

Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution (1939)

Leon Trotsky
21 October 2008

Written as an appendix to Trotsky's projected biography of Lenin, and included in his unfinished biography of Stalin, this work contrasts the perspectives of the Russian Revolution advanced by Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky. He outlines the Menshevik position ("The social relations of Russia have ripened only for the bourgeois revolution"); Lenin's pre-1917 theory of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" (which Lenin discarded when he wrote his April Theses in 1917); and his own theory of permanent revolution, "the original sin of Trotskyism." He also traces Stalin's attitude to the debates as they unfolded, and shows how the theory of "socialism in one country" was a bureaucratic reaction against the October Revolution.

* * *

The revolution of 1905 became not only "the dress rehearsal" of 1917, but also the laboratory from which emerged all the basic groupings of Russian political thought and where all tendencies and shadings within Russian Marxism took shape or were outlined. The center of the disputes and differences was naturally occupied by the question of the historical character of the Russian revolution and its future paths of development. In and of itself this war of conceptions and prognoses does not relate directly to the biography of Stalin, who took no independent part in it. Those few propaganda articles which he wrote on the subject are without the slightest theoretical interest. Scores of Bolsheviks, with pens in hand, popularized the very same ideas and did it much more ably. A critical exposition of the revolutionary conception of Bolshevism should, in the very nature of things, have entered into a biography of Lenin. However, theories have a fate of their own. If in the period of the first revolution and thereafter up to 1923, when revolutionary doctrines were elaborated and realized, Stalin held no independent position then, from 1924 on, the situation changes abruptly. There opens up the epoch of bureaucratic reaction and of drastic reviews of the past. The film of the revolution is run off in reverse. Old doctrines are submitted to new appraisals or new interpretations. Quite unexpectedly, at first sight, the center of attention is held by the conception of "the permanent revolution" as the fountainhead of all the blunderings of "Trotskyism." For a number of years thereafter, the criticism of this conception constitutes the main content of the theoretical – *sit venio verbo* – work of Stalin and his collaborators. It may be said that the whole of Stalinism, taken on the theoretical plane, grew out of the criticism of the theory of the permanent revolution as it was formulated in 1905. To this extent the exposition of this theory, as distinct from the theories of the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, cannot fail to enter into this book, even if in the form of an appendix.

Russia's Combined Development

The development of Russia is characterized first of all by backwardness.

Historical backwardness does not, however, signify a simple reproduction of the development of advanced countries, with merely a delay of one or two centuries. It engenders an entirely new "combined" social formation in which the latest conquests of capitalist technique and structure root themselves into relations of feudal and pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and subjecting them and creating a peculiar interrelationship of classes. The same thing applies in the sphere of ideas. Precisely because of her historical tardiness, Russia turned out to be the only European country where Marxism as a doctrine and the Social Democracy as a party attained powerful development even before the bourgeois revolution. It is only natural that the problem of the correlation between the struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism was submitted to the most profound theoretical analysis precisely in Russia.

Idealist-democrats, chiefly the Narodniki [Populists], refused superstitiously to recognize the impending revolution as bourgeois. They labelled it "democratic", seeking by means of a neutral political formula to mask its social content – not only from others but also from themselves. But in the struggle against Populism, Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism, established as long ago as the eighties of the last century that Russia had no reason whatever to expect a privileged path of development; that like other "profane" nations, she would have to pass through the purgatory of capitalism and that precisely along this path she would acquire political freedom indispensable for the further struggle of the proletariat for socialism. Plekhanov not only separated the bourgeois revolution as a task from the socialist revolution – which he postponed to the indefinite future – but he depicted for each of these entirely different combinations of forces. Political freedom was to be achieved by the proletariat in alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie; after many decades and on a higher level of capitalist development, the proletariat would then carry out the socialist revolution in direct struggle against the bourgeoisie.

"To the Russian intellectual..." Lenin wrote at the end of 1904, "it always seems that to recognize our revolution as bourgeois is to discolor it, degrade it, debase it ... For the proletarian, the struggle for political freedom and for a democratic republic in a bourgeois society is simply one of the necessary stages in the struggle for the social revolution." (Lenin, *Collected Works* [CW], vol. 8, p. 24).

"Marxists are absolutely convinced," he wrote in 1905, "of the bourgeois character of the Russian revolution. What does this mean? This means that those democratic transformations... which have become indispensable for Russia do not, in and of themselves, signify the undermining of capitalism, the undermining of bourgeois rule, but on the contrary they clear the ground, for the first time and in a real way, for a broad and rapid, European, and not an Asiatic, development of capitalism. They will make possible for the first time the rule of the bourgeoisie as a class..." (CW, vol. 9, p. 48).

"We cannot jump out of the bourgeois-democratic framework of the Russian revolution," he insisted, "but we can extend this framework to a colossal degree." (Ibid., p. 52).

That is to say, we can create within bourgeois society much more favorable conditions for the future struggle of the proletariat. Within these limits, Lenin followed Plekhanov. The bourgeois character of the revolution served both factions of the Russian Social Democracy as their starting point.

It is quite natural that under these conditions, Koba (Stalin) did not go in his propaganda beyond those popular formulas which constitute the common property of Bolsheviks as well as Mensheviks.

“A Constituent Assembly,” he wrote in January 1905, “elected on the basis of universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage – this is what we must now fight for! Only such an Assembly will give us the democratic republic we so urgently need in our struggle for socialism.” (Stalin, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 80). The bourgeois republic as an arena for a protracted class struggle for the socialist goal – such is the perspective.

In 1907, i.e., after innumerable discussions in the press both in Petersburg and abroad, and after a serious testing of theoretical prognoses in the experiences of the first revolution, Stalin wrote:

“That our revolution is bourgeois, that it must conclude by destroying the feudal and not the capitalist order, that it can be crowned only by a democratic republic – on this, it seems, all are agreed in our party.” (*Works*, vol. 2, p. 61).

Stalin spoke not of what the revolution begins with, but of what it ends with, and he limited it in advance and quite categorically to “only a democratic republic.” We would seek in vain in his writings of that time for even a hint of any perspective of a socialist revolution in connection with a democratic overturn. This remained his position even at the beginning of the February revolution in 1917, up to Lenin’s arrival in Petersburg.

The Menshevik View

For Plekhanov, Axelrod and the leaders of Menshevism in general, the sociological characterization of the revolution as bourgeois was valuable politically above all because in advance it prohibited provoking the bourgeoisie by the red specter of socialism and “repelling” it into the camp of reaction. “The social relations of Russia have ripened only for the bourgeois revolution,” said the chief tactician of Menshevism, Axelrod, at the Unity Congress. “In the face of the universal deprivation of political rights in our country there cannot even be talk of a direct battle between the proletariat and other classes for political power ... The proletariat is fighting for conditions of bourgeois development. The objective historical conditions make it the destiny of our proletariat to inescapably collaborate with the bourgeoisie in the struggle against the common enemy.” The content of the Russian revolution was thereby limited in advance to those transformations which are compatible with the interests and views of the liberal bourgeoisie.

It is precisely at this point that the basic disagreement between the two factions begins. Bolshevism absolutely refused to recognize that the Russian bourgeoisie was capable of leading its own revolution to the end. With infinitely greater power and consistency than Plekhanov, Lenin advanced the agrarian question as the central problem of the democratic overturn in Russia. “The crux of the Russian revolution,” he repeated, “is the *agrarian* (land) question. Conclusions concerning the defeat or victory of the revolution must be based ... on the calculation of the position of the masses in the struggle for land” (CW, vol. 11, pp. 366-367). Together with Plekhanov, Lenin viewed the peasantry as a petty-bourgeois class; the peasant land program as a program of bourgeois progress. “Nationalization is a bourgeois measure,” he insisted at the Unity Congress. “It will give an impulse to the development of capitalism; it

will sharpen the class struggle, strengthen the mobilization of the land, cause an influx of capital into agriculture, lower the price of grain.” Notwithstanding the indubitable bourgeois character of the agrarian revolution the Russian bourgeoisie remains, however, hostile to the expropriation of landed estates and precisely for this reason strives toward a compromise with the monarchy on the basis of a constitution on the Prussian pattern. To Plekhanov’s idea of an alliance between the proletariat and the liberal bourgeoisie, Lenin counterposed the idea of an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry. The task of the revolutionary collaboration of these two classes he proclaimed to be the establishment of a “democratic dictatorship,” as the only means of radically cleansing Russia of feudal rubbish, of creating a free farmers’ system and clearing the road for the development of capitalism along American and not Prussian lines.

The victory of the revolution, he wrote, can be crowned “only by a dictatorship because the accomplishment of transformations immediately and urgently needed by the proletariat and the peasantry will evoke desperate resistance from the landlords, the big bourgeoisie and tsarism. Without a dictatorship it will be impossible to break the resistance, and repel the counter-revolutionary attempts. But this will, of course, be not a socialist but a democratic dictatorship. It will not be able to touch (without a whole series of transitional stages of revolutionary development) the foundations of capitalism. It will be able, in the best case, to bring about a radical redivision of landed property in favor of the peasantry, introduce a consistent and full democratism up to establishing a republic, eradicate all Asiatic and feudal features not only from the day-to-day life of the village but also of the factory, lay the foundation for a serious improvement of workers’ conditions and raise their living standards and, last but not least, carry the revolutionary conflagration into Europe.” (CW, vol. 9, pp. 56-57).

Vulnerability of Lenin's Position

Lenin’s conception represented an enormous step forward insofar as it proceeded not from constitutional reforms but from the agrarian overturn as the central task of the revolution and singled out the only realistic combination of social forces for its accomplishment. The weak point of Lenin’s conception, however, was the internally contradictory idea of “the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.” Lenin himself underscored the fundamental limitation of this “dictatorship” when he openly called it *bourgeois*. By this he meant to say that for the sake of preserving its alliance with the peasantry the proletariat would in the coming revolution have to forego the direct posing of the socialist tasks. But this would signify the renunciation by the proletariat of its *own* dictatorship. Consequently, the gist of the matter involved the dictatorship of the peasantry even if with the participation of the workers. On certain occasions Lenin said just this. For example, at the Stockholm Congress, in refuting Plekhanov who came out against the “utopia” of the seizure of power, Lenin said: “What program is under discussion? The agrarian. Who is assumed to seize power under this program? The revolutionary peasantry. Is Lenin mixing up the power of the proletariat with this peasantry?” No, he says referring to himself: Lenin sharply differentiates the socialist power of the proletariat from the bourgeois democratic power of the peasantry. “But how,” he exclaims again, “is a victorious peasant revolution possible without the seizure of power by the revolutionary peasantry?” In this polemical formula, Lenin reveals with special clarity the vulnerability of his position.

The peasantry is dispersed over the surface of an enormous country whose key junctions are the cities. The peasantry itself is incapable of

even formulating its own interests inasmuch as in each district these appear differently. The economic link between the provinces is created by the market and the railways, but both the market and the railways are in the hands of the cities. In seeking to tear itself away from the restrictions of the village and to generalize its own interests, the peasantry inescapably falls into political dependence upon the city. Finally, the peasantry is heterogeneous in its social relations as well: the kulak stratum naturally seeks to swing it to an alliance with the urban bourgeoisie; while the lower strata of the village pull to the side of the urban workers. Under these conditions the peasantry as such is completely incapable of conquering power.

True enough, in ancient China, revolutions placed the peasantry in power or, more precisely, placed the military leaders of peasant uprisings in power. This led each time to a redivision of the land and the establishment of a new "peasant" dynasty, whereupon history would begin from the beginning: with a new concentration of lands, a new aristocracy, new usury, and a new uprising. So long as the revolution preserves its purely peasant character, society is incapable of emerging from these hopeless and vicious circles. This was the basis of ancient Asiatic history, including ancient Russian history. In Europe, beginning with the close of the Middle Ages, each victorious peasant uprising placed in power not a peasant government but a left urban party. To put it more precisely, a peasant uprising turned out victorious exactly to the degree to which it succeeded in strengthening the position of the revolutionary section of the urban population. In bourgeois Russia of the twentieth century, there could not even be talk of the seizure of power by the revolutionary peasantry.

Attitude Toward Liberalism

The attitude toward the liberal bourgeoisie was, as has been said, the touchstone of the differentiation between revolutionists and opportunists in the ranks of the social democrats. How far could the Russian revolution go? What would be the character of the future revolutionary Provisional Government? What tasks would confront it? And in what order? These questions with all their importance could be correctly posed only on the basis of the fundamental character of the policy of the proletariat, and the character of this policy was in turn determined first of all by the attitude toward the liberal bourgeoisie. Plekhanov obviously and stubbornly shut his eyes to the fundamental conclusion of the political history of the 19th century: Whenever the proletariat comes forward as an independent force, the bourgeoisie shifts over to the camp of the counter-revolution. The more audacious the mass struggle, the more rapid is the reactionary degeneration of liberalism. No one has yet invented a means for paralyzing the workings of the law of the class struggle.

"We must cherish the support of non-proletarian parties," repeated Plekhanov during the years of the first revolution, "and not repel them from us by tactless actions." By monotonous preachments of this sort, the philosopher of Marxism indicated that the living dynamics of society was unattainable to him. "Tactlessness" can repel an individual sensitive intellectual. Classes and parties are attracted or repelled by social interests. "It can be stated with certainty," replied Lenin to Plekhanov, "that the liberals and landlords will forgive you millions of 'tactless acts' but will not forgive you a summons to take away the land." And not only the landlords. The tops of the bourgeoisie are bound up with the landowners by the unity of property interests, and more narrowly by the system of banks. The tops of the petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia are materially and morally dependent upon the big and middle proprietors; they all fear the independent movement of the masses. Meanwhile, in

order to overthrow tsarism, it was necessary to rouse tens upon tens of millions of oppressed to a heroic, self-renouncing, unfettered revolutionary assault that would halt at nothing. The masses can rise to an insurrection only under the banner of their own interests and consequently in the spirit of irreconcilable hostility toward the exploiting classes, beginning with the landlords. The "repulsion" of the oppositional bourgeoisie away from the revolutionary workers and peasants was therefore the immanent law of the revolution itself and could not be avoided by means of diplomacy or "tact."

Each new month confirmed the Leninist appraisal of liberalism. Contrary to the best hopes of the Mensheviks, the Cadets not only did not prepare to take their place at the head of the "bourgeois" revolution, but, on the contrary, they found their historical mission more and more in the struggle against it.

After the crushing of the December uprising, the liberals, who occupied the political limelight thanks to the ephemeral Duma, sought with all their might to justify themselves before the monarchy and explain away their insufficiently active counter-revolutionary conduct in the autumn of 1905 when danger threatened the most sacred props of "culture." The leader of the liberals, Miliukov, who conducted the behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Winter Palace, quite correctly proved in the press that at the end of 1905 the Cadets could not even show themselves before the masses. "Those who now chide the (Cadet) party," he wrote, "because it did not protest at the time by arranging meetings against the revolutionary illusions of Trotskyism ... simply do not understand or do not remember the moods prevailing at the time among the democratic public gathering at meetings." By the "illusions of Trotskyism" the liberal leader understood the independent policy of the proletariat which attracted to the soviets the sympathies of the nethermost layers in the cities, of the soldiers, peasants, and all the oppressed, and which owing to this repelled the "educated" society. The evolution of the Mensheviks unfolded along parallel lines. They had to justify themselves more and more frequently before the liberals, because they had turned out in a bloc with Trotsky after October 1905. The explanations of Martov, the talented publicist of the Mensheviks, came down to this, that it was necessary to make concessions to the "revolutionary illusions" of the masses.

Stalin's Part in the Dispute

In Tiflis, the political groupings took shape on the same principled basis as in Petersburg. "To smash reaction," wrote the leader of the Caucasian Mensheviks, Zhordania, "to conquer and carry through the Constitution – this will depend upon the conscious unification and the striving for a single goal on the part of the forces of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie ... It is true that the peasantry will be drawn into the movement, investing it with an elemental character, but the decisive role will nevertheless be played by these two classes while the peasant movement will add grist to their mill." (*Sotsial-Demokrat*, ? 1, Tiflis, 7[20 April 1905]). Lenin mocked the fears of Zhordania that an irreconcilable policy toward the bourgeoisie would doom the workers to impotence. Zhordania "discusses the question of the possible isolation of the proletariat in a democratic overturn and *forgets* ... about the peasantry! Of all the possible allies of the proletariat he knows and is enamored of the landlord-liberals. And he does not know the peasants. And this in the Caucasus!" (CW, vol. 9, pp. 62-63). Lenin's objection, while correct in essence, simplifies the problem on one point. Zhordania did not "forget" about the peasantry and, as may be gathered from the hint of Lenin himself, could not have possibly forgotten about it in the Caucasus, where the peasantry was stormily rising at the time under the banner of the Mensheviks. Zhordania

saw in the peasantry, however, not so much a political ally as a historical battering ram which could and should be utilized by the bourgeoisie in alliance with the proletariat. He did not believe that the peasantry was capable of becoming a leading or even an independent force in the revolution, and in this he was not wrong; but he also did not believe that the proletariat was capable of leading the peasant uprising to victory – and in this was his fatal mistake. The Menshevik idea of the alliance of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie actually signified the subjection to the liberals of both the workers and the peasants. The reactionary utopianism of this program was determined by the fact that the far advanced dismemberment of the classes paralyzed the bourgeoisie in advance as a revolutionary factor. In this fundamental question, correctness was wholly on the side of Bolshevism: the chase after an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie would inescapably counterpose the Social Democracy to the revolutionary movement of workers and peasants. In 1905 the Mensheviks still lacked courage to draw all the necessary conclusions from their theory of the “bourgeois” revolution. In 1917 they drew their ideas to their logical conclusion and broke their heads.

On the question of the attitude to the liberals, Stalin stood during the years of the first revolution on Lenin’s side. It must be stated that during this period even the majority of the rank-and-file Mensheviks were closer to Lenin than to Plekhanov on issues touching the oppositional bourgeoisie. A contemptuous attitude to the liberals was the literary tradition of intellectual radicalism. One would however labor in vain to seek from Koba an independent contribution on this question, an analysis of the Caucasian social relations, new arguments or even a new formulation of old arguments. The leader of the Caucasian Mensheviks, Zhordania, was far more independent in relation to Plekhanov than Stalin was in relation to Lenin. “In vain the Messrs. Liberals are trying,” wrote Koba after January 9, “to save the tottering throne of the Tsar. In vain are they extending a helping hand to the Tsar!” (Stalin, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 78).

“On the other hand, the aroused popular masses are preparing for *revolution* and not for reconciliation with the Tsar ... Yes, gentlemen, in vain are your efforts! The Russian revolution is inevitable. It is as inevitable as the inevitable rising of the sun! Can you stop the rising sun?” (Ibid., p. 79). And so forth and so on.

Higher than this Koba did not rise. Two and a half years later, in repeating Lenin almost literally, he wrote: “The Russian liberal bourgeoisie is anti-revolutionary. It cannot be the motive force, nor, all the less so, the leader of the revolution. It is the sworn enemy of the revolution and a stubborn struggle must be waged against it” (Vol. 2, p. 64). However, it was precisely in this fundamental question that Stalin was to undergo a complete metamorphosis in the next ten years and was to meet the February revolution of 1917 already as a partisan of a bloc with the liberal bourgeoisie and, in accordance with this, as a champion of uniting with the Mensheviks into one party. Only Lenin on arriving from abroad put an abrupt end to the independent policy of Stalin which he called a mockery of Marxism.

On the Role of the Peasantry

The Populists saw in the workers and peasants simply “toilers” and “the exploited” who are all equally interested in socialism. Marxists regarded the peasant as a petty bourgeois who is capable of becoming a socialist only to the extent to which he ceases materially or spiritually to be a peasant. With the sentimentalism peculiar to them, the Populists perceived in this sociological characterization a moral slur against the peasantry. Along this line occurred for two generations the main struggle between

the revolutionary tendencies of Russia. To understand the future disputes between Stalinism and Trotskyism it is necessary once again to emphasize that, in accordance with the entire tradition of Marxism, Lenin never for a moment regarded the peasantry as a socialist ally of the proletariat. On the contrary, the impossibility of the socialist revolution in Russia was deduced by him precisely from the colossal preponderance of the peasantry. This idea runs through all his articles which touch directly or indirectly upon the agrarian question.

“We support the peasant movement,” wrote Lenin in September 1905, “to the extent that it is a revolutionary democratic movement. We are preparing (right now, and immediately) for a struggle with it to the extent that it will come forward as a reactionary, anti-proletarian movement. The entire gist of Marxism lies in this two-fold task...” (CW, vol. 9, pp. 235-236). Lenin saw the socialist ally in the Western proletariat and partly in the semi-proletarian elements in the Russian village but never in the peasantry as such. “From the beginning, we support to the very end, by means of all measures, up to confiscation,” he repeated with the insistence peculiar to him, “the peasant in general against the landlord, and later (and not even later but at the very same time) we support the proletariat against the peasant in general.”

“The peasantry will conquer in the bourgeois-democratic revolution,” he wrote in March 1906, “and with this it will completely exhaust its revolutionary spirit as the peasantry. The proletariat will conquer in the bourgeois-democratic revolution and only thereby will fully develop in a real way its genuine socialist revolutionary spirit” (CW, vol. 10, p. 259). “The movement of the peasantry,” he repeated in May of the same year, “is the movement of a different class. This is not a proletarian struggle, but a struggle of small proprietors; it is a struggle not against the foundations of capitalism but a struggle to purge them of all the remnants of feudalism” (CW, vol. 10, p. 411).

This viewpoint can be followed in Lenin from one article to the next, year by year, volume by volume. The language and examples vary, the basic thought remains the same. It could not have been otherwise. Had Lenin seen a *socialist* ally in the peasantry he would not have had the slightest ground for insisting upon the *bourgeois* character of the revolution and for limiting “the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” to purely democratic tasks. In those cases where Lenin accused the author of this book of “underestimating” the peasantry, he had in mind not at all my non-recognition of the socialist tendencies of the peasantry but, on the contrary, my inadequate – from Lenin’s viewpoint – recognition of the bourgeois-democratic independence of the peasantry, its ability to create its *own* power and thereby prevent the establishment of the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat.

The reevaluation of values on this question was opened up only in the years of Thermidorian reaction, the beginning of which coincided approximately with the illness and death of Lenin. Thenceforth the alliance of Russian workers and peasants was proclaimed to be, in and of itself, a sufficient guarantee against the dangers of restoration and an immutable pledge of the realization of socialism within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. Replacing the theory of international revolution by the theory of socialism in one country, Stalin began to designate the Marxist evaluation of the peasantry not otherwise than as “Trotskyism” and, moreover, not only in relation to the present but to the entire past.

It is, of course, possible to raise the question whether or not the classic Marxist view of the peasantry has been proven erroneous. This subject would lead us far beyond the limits of the present review. Suffice it to state here that Marxism has never invested its estimation of the peasantry as a nonsocialist class with an absolute and static character. Marx himself said that the peasant possesses not only superstitions but the ability to reason. In changing conditions the nature of the peasant himself changes. The regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat opened up very broad possibilities for influencing the peasantry and re-educating it. The limits

of these possibilities have not yet been exhausted by history.

Nevertheless, it is now already clear that the growing role of the state coercion in the USSR has not refuted but has confirmed fundamentally the attitude toward the peasantry which distinguished Russian Marxists from the Populists. However, whatever may be the situation in this respect today, after twenty years of the new regime, it remains indubitable that up to the October revolution, or more correctly up to 1924, no one in the Marxist camp – Lenin, least of all – saw in the peasantry a socialist factor of development. Without the aid of the proletarian revolution in the West, Lenin repeated, restoration in Russia was inevitable. He was not mistaken: the Stalinist bureaucracy is nothing else than the first phase of bourgeois restoration.

Trotsky Holds Third Position

We have analyzed above the points of departure of the two basic factions of the Russian Social Democracy. But alongside of them, already at the dawn of the first revolution, was formulated a third position which met with almost no recognition during those years but which we are obliged to set down here with the necessary completeness -- not only because it found its confirmation in the events of 1917, but especially because seven years after the October revolution, this conception, after being turned upside down, began to play a completely unforeseen role in the political evolution of Stalin and the whole Soviet bureaucracy.

At the beginning of 1905, a pamphlet by Trotsky was issued in Geneva. This pamphlet analyzed the political situation as it unfolded in the winter of 1904. The author arrived at the conclusion that the independent campaign of petitions and banquets by the liberals had exhausted all its possibilities; that the radical intelligentsia who had pinned their hopes upon the liberals had arrived in a blind alley together with the latter; that the peasant movement was creating favorable conditions for victory but was incapable of assuring it; that a decision could be reached only through the armed uprising of the proletariat; that the next phase on this path would be the general strike. The pamphlet was entitled "Before the Ninth of January," because it was written before the Bloody Sunday in Petersburg. The mighty strike wave which came after this date together with the initial armed clashes which supplemented this strike wave were an unequivocal confirmation of the strategic prognosis of this pamphlet.

The introduction to my work was written by Parvus, a Russian émigré, who had succeeded by that time in becoming a prominent German writer. Parvus was an exceptional creative personality capable of becoming infected with the ideas of others as well as of enriching others by his ideas. He lacked internal equilibrium and sufficient love for work to give the labor movement the contribution worthy of his talents as a thinker and writer. On my personal development he exercised undoubted influence, especially in regard to the social revolutionary understanding of our epoch. A few years prior to our first meeting, Parvus passionately defended the idea of a general strike in Germany; but the country was then passing through a prolonged industrial boom, the Social Democracy had adapted itself to the regime of the Hohenzollerns; the revolutionary propaganda of a foreigner met with nothing except ironical indifference. On becoming acquainted on the second day after the bloody events in Petersburg with my pamphlet, then in manuscript, Parvus was captured by the idea of the exceptional role which the proletariat of backward Russia was destined to play.

Those few days which we spent together in Munich were filled with conversations which clarified a good deal for both of us and which brought us personally closer together. The introduction which Parvus wrote at the time for the pamphlet has entered firmly into the history of

the Russian revolution. In a few pages he illuminated those social peculiarities of belated Russia which were, it is true, known previously but from which no one before him had drawn all the necessary conclusions.

Parvus wrote:

The political radicalism of Western Europe was, as is well known, based primarily on the petty bourgeoisie. These were the handicraft workers and, in general, that section of the bourgeoisie which had been caught up by the industrial development but was at the same time pushed aside by the capitalist class ... In Russia, during the pre-capitalist period, the cities developed more along Chinese than European lines. These were administrative centers, purely functionary in character, without the slightest political significance, while in terms of economic relations they served as trading centers, bazaars, for the surrounding landlord and peasant milieu. Their development was still very insignificant when it was halted by the capitalist process which began to create big cities after its own pattern, i.e., factory cities and centers of world trade ... The very same thing that hindered the development of petty-bourgeois democracy served to benefit the class consciousness of the proletariat in Russia, namely, the weak development of the handicraft form of production. The proletariat was immediately concentrated in the factories...

The peasants will be drawn into the movement in ever larger masses. But they are capable only of increasing the political anarchy in the country and, in this way, of weakening the government; they cannot compose a tightly welded revolutionary army. With the development of the revolution, therefore, an ever greater amount of political work will fall to the share of the proletariat. Along with this, its political self-consciousness will broaden, its political energy will grow...

The Social Democracy will be confronted with the dilemma: either to assume responsibility for the Provisional Government or to stand aside from the workers' movement. The workers will consider this government as their own regardless of how the Social Democracy conducts itself The revolutionary overturn in Russia can be accomplished only by the workers. The revolutionary Provisional Government in Russia will be the government of a *workers' democracy*. If the Social Democracy heads the revolutionary movement of the Russian proletariat, then this government will be Social Democratic.

The Social Democratic Provisional Government will not be able to accomplish a socialist overturn in Russia but the very process of liquidating the autocracy and of establishing the democratic republic will provide it with a rich soil for political work.

In the heat of the revolutionary events in the autumn of 1905, I once again met Parvus, this time in Petersburg. While preserving an organizational independence from both factions, we jointly edited a mass workers' paper, *Russkoye Slovo*, and, in a coalition with the Mensheviks, a big political newspaper, *Nachalo*. The theory of the permanent revolution has usually been linked with the names of "Parvus and Trotsky." This was only partially correct. The period of Parvus' revolutionary apogee belongs to the end of the last century when he marched at the head of the struggle against so-called "revisionism," i.e., the opportunist distortion of Marx's theory. The failure of the attempts to push the German Social Democracy on the path of more resolute policies undermined his optimism. Toward the perspective of the socialist revolution in the West, Parvus began to react with more and more reservations. He considered at that time that the "Social Democratic Provisional Government will not be able to

accomplish a socialist overturn in Russia.” His prognoses indicated, therefore, not the transformation of the democratic revolution into the socialist revolution but only the establishment in Russia of a regime of workers’ democracy of the Australian type, where on the basis of a farmers’ system there arose for the first time a labor government which did not go beyond the framework of a bourgeois regime.

I did not share this conclusion. The Australian democracy, which had grown organically on the virgin soil of a new continent, at once assumed a conservative character and subjected to itself a young but quite privileged proletariat. Russian democracy, on the contrary, could arise only as a result of a grandiose revolutionary overturn, the dynamics of which would in no case permit the workers’ government to remain within the framework of bourgeois democracy. Our differences, which had begun shortly after the revolution of 1905, resulted in a complete break between us at the beginning of the war when Parvus, in whom the skeptic had completely killed the revolutionist, turned out to be on the side of German imperialism, and later became the counsellor and inspirer of the first president of the German republic, Ebert.

The Theory of Permanent Revolution

Beginning with the pamphlet, *Before the Ninth of January*, I returned more than once to the development and justification of the theory of the permanent revolution. In view of the importance which this theory later acquired in the ideological evolution of the hero of this biography, it is necessary to present it here in the form of exact quotations from my works in 1905-06:

The core of the population of a modern city, at least in cities of economic-political significance, is constituted by the sharply differentiated class of wage labor. It is precisely this class, essentially unknown during the Great French Revolution, that is destined to play the decisive role in our revolution ... In a country economically more backward, the proletariat may come to power sooner than in an advanced capitalist country... The assumption of some sort of automatic dependence of proletarian dictatorship upon the technical forces and resources of a country is a prejudice derived from an extremely oversimplified “economic” materialism. Such a view has nothing in common with Marxism ... Notwithstanding that the productive forces of industry in the United States are ten times higher than ours, the political role of the Russian proletariat, its influence upon the politics of the country, and the possibility of its coming influence upon world politics is incomparably higher than the role and significance of the American proletariat... (*Results and Prospects*).

The Russian revolution, according to our view, will create conditions in which the power may (and with the victory of the revolution *must*) pass into the hands of the proletariat before the politicians of bourgeois liberalism get a chance to develop their statesmanly genius to the full ... The Russian bourgeoisie is surrendering all revolutionary positions to the proletariat. It will also have to surrender revolutionary hegemony over the peasantry. The proletariat in power will appear to the peasantry as an emancipator class ... The proletariat, basing itself on the peasantry, will bring all its forces into play to raise the cultural level of the village and develop a political consciousness in the peasantry ... (Ibid.)

But perhaps the peasantry itself will push aside the proletariat

and occupy its place? This is impossible. All historical experience protests against this assumption. It shows that the peasantry is completely incapable of playing an *independent* political role ... From what has been said it is clear how we regard the idea of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.’ The gist of the matter is not whether we consider it admissible in principle, whether we “want” or “do not want” this form of political cooperation. We consider it unrealizable -- at least in a direct and immediate sense.

The foregoing already demonstrates how erroneous is the assertion, later endlessly repeated, that the conception presented here “leaped over the bourgeois revolution.”

“The struggle for the democratic renovation of Russia,” I wrote at that time, “has wholly grown out of capitalism and is being conducted by the forces unfolding on the basis of capitalism and is being aimed *directly and first of all* against the feudal-serf obstacles on the path of the development of capitalist society.”

The question, however, was: Just what forces and methods are capable of removing these obstacles?

We may limit the framework of all the questions of the revolution by asserting that our revolution is *bourgeois* in its objective aims, and therefore in its inevitable results; we may thus shut our eyes to the fact that the chief agent of this bourgeois revolution is the proletariat, and the proletariat will be pushed toward power by the whole course of the revolution ... You may lull yourself with the thought that the social conditions of Russia are not yet ripe for a socialist economy – and therewith you may neglect to consider the fact that the proletariat, once in power, will inevitably be compelled by the whole logic of its situation to introduce an economy operated by the state ... Entering the government not as impotent hostages but as a ruling power, the representatives of the proletariat will by this very act destroy the boundary between minimum and maximum program, i.e., *place collectivism on the order of the day*. At what point the proletariat will be stopped in this direction will depend on the relationship of forces, but not at all upon the original intentions of the party of the proletariat... (Ibid.).

But it is not too early now to pose the question: Must this dictatorship of the proletariat inevitably be shattered against the framework of the bourgeois revolution? Or may it not, upon the given *world-historic foundations*, open before itself the prospect of victory to be achieved by shattering this limited framework? ... One thing can be stated with certainty: that it will come up against political obstacles much sooner than it will stumble over the technological backwardness of the country. Without direct state support from the European proletariat, the working class of Russia will not be able to remain in power and convert its temporary rule into a prolonged socialist dictatorship ...”

From this, however, does not at all flow a pessimistic prognosis:

The political emancipation led by the working class of Russia raises this leader to unprecedented historical heights, transfers into its hands colossal forces and resources and makes it the initiator of the world liquidation of capitalism, for which history has created all the necessary objective prerequisites... (Ibid.)

In regard to the degree to which the international Social Democracy will prove capable of fulfilling its revolutionary task, I wrote in 1906:

The European Socialist Parties – particularly the most powerful of them, the German Social-Democratic Party – have developed their own conservatism that has become stronger the more that socialism has embraced the great masses, and the more highly organized and disciplined these masses have become. As a consequence of this, Social Democracy as an organization embodying the political experience of the proletariat may become at a certain moment a direct obstacle in the path of open conflict between the workers and bourgeois reaction ...”

I concluded my analysis, however, by expressing assurance that the “Eastern revolution will imbue the Western proletariat with revolutionary idealism and engender in it the desire to speak to its enemy in ‘Russian’ ...” (Ibid.)

The Three Views Summed Up

Let us sum up. Populism, in the wake of the Slavophiles, proceeded from the illusion about the absolutely original paths of Russia’s development, bypassing capitalism and the bourgeois republic. Plekhanov’s Marxism was concentrated on proving the principled identity of the historical paths of Russia and of the West. The program derived from this ignored the wholly real and not at all mystical peculiarities of Russia’s social structure and revolutionary development. The Menshevik attitude toward the revolution, stripped of episodic encrustations and individual deviations, is reducible to the following: the victory of the Russian bourgeois revolution is conceivable only under the leadership of the liberal bourgeoisie and must hand over power to the latter. The democratic regime will then permit the Russian proletariat to catch up with its older Western brothers on the road of the struggle for socialism with incomparably greater success than hitherto.

Lenin’s perspective may be briefly expressed as follows: the belated Russian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading its own revolution to the end. The complete victory of the revolution through the medium of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” will purge the country of medievalism, invest the development of Russian capitalism with American tempos, strengthen the proletariat in the city and country, and open up broad possibilities for the struggle for socialism. On the other hand, the victory of the Russian revolution will provide a mighty impulse for the socialist revolution in the West, and the latter will not only shield Russia from the dangers of restoration but also permit the Russian proletariat to reach the conquest of power in a comparatively short historical interval.

The perspective of the permanent revolution may be summed up in these words: the complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is conceivable only in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, basing itself on the peasantry. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which will inescapably place on the order of the day not only democratic but also socialist tasks, will at the same time provide a mighty impulse to the international socialist revolution. Only, the victory of the proletariat in the West will shield Russia from bourgeois restoration and secure for her the possibility of bringing the socialist construction to its conclusion.

These terse formulations reveal with equal clarity both the homogeneity of the last two conceptions in their irreconcilable contradiction with the

liberal-Menshevik perspective, as well as their extremely essential difference from one another on the question of the social character and the tasks of the “dictatorship” which must grow out of the revolution. The frequently repeated objection of the present Moscow theoreticians that the program of the dictatorship of the proletariat was “premature” in 1905 is entirely lacking in content. In the empirical sense, the program of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry proved to be equally “premature.” The unfavorable relation of forces in the epoch of the first revolution rendered impossible not the dictatorship of the proletariat as such, but the victory of the revolution in general. Meanwhile all the revolutionary tendencies proceeded from the hope for a complete victory; without such a hope an unfettered revolutionary struggle would be impossible. The differences involved the general perspectives of the revolution and the strategy flowing therefrom. The perspective of Menshevism was false to the core: it pointed out an entirely wrong path for the proletariat. The perspective of Bolshevism was not complete: it correctly indicated the general direction of the struggle, but incorrectly characterized its stages. The inadequacy of the perspective of Bolshevism was not revealed in 1905 only because the revolution itself did not receive further development. But at the beginning of 1917, Lenin was compelled, in a direct struggle against the old cadres of the party, to change the perspective.

A political prognosis cannot pretend to the same exactness as an astronomical one. It suffices if it gives a correct indication of the general line of development and helps to orient oneself in the actual course of events in which the basic line is inevitably shifted either to the right or to the left. In this sense, it is impossible not to recognize that the conception of the permanent revolution has fully passed the test of history. In the first years of the Soviet regime, this was denied by none; on the contrary, this fact met with recognition in a number of official publications. But when on the quiescent and ossified summits of Soviet society the bureaucratic reaction against October opened up, it was from the very beginning directed against this theory which more completely than any other reflected the first proletarian revolution in history and at the same time clearly revealed its incomplete, limited and partial character. Thus, by way of repulsion, originated the theory of socialism in one country, the basic dogma of Stalinism.

Summer, 1939.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact