

WHY PAST REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS HAVE FAILED

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I.

Thirty years ago every socialist was convinced that the approaching war of the great capitalist powers would mean the final catastrophe of capitalism and would be succeeded by the proletarian revolution. Even when the war did break out and the socialist and labor movement collapsed as a revolutionary factor, the hopes of the revolutionary workers ran high. Even then they were sure that the world revolution would follow in the wake of the world war. And indeed it came. Like a bright meteor the Russian revolution flared up and shone all over the earth, and in all the countries the workers rose and began to move.

Only a few years alter it became clear that the revolution was decaying, that social convulsions were decreasing, that the capitalist order was gradually being restored. Today the revolutionary workers' movement is at its lowest ebb and capitalism is more powerful than ever. Once again a great war has come, and again the thoughts of workers and communists turn to the question: will it affect the capitalistic system to such a degree that a workers revolution will arise out of it? Will the hope of a successful struggle for freedom of the working class come true this time?

It is clear that we cannot hope to get an answer to this question so long as we do not understand why the revolutionary movements after 1918 failed. Only by investigating all the forces that were then at work can we get a clear insight into the causes of that failure. So we must turn our attention to what happened twenty years ago in the workers' movement of the world.

II.

The growth of the workers movement was not the only important nor even the most important fact in the history of the past century. Of primary importance was the growth of capitalism itself. It grew not only in intensity—through concentration of capital, the increasing perfection of industrial techniques, the increase of productivity—but also in extensity. From the first centers of industry and commerce—England, France, America and Germany—capitalism began to invade foreign countries, and now is conquering the whole earth. In former centuries foreign continents were subdued to be exploited as colonies. But at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries we see a higher form of conquest. These continents were assimilated by capitalism; they became themselves capitalistic. This most important process, that went on with increasing rapidity in the last century, meant a fundamental change in their economic structure. In short, there was the basis of a series of world-wide revolutions.

The central countries of developed capitalism, with the middle class—the bourgeoisie—as the ruling class, were formerly surrounded by a fringe of other, less developed countries. Here the social structure was still entirely agrarian and more-or-less feudal; the large plains were cultivated by farmers who were exploited by landowners and stood in continuous, more-or-less open struggle against them and the reigning autocrats. In the case of the colonies this internal pressure was intensified through exploitation by European colonial capital that made the landowners and kings its agents. In other cases this stronger exploitation by European capital was brought about by financial loans of governments, which laid heavy taxes upon the farmers. Railways, introducing the factory products that destroyed the old home industries and carried away raw material and food, were built. This gradually drew the farmers into

world commerce and aroused in them the desire to become free producers for the market. Factories were constructed; a class of business men and dealers developed in the towns who felt the necessity of better government for their interest. Young people, studying at western universities, became the revolutionary spokesmen of these tendencies. they formulated these tendencies in theoretical programs, advocating chiefly national freedom and independence, a responsible democratic government, civil rights and liberties, in order that they may find their useful place as officials and politicians in a modern state.

This development in the capitalistic world proper took place simultaneously with the development of the workers' movement within the central countries of big capitalism. Here then were two revolutionary movements, not only parallel and simultaneous, but also with many points of contact. they had a common foe, capitalism, that in the form of industrial capitalism exploited the workers, and in the form of colonial and financial capitalism exploited the farmers in the Eastern and colonial countries and sustained these despotic rulers. the revolutionary groups from these countries found understanding and assistance only from the socialist workers of western Europe. So they called themselves socialists too. the old illusions that middle class revolutions would bring freedom and equality to the entire population were reborn,

In reality there was a deep and fundamental difference between these two kinds of revolutionary aims, the so-called Western and eastern. The proletarian revolution can be the result only of the highest development of capitalism. It puts an end to capitalism. the revolutions in the eastern countries were the consequences of the beginning of capitalism in these countries. Viewed thus, they resemble the middle class revolutions in the Western countries and—with due consideration for the fact that their special character must somewhat different in different countries- they must be regarded as middle class revolutions. Though there was not such a numerous middle class of artisans, petty bourgeois and wealthy peasants as there was in the French and the English revolutions (because in the East, capitalism came suddenly, with a smaller number of big factories) still the general character is analogous. Here also we have the awakening out of the provincial view of an agrarian village to the consciousness of a nation-wide community and to interest in the whole world; the

rising of individualism that frees itself from the old group bonds; the growth of energy to win personal power and wealth; the liberation of the mind from old superstitions, and the desire for knowledge as a means of progress. All this is the mental equipment necessary to bring mankind from the slow life of pre-capitalist conditions into the rapid industrial and economic progress that later on will open the way for communism.

The general character of a proletarian revolution must be quite different. Instead of reckless fighting for personal interests there must be a common action for the interests of the class community. A worker, a single person, is powerless; only as part of his class, as a member of a strongly connected economic group can he get power. Workers individualities are disciplined into line by their habit of working and fighting together. Their minds must be freed from social superstitions and they must see as a commonplace truth that once they are strongly united that they can produce abundance and liberate society from misery and want. This is part of the mental equipment necessary to bring mankind from class exploitation, the misery, the mutual destruction of capitalism into communism itself.

Thus the two kinds of revolution are as widely different as are the beginning and end of capitalism. We can see this clearly now, thirty years later. we can understand too, how at the time they could be considered not only as allies, but were thrown together as two sides of the same great world-revolution. The great day was supposed to be near; the working class, with its large socialist parties and still larger unions, would soon conquer power. And then at the same time, with the power of western capitalism breaking down, all the colonies and eastern countries would be freed from western domination and take up their own national life.

Another reason for confusing these different social aims was that at that time the minds of the western workers were entirely occupied by reformist ideas about reforming capitalism into the democratic forms of its beginning and only a few among them realized the meaning of a proletarian revolution.

III.

The world war of 1914-18, with its utter destruction of productive forces, cut deep furrows through the social structure, especially of central and eastern Europe. emperors disappeared, old out-moded governments were overthrown, social forces from below were loosened, different classes of different peoples, in a series of revolutionary movements, tried to win power and to realize their class aims.

In the highly industrialized countries the class struggle of the workers was already the dominating factor of history. Now these workers had gone through a world war. They learned that capitalism not only lays claim on their working power, but upon their lives too; completely, body and soul, they are owned by capital. The destruction and impoverishment of the productive apparatus, the misery and privation suffered during the war, the disappointment and distress after the peace brought waves of unrest and rebelliousness over all participating countries. Because Germany had lost, the rebellion here of the workers was greatest. In the place of pre-war conservatism, there arose a new spirit in the German workers, compounded of courage, energy, yearnings for freedom and for revolutionary struggle against capitalism. It was only a beginning but it was the first beginning of a proletarian revolution.

In the eastern countries of Europe the class struggle had a different composition. the land owning nobility was dispossessed; the farmers seized the land; a class of small or middle-sized free landowners arose. Former revolutionary conspirators became leaders and ministers and generals in the new national states. These revolutions were middle-class revolutions and as such indicated the beginning of an unlimited development of capitalism and industry.

In Russia this revolution went deeper than anywhere else. Because it destroyed the Czarist world power which for a century had been a dominating power in Europe and the most hated enemy of all democracy and socialism, the Russian revolution led all the revolutionary movements in Europe. Its leader had been associated for many years with the socialist leaders of Western Europe just as the Czar had been the ally of the English and French governments. It is true that the chief social contents of the Russian Revolution—the land seizures by the peasants and the smashing of the autocracy and nobility—show it to be a middle-class revolution and the Bolsheviks themselves accentuated this character by often comparing themselves with the jacobins of the French Revolution.

But the workers in the west, themselves full of traditions of petty bourgeois freedom, did not consider this foreign to them. And the Russian revolution did more than simply rouse their admiration; it showed them an example in methods of action. It's power in decisive moments was the power of spontaneous mass action of the industrial workers in the big towns. Out of these actions the Russian workers also built up that form of organization most appropriate to independent action—the soviets or councils. Thus they became the guides and teachers of the workers in other countries.

When a year later, November 1918, the German empire collapsed, the appeal to world revolution issued by the Russian Bolsheviks was hailed and welcomed by the foremost revolutionary groups in Western Europe. these groups, calling themselves communists, were so strongly impressed by the proletarian character of the revolutionary struggle in Russia that they overlooked the fact that, economically, Russia stood only at the threshold of capitalism, and that the proletarian centers were only small islands in the ocean of primitive peasantry. Moreover they reasoned that when a world revolution came, Russia would be only a world-province—the place where the struggle started—whereas the more advanced countries of big capitalism would soon take the lead and determine the world's real course.

But the first rebellious movement among the German workers was beaten down. It was only an advanced minority that took part; the great mass held aloof, nursing the illusion that quiet and peace were now possible. Against these rebels stood a coalition of the Social-Democratic party, whose leaders occupied the government seats, and the old governing classes, bourgeoisie and army officers. While the former lulled the masses into inactivity, the latter organized armed bands that crushed the rebellious movement and murdered the revolutionary leaders, Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

The Russian revolution, through fear, had aroused the bourgeoisie to greater energy than it had aroused the proletariat through hope. Though, for the moment, the political organization of the bourgeoisie had collapsed, it's real material and spiritual power was enormous. The socialist leadership did nothing to weaken this power; they feared the proletarian revolution no less than the bourgeoisie did. They did everything to restore the capitalist order, in which, for the moment, they were ministers and presidents.

This did not mean that the proletarian revolution in Germany was a complete failure. Only the first attack, the first rebellion had failed. The military collapse had not led directly to proletarian rule. The real power of the working class—clear consciousness on the part of the masses of their social position and the necessity for fighting, eager activity in all these hundreds of thousands, enthusiasm, solidarity and strong unity in action, awareness of the supreme aim: to take the means of production in their own hands—had to come up and grow gradually in any case. So much misery and crisis was threatening in the exhausted, shattered and impoverished post-war society that new fights were bound to come.

In all capitalist countries, in England, France, America as well as Germany, revolutionary groups arose among the workers in 1919. They published papers and pamphlets, they showed their fellow workers new facts, new conditions and new methods of fighting, and they found a good hearing among the alarmed masses. They pointed to the Russian revolution as their great example, it's methods of mass action and it's soviet or council form of organization. They organized into communist parties and groups, associating themselves with the Bolshevik, the Russian Communist party. Thus the campaign for world revolution was launched.

IV.

Soon, however, these groups became aware with increasingly painful surprise that under the name of communism other principles and ideas than their own were being propagated from Moscow. they pointed to the Russian Soviets as the worker's new organs for self-rule in production. But gradually it became known that the Russian factories were again ruled by directors appointed from above, and that, the important political position had been seized by the Communist Party. These Western groups promulgated the dictatorship of the proletariat, which in opposition to the parliamentary democracy embodied the principle of self-rule of the working class as the political form of the proletarian revolution.

But the spokesmen and leaders which Moscow sent to Germany and Western Europe proclaimed that the dictatorship of the proletariat was embodied in the dictatorship of the Communist Party.

The Western Communists saw as their chief task the enlightening of workers concerning the role of the socialist party and the unions. They pointed out that in these organizations the actions and decisions of the leaders were substituted for actions and decisions of the workers, and that the leaders were never able to wage a revolutionary fight because a revolution consists in this very self-action of the workers; that the trade union actions and parliamentary practice are good in a young and quiet capitalist world, but are entirely unfit for revolutionary times, where, by diverting the attention of the workers from important aims and goals and directing them to unreal reforms, they work as hostile, reactionary forces; that all the power of these organizations, in the hands of leaders, is used against the revolution. Moscow, however, demanded that communist parties should take part in parliamentary elections as well as in all union work. The Western communists preached independence, development of initiative, self-reliance, the ejection of dependence on and belief in leaders. But Moscow preached, in ever stronger terms that obedience to the leaders was the chief virtue of the true communist.

Western communists did not immediately realize how fundamental was the contradiction. They saw that Russia, attacked from all sides by counter-revolutionary armies, which were supported by the English and French governments, needed sympathy and assistance from the western working classes; not from small groups that fiercely attacked the old organizations, but from the old mass organizations themselves. They tried to convince Lenin and the Russian leaders that they were ill-informed about the real conditions and the future of the proletarian movement in the West. In vain, of course. They did not see, at the time, that in reality it was the conflict of two concepts of revolution, the middle class revolution and the proletarian revolution.

It was only natural that Lenin and his comrades were utterly unable to see that the impending proletarian revolution of the West was quite a different thing from their Russian revolution. Lenin did not know capitalism from within, at its highest development, as a world of enlarging proletarian masses, moving up to the time when

they could seize power to lay hands on a potentially perfect production apparatus. Lenin knew capitalism only from without, as a foreign, robbing, devastating usurer, such as the western financial and colonial capital must have appeared to him in Russia and other Asiatic countries. His idea was that in order to conquer, the Western masses had only to join the anti-capitalistic power established in Russia; they should not obstinately try to seek other ways but were to follow the Russian example. Hence flexible tactics were needed in the west to win the great masses of socialist and union members as soon as possible, to induce them to leave their own leaders and parties that were bound to their national governments, and to join the communist parties, without the necessity of changing their own ideas and convictions. So Moscow tactics followed logically from the basic misunderstanding.

And what had Moscow propagated had by far the greatest weight. it had the authority of a victorious against a defeated (German) revolution. Will you be wiser than your teachers? The moral authority of Russian Communism was so undisputed that even a year later the excluded German opposition asked to be admitted as a 'sympathizing' adherent to the Third International. But besides moral authority, the Russians had the material authority of money behind them. An enormous amount of literature, easily paid for by Moscow subsidies, flooded the western countries: weekly papers, pamphlets, exciting news about successes in Russia, scientific reviews, all explaining Moscow's views. Against this overwhelming offensive of noisy propaganda, the small groups of Western communists, with their lack of financial means, had no chance. So the new and sprouting recognition of the conditions necessary for revolution were beaten down and strangled by Moscow's powerful weapons. Moreover Russian subsidies were used to support a number of salaried party secretaries, who, under threat of being fired, naturally turned into defenders of Russian tactics.

When it became apparent that even all this was not sufficient, Lenin himself wrote his well known pamphlet "Left-Wing Communism _ An Infantile Disorder." Though his arguments showed only his lack of understanding of western conditions, the fact that Lenin, with his still unbroken authority, so openly took sides in the internal differences, had a great influence on a number of western communists. And yet, notwithstanding all this, the majority of the German communist party stuck to the

knowledge they had gained through their experience of proletarian struggles. So at their next congress at Heidelberg, Dr. Levi, by some dirty tricks, had first to divide the majority—to excluded one part, and then to outvote the other part—in order to win a formal and apparent victory for the Moscow tactics.

The excluded groups went on for some years disseminating their ideas. But their views were drowned out by the enormous noise of Moscow propaganda, they had no appreciable influence on the political events of the next years. They could only maintain and further develop, by mutual theoretical discussions and some publications, their understanding of the conditions of proletarian revolution and keep them alive for times to come.

The beginnings of a proletarian revolution in the West had been killed by the powerful middle class revolution of the East.

V.

Is it correct to call this Russian revolution that destroyed the bourgeoisie and introduced socialism a middle class revolution?

Some years afterwards in the big towns of poverty-stricken Russia special shops with plate glass fronts and exquisite, expensive delicacies appeared, especially for the rich, and luxurious night clubs were opened, frequented by gentlemen and ladies in evening dress—chiefs of departments, high officials, directors of factories and committees. they were stared at in surprise by the poor in the streets, and the disillusioned communists said: “There go the new bourgeoisie.” They were wrong. It was not a new bourgeoisie; but it was a new ruling class. When a new ruling class comes up, disappointed revolutionaries always call it by the name of the former ruling class. In the French revolution, the rising capitalists were called “the new aristocracy.” Here in Russia the new class firmly seated in the saddle as masters of the production apparatus was the bureaucracy. It had to play in Russia the same role that in the West the middle class, the bourgeoisie, had played: to develop the country by industrialization from primitive conditions to high productivity.

Just as in Western Europe the bourgeoisie had risen out of the common people of artisans and peasants, including some aristocrats, by ability, luck and cunning, so the Russian ruling bureaucracy had risen from the working class and the peasants (including former officials) by ability, luck and cunning. The difference is that in the USSR they did not own the means of production individually but collectively; so their mutual competition, too, must go on in other forms. This means a fundamental difference in the economic system; collective, planned production and exploitation instead of individual haphazard production and exploitation; state capitalism instead of private capitalism. For the working masses, however, the difference is slight, not fundamental; once more they are exploited by a middle class. But now this exploitation is intensified by the dictatorial form of government, by the total lack of all those liberties which in the West render fighting against the bourgeoisie possible.

This character of modern Russia determined the character of the fight of the Third International. Alternating red-hot utterances with the flattest parliamentary opportunism, or combining both, the 3rd International tried to win the adherence of the working masses of the West. It exploited the class antagonism of the workers against capitalism to win power for the Party. It caught up all the revolutionary enthusiasm of youth and all the rebellious impulses of the masses, prevented them from developing into a growing proletarian power, and wasted them in worthless political adventures. It hoped thus to get power over the Western bourgeoisie; but it was not able to do so, because understanding of the inner-most character of big capitalism was totally lacking. This capitalism cannot be conquered by an outside force; it can be destroyed only from within, by the proletarian revolution. Class domination can be destroyed only by the initiative and insight of a self-reliant proletarian class: party discipline and obedience of the masses to their leaders can only lead to a new class domination. Indeed in Italy and Germany this activity of the Communist Party prepared the way for fascism.

The Communist Parties that belong to the Third International are entirely—materially and mentally—dependent on Russia, are the obedient servants of the rulers of Russia. Hence, when Russia, after 1933, felt that it must line up with France against Germany, all former intransigence was forgotten. The Comintern became the champion of “democracy” and united not only with socialists but even with some

capitalist parties into the so-called Popular Front. Gradually its power to attract, through pretending that it represented the old revolutionary traditions, began to disappear; its proletarian following diminished.

But at the same time, its influence on the intellectual middle classes in Europe and America began to grow. A large number of books and reviews in all fields of social thought were issued by more or less camouflaged C.P. publishing houses in England, France and America. Some of them were valuable historical studies or popular compilations; but mostly they were worthless expositions of so-called Leninism. All this was literature evidently not intended for workers, but for intellectuals, in order to win them over to Russian communism.

The new approach met with some success. The ex-soviet diplomat Alexander Barmine tells in his memoirs how he perceived with surprise in western Europe that just when he and other Bolshevists began to have their doubts as to the outcome of the Russian revolution, the western middle class intellectuals, misled by the lying praises of the successes of the Five Year Plan, began to feel a sympathetic interest in Communism. The reason is clear: now that Russia was obviously not a worker's state any more, they felt that this state-capitalistic rule of a bureaucracy came nearer to their own ideals of rule by the intelligentsia than did the European and American rule of big finance. Now that a new ruling minority over and above the masses was established in Russia, the Communist Party, its foreign servant had to turn to those classes from which, when private capitalism collapsed, new rulers for exploiting the masses could arise.

Of course, to succeed in this way, they needed a worker's revolution to put down capitalist power. Then they must try to divert it from its own aims and make it an instrument for their party rule. So we see what kind of difficulties the future working class revolution may have to face. It will have to fight not only the bourgeoisie but the enemies of the bourgeoisie as well. It has not only to throw off the yoke of its present masters; it must also keep from those who would try to be its future masters.

The world has now entered into its new great imperialistic war. Cautious though the warring governments may be in handling the economic and social forces and in trying to prevent hell from breaking loose entirely, they will not be able to hold back a social catastrophe. With the general exhaustion and impoverishment, most severe on the European continent, with the spirit of fierce aggressiveness still mighty, violent class struggles will accompany the unavoidable new adjustments of the system of production. Then, with private capitalism broken down, the issues will be planned economy, state capitalism, worker's exploitation on the one side; worker's freedom and mastery over production on the other.

The working class is going into this war burdened with the capitalistic tradition of Party leadership and the phantom tradition of a revolution of the Russian kind. The tremendous pressure of this war will drive the workers into spontaneous resistance against their governments and into the beginnings of new forms of real fight. When it happens that Russia enters the field against the Western powers, it will reopen its old box of slogans and make an appeal to the workers for 'world revolution against capitalism' in an attempt to get the rebellious-minded workers on its side. So Bolshevism would have its chance once more. But this would be no solution for the problems of the workers. When the general misery increases and conflicts between classes become fiercer, the working class must, out of its own necessity, seize the means of production and find ways to free itself from the influence of Bolshevism.

Anton Pannekoek