

Lenin's Life and Work

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(Continued from last issue)

AS early as the period of his first sojourn in Europe, before his banishment, Lenin began to study with great interest the West European labour movement, which up to then had only been known to him through the medium of books and which he was now able to study in actual practice. He often narrated the impressions made upon him by the workers' meetings in Switzerland and France; and he often observed that what he had seen, completely contradicted the ideas which he had formed in Russia with respect to the European labour movement. But this great realist did not succumb for a moment to scepticism, but sought for the essentially revolutionary character of the West European labour movement in the midst of its commonplace triteness and humdrum everyday work. It was not until 1906 that Lenin came into close connection with the labour movement and its leaders in Switzerland, France, and England. At this time he returned from banishment, and took part with Martov, Axelrod, and Plekhanov, in the publication of the "Iskra." The "Iskra" was not only the fighting organ of Russian Social Democracy, but at the same time the fighting organ of European Socialism. The period of its publication coincided with the blazing up of the conflict between the revolutionary and revisionist tendencies of international socialism. The practical questions of the West European labour movement were dealt with in the "Iskra" for the most part by Plekhanov. Lenin devoted his attention chiefly to theoretical questions, but at the same time he accorded much careful study to the practical phenomena of the labour movement. He visited workers' meetings at Munich, and not only listened attentively to the speeches delivered by socialist speakers at the meetings in Hyde Park in London, but also to the speeches delivered by the preachers of the various religious sects exercising so much influence among the working masses of England.

It was perfectly clear to Lenin, after Bernstein's first action, that revisionism represents the expression of the interests of the labour aristocracy and of labour bureaucracy. And now he saw this graphically demonstrated in the types of the labour movement. At the international congresses at Amsterdam and Stuttgart, he observed the leading organizations of the Second International, and it is probable that he felt very solitary. The debates on colonial policy and on the combatting of war danger, held at the Stuttgart congress, showed him the path being pursued by the reformist leaders. The articles which he wrote on the sessions of the International Bureau, after the first revolution, are already permeated with the profound hate which he felt for all these van Kols, Troelstras, Brantings, and the like.

At that time the International was still united, it was not yet dismembered. But Lenin was already aware that the International contained enemies of the working class, and he was aware of the kind of people composing the whole honourable company of the Second International, beginning with the open revisionists, down to and including Kautsky, with whom Lenin had become acquainted in Munich as early as the year 1901, and whom at the very best he recognised to be a man who had his head in the clouds. Comrade Warsky, the theoretician of Polish Marxism, shows in his article on the lessons of the Bolshevik anniversary that he has excellently grasped the fact that at that time, the whole left wing of the Second International, including the best, represented an opposition against reformism within the Second International, and that Lenin alone stood for the principles of the future Third International. It suffices to read Lenin's short review in the "Enlightenment" on the book written by the German trade union leader Legien, to clearly

recognize that no other human being except Lenin wrote in this manner about this worthy company.

The differences between revisionism and the radical Marxism pursued by Karl Kautsky, were merely differences of the interpretation of Marxian doctrine. In reality, in daily practice, these tendencies agreed excellently with one another, and it is upon this fact that the unity of the Second International was based. The congress of this International met for some years without any very serious conflicts arising. Such conflicts as arose generally terminated with the acceptance of a common resolution. In actual practice, the so-called radical Marxists did not even propose the revolutionary preparation of the masses by means of clear and decided revolutionary agitation. In the year 1910 there was a split in the camp of so-called orthodox Marxism. This split came about on account of practical reasons. The result was the so-called left radical section, and the so-called centre headed by Kautsky. The separation took place on the questions of the fight against imperialism, and of the mass strike. At first it appeared to Lenin as if we left radicals had incorrectly formulated our attitude towards imperialism, but were unconditionally right in the question of mass strikes. At the time, when Martov published an article against Rosa Luxemburg in Kautsky's organ, Lenin published an article by Pannekoek in the Russian central organ, in which he defended the attitude of the left radicals, and morally supported the left.

The war breaks out. The dark day comes, the 4th. August. Lenin, sojourning in the Carpathian district, receives the news of the complete betrayal by German and international Social Democracy. In the first moment he doubts the tidings, and hopes that it is merely a war manoeuvre of the international bourgeoisie; but he is speedily convinced of its tragic truth, goes to Switzerland, and takes up his fighting position at once. As early as the end of 1914, I had the opportunity of speaking with him, after his attitude had been firmly established in the historical manifesto issued by the Central Committee of the Party, and in various issues of the "Social Democrat." I still remember very well the profound impression made on me by the conversation with Lenin. I came from Germany for the purpose of establishing connections with the revolutionary groups of other countries. In Germany we unconditionally rejected the attitude of the social democratic majority from the very first day onwards. We rejected the idea of the defence of native country in an imperialist war. We were in conflict with Haase and Kautsky, who went no further than diffident opposition to the social patriotic leadership, of the party, and only differed from this in sighing for peace. In our propaganda, carried on in the censored press and in hectographed papers, we agitated for revolutionary war against war. But for me—and through my intermediation also for many German comrades—my conversation with Lenin signified a sharp turn to the left. The first question which Lenin put to me was the question of the prospect of a split in the German Social Democracy. This question was like a dagger stab to the heart to me, and to the comrades standing at the left wing of the party. We had spoken thousands of times of reformism as of a policy pursued by the workers' aristocracy. But we hoped that the whole German party, after the first patriotic throwback, would develop towards the left. The fact that Karl Liebknecht did not vote openly against the war on 4th August is to be explained precisely by the fact that he still hoped that the persecution carried on by the government would induce the whole party to break with the government, and with the defence of the imperialist fatherland. Lenin put the direct question: what is the actual policy being pursued by the Second International? Is it an error, or is

it treason to the working class? I began to explain to him that we were on the borderland between the period of peaceful development of socialism and the period of storm and stress, that it was not merely a question of treachery on the part of leaders, but of the attitude taken by masses not possessing the power to offer resistance to the war, but subservient to the bourgeoisie; but that the burdens imposed by this policy would force the masses to break with the bourgeoisie and tread the path of revolutionary struggle. Lenin interrupted me by the words: "It is an historicism that everything finds its explanation in the changing epoch. But is it possible for the leaders of reformism, who led the proletariat systematically into the camp of the bourgeoisie even before the war, and who openly went over to this camp at the moment of the outbreak of the war, to be the champions of a revolutionary policy?" I replied that I did not believe this to be possible. "Then" declared Lenin, "the survivals of an outlived epoch, in the form of reformist leaders, must also be cast aside. If we want to facilitate for the working class its transition to the policy of war against war, of war against reformism, then we must break with the reformist leaders, and with all who are not fighting honourably on the side of the working class. It is only a question of when this rupture is to be accomplished. The question of the organizational preparations of this rupture is purely one of tactics, but to strive towards rupture is the fundamental duty every proletarian revolutionist." Lenin insisted on the sharpest form of the ideological struggle against the social patriots, insisted on the necessity of openly emphasizing the treachery committed, especially the treachery of these leaders. He frequently repeated these words on later occasions, when we were working together; when drawing up resolutions he invariably adhered to the standpoint of this political definition, and held it to be a measure of revolutionary sincerity and logic, an evidence of the will to break with Social Democracy.

Lenin insisted with equal emphasis upon the slogan of civil war being opposed to the slogan of Burgfrieden (civil peace). Since our polemical discussions with Kautsky, we left radicals in Germany had become accustomed to formulate the slogan less clearly: our slogan was the slogan of "mass action." The lack of clearness of this slogan corresponded with the embryonic condition of the revolutionary movement in Germany in the years 1911 and 1912, when we regarded the demonstration made by the workers of Berlin in the Tiergarten, at the time of the struggle for universal suffrage for the Prussian Diet, as the beginning of the revolutionary struggle of the German workers. Lenin showed us that though this slogan might be suitable for the purpose of opposing the action of the masses to the parliamentary game played by the social democratic leaders before the war, it is entirely unsuitable in a period of blood and iron, in a period of war. "When discontent with the war has increased"—he said—"then the Centrists can also organize a mass movement for the purpose of exerting pressure on the government, and for forcing it to end the war with a peaceful understanding, if our goal, the goal of ending the imperialist war by the revolution, is not to be a mere pious wish, but a goal for which we really work, then we must issue the slogan of civil war, clearly and determinedly." He was extraordinarily pleased when Liebknecht, in his letter to the Zimmerwald conference, made use of the words: "Against the civil peace for the civil war." For Lenin, this was the best proof that Liebknecht was in agreement with us in essentials.

The split in the Second International as a means for the development of the revolutionary movement in the proletariat, civil war as the means of victory, over imperialist war—these were the two leading ideas which Lenin endeavored to impress upon the

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