was crushed, but in August the influence of the revolutionary workers and of the garrison was strong enough to enable them to prevent the attack planned by Korniloff. The Petrograd Soviet gained strength from day to day. On October 16th it organised its own Revolutionary Military Committee, an act of defiance [sic] of and open challenge to the government. The Soviet, through its Revolutionary Military Committee, prepared to defend Petrograd against the coalition government of Kerensky and the possible attack of General Kaledin and his counter-revolutionary cossacks. On October 22nd the whole proletarian population of Petrograd, solidarically supported by the garrison, demonstrated throughout the city against the government and in favor of "All power to the Soviets".

The All-Russian Congress of Soviets was to open on October 25th. The provisional government, knowing its very existence in imminent peril, resorted to drastic action. On October 23rd

the Petrograd Soviet ordered the Kerensk Cabinet to withdraw within 48 hours. Driven to desperation, Kerensky undertook — on October 24th — to suppress the revolutionary press, arrest the most prominent revolutionists of Petrograd, and remove the active Commissars of the Soviet. The government relied on the “faithful” troops and on the young yunkers of the military student schools. But it was too late: the attempt to sustain the government failed. During the night of October 24–25 (November 6–7) the Kerensky government was dissolved — peacefully, without bloodshed — and the exclusive supremacy of the Soviets was established. The Communist Party stepped into power. It was the political culmination of the Russian Revolution.

IV

Various factors contributed to the success of the Revolution. To begin with, it met with almost no active opposition: the Russian bourgeoisie was unorganised weak, and not of a militant disposition. But the main reasons lay in the all-absorbing enthusiasm with which the revolutionary slogans had fired the whole people. “Down with the war!”, “Immediate peace!”, “The land to the peasant, the factory to the workers!”, “All power to the Soviets!” — these were expressive of the passionate soul cry and deepest needs of the great masses. No power could withstand their miraculous effect.

Another very potent factor was the unity of the various revolutionary elements in their opposition to the Kerensky government. Bolsheviki Anarchists, the left faction of the Socialist Revolutionary party, the numerous politicals freed from prison and Siberian exile, and the hundreds of returned revolutionary emigrants, had all worked during the February-October months toward a common goal.

But if “it was easy to begin” the Revolution, as Lenin had said in one of his speeches, to develop it, to carry it to its logical conclusion was another and more difficult matter. Two conditions were essential to such a consummation: continued unity of all the revolutionary forces, and the application of the country’s goodwill initiative and best energies to the important work of the new social construction. It must always be remembered — and remembered well — that revolution does not mean destruction only. It means destruction plus construction, with the greatest emphasis on the plus. Most unfortunately, Bolshevik principles and methods were soon fated to prove a handicap, a drawback upon the creative activities of the masses.

The Bolsheviki are Marxists. Though in the October days they had accepted and proclaimed anarchist watchwords (direct action by the people, expropriation, free Soviets, and so forth), it was not their social philosophy that dictated this attitude. They had felt the popular pulse — the rising waves of the Revolution had carried them far beyond their theories. But they remained Marxists. At heart they had no faith in the people and their creative initiative. As social-democrats they distrusted the peasantry, counting rather upon the support of the small revolutionary minority among the industrial element. They had advocated the Constituent Assembly, and only when they were convinced that they would not have a majority there, and therefore not be able to take State power into their own hands, they suddenly decided upon the dissolution of the Assembly, though the step was a refutation and a denial of fundamental Marxist principles. (Incidentally, it was an Anarchist, Anatoly Zheleznyakov in charge of the palace guard, who took the initiative in the matter). As Marxists, the Bolsheviki insisted on the nationalisation of the land: ownership, distribution and control to be in the hands of the State. They were in principle opposed to social-

isation, and only the pressure of the Left faction of the Social-Revolutionists (the Spiridonova-Kamkov wing) whose influence among the peasantry was traditional, forced the Bolsheviki to “swallow the agrarian programme of the Socialist-Revolutionists whole”, as Lenin afterwards put it.

From the first days of their accession to political power the Marxist tendencies of the Bolsheviki began to manifest themselves, to the detriment of the Revolution. Social-Democratic distrust of the peasantry influenced their methods and measures. At the All-Russian Conferences the peasants did not receive equal representation with the industrial workers. Not only the village speculator and exploiter, but the agrarian population, as a whole was branded by the Bolsheviki as “petty bosses” and “bourgeois”, “unable to keep step with the proletariat on the road to socialism”. The Bolshevik government discriminated against the peasant representatives in the Soviets and at the National Conferences, sought to handicap their independent efforts, and systematically narrowed the scope and activities of the Land Commissariat, then by far the most vital factor in the reconstruction of Russia. (The Commissariat was then presided over by a Left Social-Revolutionist). Inevitably this attitude led to much dissatisfaction on the part of the great peasant masses. The Russian muzhik is simple and naive, but with the instinct of the primitive man he quickly senses a wrong: no fine dialectics can budge his once settled conviction. The very cornerstone of the marxian credo, the dictatorship of the proletariat, served as an affront and an injury to the peasantry. They demanded an equal share in the organisation and administration of the affairs of the country. Had they not been enslaved, oppressed and ignored long enough? The dictatorship of the proletariat the peasant resented as discrimination against himself. “If dictatorship must be”, he argued, “why not of all who labor, of the town worker and of the peasant, together?”

Then came the Brest-Litovsk peace. In its far-reaching results it proved the death blow to the Revolution. Two months previously, in December, 1917, Trotzky had refused, with a fine gesture of noble indignation, the peace offered by Germany on conditions much more favorable to Russia. “We wage no war, we sign no peace!” he had said, and revolutionary Russia applauded him. “No compromise with German imperialism, no concessions”, echoed through the length and breadth of the country, and the people stood ready to defend their Revolution to the very death, But now Lenin demanded the ratification of a peace that meant the most mean-spirited betrayal of the greater part of Russia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraina, White Russia, Bessarabia — all were to be turned over to the oppression and exploitation of the German invader and of their own bourgeoisie. It was a monstrous thing — the sacrifice at once of the principles of the Revolution and of its interests as well.

Lenin insisted on ratification, on the ground that the Revolution needed a “breathing spell”, that Russia was exhausted, and that peace would enable the “revolutionary oasis” to gather strength for new effort. Radek denounced acceptance of Brest-Litvosk conditions as betrayal of the October Revolution. Trotzky disagreed with Lenin. The revolutionary forces split. The Left Social-Revolutionists, most of the Anarchists and many of the nonpartisan revolutionary elements were bitterly opposed to making peace with imperialism, especially on the terms dictated then by Germany. They declared that such a peace would be fatal to the Revolution; that the principle of “peace without annexations” must not be sacrificed; that the German conditions involved the basest treachery to the workers and peasants of the provinces demanded by the Prussians; that the peace would subject the whole of Russia to economic and political dependence upon

German Imperialism, that the invaders would possess themselves of the Ukrainian bread and the Don coal, and drive Russia to industrial ruin.

But Lenin's influence was potent. He prevailed. The Brest-Litvosk treaty was ratified by the 4th Soviet Congress.

It was Trotzky who first asserted in refusing the German peace terms offered in December, 1917, that the workers and peasants, inspired and armed by the Revolution, could by guerilla warfare overcome any army of invasion. The Left Social-Revolutionists now called for peasant uprisings to oppose the Germans, confident that no army could conquer the revolutionary ardor of a people fighting for the fruits of their great Revolution. Workers and peasants, responding rushed to the aid of Ukraina and White Russia, then valiantly struggling against the German invaders. Trotzky ordered the Russian army to pursue and suppress these partisan units.

The killing of Mirbach followed. It was the protest of the Left Social-Revolutionists Party against, and the defiance of, Prussian imperialism within Russia. The Bolsheviki government initiated repressive measures: it now felt itself, as it were, under obligations to Germany. Dzerzhinsky, head of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, demanded the delivery of the terrorist. It was a situation unique in revolutionary annals: a revolutionary party in power demanding of another revolutionary party, with which it had till then cooperated the arrest and punishment of a revolutionist for executing the representative of an imperialist government! The Brest-Litvosk peace had put the Bolsheviki in the anomalous position of a gendarme for the Kaiser. The Left Social-Revolutionists replied to Dzerzhinsky' demand by arresting the latter. This act, and the armed skirmishes which followed it (though insignificant in themselves) were thoroughly exploited by the Bolsheviki politically. They declared that it was an attempt of the Left Social-Revolutionist Party to seize the reins of government. They announced that party outlawed, and their extermination began.

These Bolsheviki methods and tactics were not accidental. Soon it became evident that it is the settled policy of the Communist State to crush every form of expression not in accord with the government. After the ratification of the Brest-Litvosk peace the Left Social-Revolutionist Party withdrew its representative in the Soviet of People's Commissars. The Bolsheviki thus remained in exclusive control of the government. Under one pretext and another there followed most arbitrary and cruel suppression of all the other political parties and movements. The Mensheviki and the Right Social-Revolutionists had been "liquidated" long before, together with the Russian bourgeoisie. Now was the turn of the revolutionary elements — the Left Social-Revolutionists the Anarchists, the non-partisan revolutionists.

But the "liquidation" of these involved much more than the suppression of small political groups. These revolutionary elements had strong followings, the Left Social-Revolutionists among the peasantry, the Anarchists mainly among the city proletariat. The new Bolsheviki tactics encompassed systematic eradication of every sign of dissatisfaction, stifling all criticism and crushing independent opinion or effort. With this phase the Bolsheviki enter upon the dictatorship over the proletariat, as it is popularly characterised in Russia. The government's attitude to the peasantry is now that of open hostility. More increasingly is violence resorted to. Labor unions are dissolved, frequently by force, when their loyalty to the Communist Party is suspected. The cooperatives are attacked. This great organisation, the fraternal bond between city and country, whose economic functions were so vital to the interests of Russia and of the Revolution, is hindered in its important work of production, exchange and distribution of the necessaries of life, is disorganised, and finally completely abolished.

Arrests, night searches, zassada (house blockade), executions, are the order of the day. The Extraordinary Commissions (Tcheka), originally organised to fight counter-revolution and speculation, is becoming the terror of every worker and peasant. Its secret agents are everywhere, always unearthing "plots", signifying the razstrel (shooting) of hundreds without hearing, trial or appeal. From the intended defense of the Revolution the Tcheka becomes the most dreaded organisation, whose injustice and cruelty spread terror over the whole country. All-powerful, owing no one responsibility, the Tcheka is a law unto itself, possesses its own army, assumes police, judicial, administrative and executive powers, and makes its own laws that supersede those of the official State. The prisons and concentration camps are filled with alleged counter-revolutionists and speculators, 95 per cent of whom are starved workers, simple peasants, and even children of 10 to 14 years of age. (See reports of prison investigations, Petrograd "Krasnaya Gazetta" and "Pravda"; Moscow "Pravda", May, June, July, 1920). Communism becomes synonymous in the popular mind with Tchekism, the latter the epitome of all that is vile and brutal. The seed of counter-revolutionary feeling is sown broadcast.

The other policies of the "revolutionary government" keep step with these developments. Mechanical centralisation, run mad, is paralysing the industrial and economic activities of the country. Initiative is frowned upon, free effort systematically discouraged. The great masses are deprived of the opportunity to shape the policies of the Revolution, or take part in the administration of the affairs of the country. The government is monopolising every avenue of life: the Revolution is divorced from the people. A bureaucratic machine is created that is appalling in its parasitism, inefficiency and corruption. In Moscow alone this new class of sovburas (Soviet bureaucrats) exceeds, in 1920, the total of office holders throughout the whole of Russia under the Tsar in 1914. (See official report of investigation by Committee of Moscow Soviet, 1921). The Bolshevik economic policies, effectively aided by this bureaucracy, completely disorganise the already crippled industrial life of the country. Lenin, Zinoviev, and other Communist leaders thunder philippics against the new Soviet bourgeoisie, — and issue ever new decrees that strengthen and augment its numbers and influence.

The system of yedinolitchiye is introduced: management by one person. Lenin himself is its originator and chief advocate. Henceforth the shop, and factory committees are to be abolished, stripped of all power. Every mill, mine, and factory, the railroads and all the other industries are to be managed by a single head, a "specialist", — and the old Tsarist bourgeoisie is invited to step in. The former bankers, bourse operators, mill owners and factory bosses become the managers, in full control of the industries, with absolute power over the workers. They are vested with authority to hire, employ and discharge the "hands", to give or deprive them of the payok (food ration), even to punish them and turn them over to the Tcheka. The workers, who had fought and bled for the Revolution and were willing to suffer, freeze

and starve in its defense, resent this unheard of imposition. They regard it as the worst betrayal. They refuse to be dominated by the very owners and foremen whom they had driven, in the days of the Revolution, out of the factories and who had been so lordly and brutal to them. They have no interest in such a reconstruction. The "new system", heralded by Lenin as the savior of the industries, results in the complete paralysis of the economic life of Russia, drives the workers en masse from the factories, and fills them with bitterness and hatred of everything "socialistic". The principles and tactics of Marxian mechanisation of the Revolution are sealing its doom.

The fanatical delusion that a little conspirative group, as it were, could achieve a fundamental social transformation proved the Frankenstein of the Bolsheviks. It led them to incredible depths

of infamy and barbarism. The methods of such a theory, its inevitable means, are twofold: decrees and terror. Neither of these did the Bolsheviks spare. As Bukharin, the foremost ideologue of the militant Communists taught, terrorism is the method by which capitalistic human nature is to be transformed into fit Bolshevik citizenship. Freedom is “a bourgeois prejudice” (Lenin’s favorite expression), liberty of speech and of the press unnecessary, harmful. The central government is the depository of all knowledge and wisdom. It will do everything. The sole duty of the citizen is obedience. The will of the State is supreme.

Stripped of fine phrases, intended mostly for Western consumption, this was and is the practical attitude of the Bolshevik government. This government, the real and only actual government of Russia, consists of five persons, members of the inner circle of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia. These “Big Five” are omnipotent. This group, in its true essence conspiratory, has been controlling the fortunes of Russia and of the Revolution since the Brest-Litovsk peace. What has happened in Russia since, has been in strict accord with the Bolshevik interpretation of Marxism. That Marxism, reflected through the Communist inner circle’s megalomania of omniscience and omnipotence, has achieved the present debacle of Russia.

In consonance with their theory, the social fundamentals of the October Revolution have been deliberately destroyed. The ultimate object being a powerfully centralised State, with the Communist Party in absolute control, the popular initiative and the revolutionary creative forces of the masses had to be eliminated. The elective system was abolished, first in the army and navy, then in the industries. The Soviets of peasants and workers were castrated and transformed into obedient Communist committees, with the dreaded sword of the Tcheka ever hanging over them. The labor unions government alised, their proper activities suppressed, they were turned into mere transmitters of the orders of the State. Universal military service, coupled with the death penalty for conscientious objectors; enforced labor, with a vast officialdom for the apprehension and punishment of, “deserters”; agrarian and industrial conscription of the peasantry; military Communism in the cities and the system of requisitioning in the country, characterised by Radek as simply grain plundering (International Press Correspondence, English edition, vol. 1, No. 17); the suppression of workers’ protests by the use of the military; the crushing of peasant dissatisfaction with an iron hand, even to the extent of whipping the peasants and razing their villages with artillery — (in the Ural, Volga and Kuban districts, in Siberia and the Ukraine) — this characterised the attitude of the Communist State toward the people, this comprised the “constructive social and economic policies” of the Bolsheviks.

Still the Russian peasants and workers, prizing the Revolution for which they had suffered so much, kept bravely fighting on numerous military fronts. They were defending the Revolution, as they thought. They starved, froze, and died by the thousands, in the fond hope that the terrible things the Communists did would soon cease. The Bolshevik horrors were, somehow — the simple Russian thought — the inevitable result of the powerful enemies “from abroad” attacking their beloved country. But when the wars will at last be over — the people naively echoed the official press — the Bolsheviks will surely return to the revolutionary path they entered in October, 1917, the path the wars had forced them temporarily to forsake.

The masses hoped and — endured. And then, at last, the wars were ended. Russia drew an almost audible sigh of relief, relief palpitating with deep hope. It was the crucial moment: the great test had come. The soul of a nation was a-quiver. To be or not to be? And then full realisation came. The people stood aghast. Repressions continued, even grew worse. The piratical *razvyorstka*, the punitive expeditions against the peasants, did not abate their murderous work. The

Tcheka was unearthing more “conspiracies”, executions were taking place as before. Terrorism was rampant. The new Bolshevik bourgeoisie lorded it over the workers and the peasants, official corruption was vast and open, huge food supplies were rotting through Bolshevik inefficiency and centralised State monopoly, — and the people were starving.

The Petrograd workers, always in the forefront of revolutionary effort, were the first to voice their dissatisfaction and protest. The Kronstadt sailors, upon investigation of the demands of the Petrograd proletariat, declared themselves solidaric with the workers. In their turn they announced their stand for free Soviets, Soviets free from Communist coercion, Soviets that should in reality represent the revolutionary masses and voice their needs. In the middle provinces of Russia, in the Ukraina, on the Caucasus, in Siberia, everywhere the people made known their wants, voiced their grievances, informed the government of their demands. The Bolshevik State replied with its usual argument : the Kronstadt sailors were decimated, the “bandits” of Ukraina massacred, the “rebels” of the East laid low with machine guns,

This done, Lenin announced at the X. Congress of the Communist Party of Russia (March, 1921) that his former policies were all wrong. The *razvyorstka*, the requisition of food, was pure robbery. Military violence against the peasantry a “serious mistake”. The workers must receive some consideration. The Soviet bureaucracy is corrupt and criminal, a huge parasite. “The methods we have been using have failed.” The people, especially the rural population, are not yet up to the level of Communist principles. Private ownership must be re-introduced free trade established. Henceforth the best Communist is he who can drive the best bargain. (Lenin’s expression).

V

Back to Capitalism!

The present situation in Russia is most anomalous. Economically it is a combination of State and private capitalism. Politically it remains the “dictatorship of the proletariat” or, more correctly, the dictatorship of the inner circle of the Communist Party.

The peasantry has forced the Bolsheviks to make concessions to it. Forcible requisitioning is abolished. Its place has taken the tax in kind, a certain percentage of the peasant produce going to the government. Free trade has been legalised, and the farmer may now exchange or sell his surplus to the government, to the re-established co-operatives or on the open market. The new economic policy opens wide the door of exploitation. It sanctions the right of enrichment and of wealth accumulation. The farmer may now profit by his successful crops, rent more land, and exploit the labor of those peasants who have little land and no horses to work it with. The shortage of cattle and bad harvests in some parts of the country have created a new class of “farm hands” who hire themselves out to the well-to-do peasant. The poor people migrate from those regions which are suffering from famine and swell the ranks of this class. The village capitalist is in the making.

The city worker in Russia today, under the new economic policy, is in exactly the same position as in any other capitalistic country. Free food distribution is abolished except in a few industries operated by the government, The worker is paid wages, and must pay for his necessaries — as in any country. Most of the industries, in so far as they are active, have been let or leased to private persons. The small capitalist now has a free hand. He has a large field for his activities. The farmer’s surplus, the product of the industries, of the peasant trades, and of all the enterprises

of private ownership, are subject to the ordinary processes of business, can be bought and sold. Competition within the retail trade leads to incorporation and to the accumulation of fortunes in the hands of individuals.

Developing city capitalism and village capitalism can no longer co-exist with “dictatorship of the proletariat”. The unnatural alliance between the latter and foreign capitalism will in the near future prove another vital factor in the fate of Russia.

The Bolshevik government still strives to uphold the dangerous delusion that the “revolution is progressing”, that Russia is “ruled by proletarian soviets”, that the Communist Party and its State are identical with the people. It is still speaking in the name of the “proletariat”. It is seeking to dupe the people with a new chimera. After awhile — the Bolsheviks now pretend — when Russia shall have become industrially resurrected, through the achievements of our fast growing capitalism, the “proletarian dictatorship” will also have grown strong, and we will return to nationalisation. The State will then systematically, curtail and supplant the private industries and thus break the power of the meanwhile developed bourgeoisie.

“After a period of partial denationalisation a stronger nationalisation begins”, says Preobrazhensky, Finance Commissar, in his recent article, “The Perspectives of the New Economic Policy”. Then will “Socialism be victorious on the entire front” (ibid). Radek is less diplomatic. “We certainly do not mean”, he assures us in his political analysis of the Russian situation, entitled “Is the Russian Revolution a Bourgeois Revolution?” (I.P.C., Dec. 16, 1921) “that at the end of a year we shall again confiscate the newly accumulated goods. Our economic policy is based upon a longer period of time... We are consciously preparing ourselves for co-operating with the bourgeoisie; this is undoubtedly dangerous to the existence of the Soviet government, because the latter loses the monopoly on industrial production as against the peasantry. Does not this signify the decisive victory of capitalism? May we not then speak of our revolution as having lost its revolutionary character? ...”

To these very timely and significant questions Radek cheerfully replies with a categorical No! It is true, of course, as Marx taught, he admits, that economic relations determine the political ones, and that economic concessions to the bourgeoisie must lead also to political concessions. He remembers that when the powerful landowning class of Russia began making economic concessions to the bourgeoisie those concessions were soon followed by political ones and finally by the capitulation of the landowning class. But he insists that the Bolsheviks will retain their power even under the conditions of the restoration of capitalism. “The bourgeoisie is a historically deteriorating, dying class... That is why the working class (?) of Russia can refuse to make political concessions to the bourgeoisie; since it is justified in hoping that its power will grow on a national and international scale more quickly than will the power of the Russian bourgeoisie”.

Meanwhile, though authoritatively assured that his, “power is to grow on a national and international scale”, the Russian worker is in a bad plight. The new economic policy has made the proletarian “dictator” a common, every-day wage slave, like his brother in countries unblest with Socialist dictatorship. The curtailment of the government’s national monopoly has resulted in the throwing of hundreds of thousands of men and women out of work. Many Soviet institutions have been closed; the remaining ones have discharged from 50 to 75 per cent of their employees. The large influx to the cities of peasants and villagers ruined by the *razvyorstka*, and those fleeing from the famine districts, has produced an unemployment problem of threatening scope. The revival of the industrial life through private capital is a very slow process, due to the general lack of confidence in the Bolshevik State and its promises.

But when the industries will again begin to function more or less systematically, Russia will face a very difficult and complex labor situation. Labor organisations, trade unions, do not exist in Russia, so far as the legitimate activities of such bodies are concerned. The Bolsheviki abolished them long ago. With developing production and capitalism, governmental as well as private, Russia will see the rise of a new proletariat whose interests must naturally come into conflict with those of the employing class. A bitter struggle is imminent. A struggle of a twofold nature: against the private capitalist, and against the State as an employer of labor. It is even probable that the situation may develop still another phase: antagonism of the workers employed in the State-owned industries toward the better-paid workers of private concerns. What will be the attitude of the Bolshevik government? The object of the new economic policy is to, encourage, in every way possible, the development of private enterprise and to accelerate the growth of industrialism. Shops, mines, factories and mills have already been leased to capitalists. Labor demands have a tendency to curtail profits; they interfere with the "orderly processes" of business. And as for strikes, they handicap production, paralise industry. Shall not the interests of Capital and Labor be declared solidaric in Bolshevik Russia?

The industrial and agrarian exploitation of Russia, under the new economic policy, must inevitably lead to the growth of a powerful labor movement. The workers' organisations will unite and solidify the city proletariat with the agrarian poor, in the common demand for better living conditions. From the present temper of the Russian worker, now enriched by his four years' experience of the Bolshevik regime, it may be assumed with considerable degree of probability that the coming labor movement of Russia will develop along syndicalist lines. The sentiment is strong among the Russian workers. The principles and methods of revolutionary syndicalism are not unfamiliar to them. The effective work of the factory and shop committees, the first to initiate the industrial expropriation of the bourgeoisie in 1917, is an inspiring memory still fresh in the minds of the proletariat. Even in the Communist Party itself, among its labor elements, the syndicalist idea is popular. The famous Labor Opposition, led by Shliapnikov and Mme. Kolontay within the Party, is essentially syndicalistic.

What attitude will the Bolshevik government take to the labor movement about to develop in Russia, be it wholly or even only partly syndicalistic? Till now the State has been the mortal enemy of labor syndicalism within Russia, though encouraging it in other countries. At the X. Congress of the Russian Communist Party (March, 1921) Lenin declared merciless warfare against the faintest symptom of syndicalist tendencies, and even the discussion of syndicalist theories was forbidden the Communists, on pain of exclusion from the Party. (See official Report, X. Congress). A number of the Labor Opposition were arrested and imprisoned. It is not to be lightly assumed that the Communist dictatorship could satisfactorily solve the difficult problems arising out of a real labor movement under Bolshevik autocracy. They involve principles of Marxian centralisation, the functioning of trade or industrial unions independent of the omnipotent government, and active opposition to private capitalism. But not only the big and small capitalist will the workers of Russia soon have to fight. They will presently come to grips with State capitalism itself.

To correctly understand the spirit and character of the present Bolshevik phase, it is necessary to realise that the so-called "new economic policy" is neither new nor economic, properly considered. It is old political Marxism, the exclusive fountain-head of Bolshevik wisdom. As social-democrats they have remained faithful to their bible. Only a country where capitalism is most highly developed can have a social revolution — that is the acme of Marxian faith. The Bolshe-

wiki, are about to apply it to Russia. True, in the October days of the Revolution they repeatedly deviated from the straight and narrow path of Marx. Not because they doubted the prophet. By no means. Rather that Lenin and his group, political opportunists, had been forced by irresistible popular aspiration to steer a truly revolutionary course. But all the time they hung on to the skirts of Marx, and sought every opportunity to direct the Revolution into Marxian channels. As Radek naively reminds us, “already in April, 1918, in a speech by comrade Lenin, the Soviet government attempted to define our next tasks and to point out the way which we now designate as the new economic policy”. (I. P. C., Vol. 1, No. 17).

Significant admission! In truth, present Bolshevik policies are the continuation of the good orthodox Bolshevik Marxism of 1918. Bolshevik leaders now admit that the Revolution, in its post-October developments, was only political, not social. The mechanical centralisation of the Communist State — it must be emphasized — proved fatal to the economic and social life of the country. Violent party dictatorship destroyed the unity of the workers and the peasants, and created a perverted, bureaucratic attitude to revolutionary reconstruction. The complete denial of free speech and criticism, not only to the masses but even to the rank and file of the Communist Party itself, resulted in its undoing, through its own mistakes.

And now? Bolshevik Marxism is continuing in poor Russia. But it is monstrously criminal to prolong this bloody Comedy of Errors. Communist construction is not possible alongside of a sickly capitalism, artificially developed. That capitalism can never be destroyed — as Lenin & Co. pretend to believe — by the regular processes of the Bolshevik State grown economically strong. The “new” policies are there for a delusion and a snare, fundamentally reactionary. These policies themselves create the necessity for another revolution.

Must tortured humanity ever tread the same vicious circle?

Or will the workers at last learn the great lesson Of the Russian Revolution that every government, whatever its fine name and nice promises is by its inherent nature, as a government, destructive of the very purposes of the social revolution? it is the mission of government to govern, to subject, to strengthen and perpetuate itself. It is high time the workers learn that only their own organised, creative efforts, free from Political and State interference, can make their age-long struggle for emancipation a lasting success.

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Alexander Berkman
The Russian Tragedy (A Review and An Outlook)
1922

Retrieved on March 14th, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu

en.anarchistlibraries.net