

Writings of Trotsky from 1917

From Whom and How to Defend the Revolution

Leon Trotsky
21 March 2017

This article was published in the Russian-language New York newspaper Novy mir (New World) on March 21, 1917. It was published in Russian in Trotsky's 1923 Voina i Revoliutsiia (War and Revolution), vol. 2, pp. 440-443. It appeared in English in Trotsky Speaks. Below is an original translation.

In our country, like everywhere else, imperialism originates in the very foundations of capitalist production. But the development of imperialism has greatly accelerated in Russia and become more acute under the influence of counter-revolution. We spoke about this last time. When the bourgeoisie, frightened by the revolution, backed away from its program of extending the home market by handing over the gentry's lands to the peasantry, it shifted its attention to world politics. The anti-revolutionary character of our imperialism thus reveals itself quite clearly. The imperialist bourgeoisie—given success—promised the Russian worker better wages, and tried to buy off upper layers of the working class with a privileged position in and around the war industry. It promised new lands to the peasantry. “Whether we get new land or not,” reasoned the muzhik-middle peasant, “the number of people is shrinking anyway, which means things will be easier with the land...”

The war, consequently, was, in the most direct sense of the word, a means of diverting the attention of the popular masses from the most acute domestic problems, the agrarian problem most of all. This is one of the reasons why the “liberal” and non-liberal nobility so fervently supports the imperialist bourgeoisie in its war efforts.

Under the banner of “saving the nation,” the liberal bourgeois are trying to retain control over the revolutionary people and, with this aim, have in tow not only the patriotic Trudovik Kerensky, but, apparently, Chkheidze as well, representative of the opportunist elements of Social-Democracy.

Stopping the war and the very struggle for peace bring to the forefront all the domestic problems, and the land

problem most of all... The agrarian question is driving a deep wedge into the present bloc of the nobility, bourgeoisie, and social-patriots. Kerensky will have to choose between the “liberal” June-Third elements, who want to rob the entire revolution for capitalist aims, and the revolutionary proletariat, which will launch a wide-scale program of agrarian revolution, that is, confiscation of lands—belonging to the tsar, land-owners, the crown family, monasteries and churches—in favor of the people. Whatever Kerensky's personal choice may be has little significance: this young lawyer from Saratov, “beseeching” soldiers at a meeting to shoot him if they did not trust him, while at the same threatening worker-internationalists with scorpions, does not have much significance on the scales of the revolution. The peasant masses, the lowest layers of the village, are a different matter. Attracting them to the side of the proletariat is the most unpostponable and urgent task.

It would be a crime to try to solve this task by adapting our policies to the national-patriotic narrow-mindedness of the countryside: the Russian worker would commit suicide if he paid for his alliance with the peasantry by severing his ties with the European proletariat. But, then, there is no political need to do so. In our hands is a more powerful weapon: at a time when the present Provisional Government and the Ministries of Lvov-Guchkov-Miliukov-Kerensky are compelled—in the name of preserving their unity—to evade the agrarian question, we can and must raise it in all its magnitude before the peasant masses of Russia.

“Since agrarian reform is impossible, then we are in favour of imperialist war!”—that is what the Russian bourgeoisie said after the experience of 1905-1907.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

“Turn your back on the imperialist war, turn instead toward the agrarian revolution!”—that is what we will say to

the peasant masses, referring to the experience of 1914-1917.

It is this question, the agrarian question, which will play an enormous role in uniting the proletarian cadres of the army with its peasant layers. “The gentry’s lands, but not Constantinople!”—the soldier-proletarian will say to the soldier-peasant, explaining to him who is served by the imperialist war and what its aims are. And the success of our agitation and struggle against the war—primarily in the working-class, but secondarily in the peasant and soldier masses—will determine how soon the liberal-imperialist government will be replaced by a Revolutionary Workers Government, resting immediately on the proletariat and the lowest layers of the village who join the proletariat.

Only a regime that does not resist the offensive of the masses, but, on the contrary, leads them forward, is capable of guaranteeing the fate of the revolution and the working class. The creation of such a regime is now the basic political task of the revolution.

For the time being, the Constituent Assembly is only a revolutionary screen. What is lurking behind it? What relations will this Constituent Assembly establish? This depends on its composition. And its composition depends on who will convene the Constituent Assembly, and under what conditions.

The Rodziankos, Guchkovs, and Miliukovs will make every effort to create a Constituent Assembly in their own image. The strongest trump card in their hands will be the slogan of a war of the entire nation against a foreign enemy. Now they will speak, of course, about the need to defend “the gains of the revolution from destruction” on the part of Hohenzollern. And the social-patriots will join their chorus.

We will say: “If only there were something to defend!” First of all, we must safeguard the revolution from domestic enemies. Without waiting for the Constituent Assembly, we must sweep the monarchist and gentry rubbish from all nooks and crannies. We must teach the Russian peasant not to trust the promises of Rodzianko and the patriotic lies of Miliukov. Under the banner of the agrarian revolution and the republic, we must unify the peasant millions against the liberal imperialists. Only a Revolutionary Government resting on the proletariat will be able to carry out this work fully, by driving the Guchkovs and Miliukovs from power. This Revolutionary Government will put into motion all the resources of state power in order to raise onto their feet, educate and unify the most backward and benighted layers of the toiling masses in town and country. Only with such a government and after such preparatory work will the Constituent Assembly become, not a screen for land-owning and capitalist interests, but a genuine organ of the people and the revolution.

Well, and what to do with Hohenzollern, whose troops will loom as a threat over the victorious Russian revolution?

We have already written about this. The Russian revolution is an immeasurably greater danger for Hohenzollern than the appetites and schemes of imperialist Russia. The sooner the revolution casts off its Guchkov-Miliukov chauvinist mask and reveals its proletarian face, the more powerful will be the response that it will meet in Germany; Hohenzollern will have a much-diminished desire and possibility to strangle the Russian revolution—he will have worries enough at home.

“And what if the German proletariat does not rise up? What will we do then?”

“That is, you are assuming that the Russian revolution might happen without leaving a trace in Germany—even if the revolution here places a workers’ government in power? But that is absolutely inconceivable.”

“But if, nevertheless...?”

“Essentially, we have no reason now to rack our brains over such an improbable supposition. The war has turned all of Europe into a warehouse filled with the gunpowder of social revolution. The Russian proletariat is now tossing a flaming torch into this gunpowder warehouse. To suppose that this torch will not cause an explosion means to think in defiance of the laws of historical logic and psychology. But if the improbable were to happen, if the conservative social-patriotic organization were to prevent the German working class in the immediate epoch from rising up against their ruling classes—then, of course, the Russian working class would defend the revolution with arms in hand. The revolutionary workers government would wage war against Hohenzollern, calling upon fraternal German proletarians to rise up against the common enemy. In exactly the same way, if it were to take power in the immediate epoch, the German proletariat would not only have the ‘right,’ but would be obligated to wage war against Guchkov-Miliukov, in order to help the Russian workers in dealing with their imperialist enemy. In both cases, the war conducted by the proletarian government would only be an armed revolution. This would not mean ‘defense of the fatherland,’ but defense of the revolution and its transmission to other lands.”

Novy mir, 21 March 1917



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