

The Development of Policy in Soviet Russia

Editor's Note. — The following article, by I. Maiski (Chief of the Press and Information Dept. at the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs) appeared in the "Manchester Guardian Commercial," July 6, 1922, and is reproduced here (in two issues) because it comprises a brief, comprehensive statement from a Soviet official, tracing the development of policy in Soviet Russia from February, 1917, to date.

THE changes which Russia has undergone during the Revolution have been so tremendous in their depth and scope as to give rise in many people's minds to a feeling of fantastic unreality. Only six years ago Russia was ruled by the despotism of the Tsars—today she is the first and only Socialist Republic in the world. At that time she was the bulwark of international reaction—now she is the standard bearer of world-revolution. There is no instance in history of a similar transformation. It is not, therefore, surprising that the Soviet Republic has hitherto in the eyes of the rest of the world been surrounded by a halo of legendary myth. Through the mists of legend it is impossible to see her clearly. But since the iron necessities of economic, political, and commercial life demand that the civilized States should as quickly as possible renew the broken relationship with Russia, it would not be out of place here to consider what in reality has taken place and is still taking place in that "mysterious" country.

The Provisional Government

In February, 1917, the Government of the Tsarist despots was overthrown by the united efforts of the workers, the peasants, and the liberal bourgeoisie. The Provisional Government which came into power embodied economically the interests of private ownership, and politically professed the principles of a moderate democracy. It is enough to mention that during the first five months of the Revolution the Provisional Government could not make up its mind formally to declare Russia a republic.

During the course of its short existence (from March to October, 1917) the Provisional Government more than once changed its character. At first it consisted almost entirely of the big liberal provincial bourgeoisie: at the head of the Government stood Prince G. E. Lvov; the Minister for War was A. Gouehkov, the Minister for Foreign Affairs was P. N. Miliukov. The more democratic elements had only one representative in the Government—namely, the Minister for Justice, A. Kerensky. Such a Government could not maintain itself for two months. For a country in the grip of revolution it was far too moderate, and towards the end of April, 1917, under the pressure of the masses of the people, the Provisional Government underwent its first reconstruction: into its formation now entered, together with the liberal bourgeoisie, Right Wing Socialists also i.e., representatives of the Socialist Revolutionary party and the Social Democratic party (Mensheviks). The new Provisional Government styled itself a "coalition," and economically represented the interests of the large and small propertied town bourgeoisie. Politically, however, it maintained its course towards a bourgeois democratic republic. During the subsequent months it more than once changed its personnel, and to some extent its party composition, but remained unvaryingly a "Coalition" Government uniting Liberals and Right Wing Socialists.

But even this Government, more democratic both in composition and outlook, could not satisfy the wide circles of workers and peasants, for it was unable to give a satisfactory reply to the masses upon the burning questions of the moment. The peasantry coveted the land; but the Provisional Government could not at once make up its mind to give them the right of ownership, and put off the solution of the agrarian question for the Constituent Assembly, the exact date of the summoning of which was unknown. The proletariat desired the nation-

alization of the factories and workshops; but in the Provisional Government the inviolability of capitalism was openly declared, and here again the introduction of every important social reform was postponed for the Constituent Assembly. The whole country was united (with the exception of a few handfuls of privileged persons and a part of the intelligentsia) in demanding the cessation of the imperialist war, but the Provisional Government announced an offensive upon the Russo-German front. The whole of its policy was feeble, nerveless, and provocative. It seemed to set out deliberately to irritate the masses and to expedite its own downfall.

The Soviet Power.

Subsequent events are well known. In October, 1917, the workers and peasants of Russia rose up. The "Coalition" Provisional Government fell, and in the person of the Council of People's Commissaries the Communist party came into power. This party embodied the interests of the town proletariat more than any other, but it also based itself upon the wide masses of the revolutionary peasantry, and upon the many millions of soldiers at the front. It was the mouthpiece of the masses, and when it found itself at the helm of the State it quickly and decidedly responded to their demands. The war was brought to an end and the army demobilized. The ownership of the land was transferred to the peasants. The proletariat was guaranteed security of its interests and, assured a controlling hand in production. In contradistinction to the policy of the Provisional Government, the policy of the Council of People's Commissaries was firm, decisive, and consistent. It destroyed much: many a Gordian knot it cut with a stroke of the sword; but this is essential to every revolution. To assure that its policy should be executed, the Communist party established the dictatorship of the workers throughout the country. This was achieved by the aid of the Soviets, which are distinguished from the parliaments and the municipal governments of the West chiefly by the fact that the right of election to them is limited to toilers (workers, peasants and employees). For non-toilers and exploiters there is no place in the Soviets.

Naturally, when the Communist party came into power it could not do otherwise than embark on a Communist policy. However Utopian they may have been, it is not true that the Communists in twenty-four hours decreed the complete abolition of private property in Russia. But it is true that they consciously and definitely placed before themselves the task of socializing the means of production and exchange.

In the beginning the Communists manifested in this respect a certain degree of foresight and caution. During the first eight months of the Communist Revolution only foreign trade, banking, the railways, water transport, and certain less important branches of industry were nationalized. Most branches of industry were put in charge of mixed directorates, consisting of representatives of the workers and the owners. Private internal trade was maintained, as was also the acquisition of food by the State by means of purchase and exchange of goods. There was also promulgated a decree on the food tax very similar to the decree of 1921.

The Influence of the Civil War.

This cautious policy had, willy-nilly, to be abandoned the moment the civil war broke out. When the Czechoslovakian army rose up against the Soviet power on the Volga, when later began the attacks against the Workers' and Peasants' Republic by Kolchak, Denikin, Wrangel, Yudenich, and other White Guard generals, subsidized by the Entente, the first duty of the Republic became to create an

armed force capable of beating off the enemy and of defending the conquests of the Revolution. The difficulties of the task were colossal, but they were overcome. Within two years eighteen armies were created, literally out of nothing, and flung against the oncoming reaction. At the conclusion of the civil war the Soviet Republic was maintaining more than five million persons under arms.

The army had to be fed and supplied with boots, clothing, and rifles. In view of the inadequate resources of the Government it was difficult to purchase food from the peasants, and therefore recourse to the method of requisition became inevitable—i.e., all superfluous food was compulsorily confiscated and only partially paid for in money and goods. The production of clothes, boots, and war materials was hindered by the sabotage of the owners still remaining in the factories and workshops, so it became necessary to nationalize the industries supplying the army, and these consisted of no less than three-quarters of all the large industries. In addition, in the interests of the front, it became necessary to impose strict control even upon small and home industries, with the result that these lost their independence and might almost have been regarded as nationalized.

As the result of all this, towards the end of 1920 the Soviet Republic had the appearance of a country in which the State was an undisputed monopolist in the economic realm; it directly managed trade, transport, and industry, and its policy of requisitions produced such profound effects upon peasant economy that it, too might have been considered as a component part of general State enterprise. For a country in which four-fifths of the population consist of small proprietors, such a system was undoubtedly premature, but it was brought about by the necessities of war, and was maintained in the hope of an early world-revolution.

The New Economic Policy.

But the war came to an end, and the country was again enabled to begin its transition to a condition of peace. Now that all the enemies of the Republic were overthrown and its independence secure, the question of the restoration of the national economy became one of first importance. Seven years of ceaseless war and three years of merciless blockade had severely shattered the well-being of Russia. Hundreds of factories and workshops were either closed down or destroyed, railway transport had considerably deteriorated, and the construction and the repair of buildings had almost completely ceased. In addition, thanks to the terrible losses in workers upon the field of battle, and also as a result of the military necessity for requisitions, agriculture had fallen into decay: the area of cultivation had decreased almost by half in comparison with pre-war days. The number of working cattle had been reduced still further. Decisive measures were essential for the restoration of Russia's war-shattered economy. And as in view of the political situation in Europe it was useless to count upon a world-revolution, the Soviet Republic recognized the advisability of adopting the so-called "new economic policy" set forth by Lenin in March, 1921, at the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist party. The significance of the change amounted to this: as the complete realization of Socialism in Russia, while capitalism still existed in the rest of the world was impossible, the Soviet Republic with her advanced economic position—and because it is advanced therefore difficult of defence—must retreat to its second line defences. Here she will remain until the hour of revolution shall have struck for Western Europe.

Since that period a whole year has elapsed, and
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