

Chapter III

MARX AND ENGELS ON RUSSIA

X In spite of the universal applicability of his theory of social evolution it is asserted that Marx made an express exception in favor of Russia, and he is frequently and loosely quoted to the effect that the Socialist revolution may break out in Russia in advance of other countries.

Both Marx and Engels always took a keen interest in the economic and political developments and the Socialist movement of Russia. Their main views on the latter subject were collated by Frederick Engels, and published as a separate chapter of a pamphlet entitled "Internationales aus dem Volkstaat" (Berlin, 1894).

The publication sheds full light upon the estimate of Marx and Engels of the possibilities of a Socialist revolution in Russia. But to enable the reader to grasp the full import of their expressed opinions a few preliminary words must be said about the character and theoretical foundations of the Russian Socialist movement in the days of Marx and Engels.

¹ See f. i. R. W. Postgate, "The Bolshevik Theory," N. Y., 1920, page 116.

Inspired by the desire to accomplish the Socialist revolution quickly in spite of the backward economic conditions of their country, the pioneers of Russian Socialism, mostly young and enthusiastic intellectuals, evolved a convenient Socialist theory of their own, known as "Narodnichestvo," an untranslatable term corresponding approximately to "populism." It was not Marxian, but specifically Russian. It reposed its hope not in the wage workers, but in the peasantry. Its starting point was not the capitalist system, but the village community.

The institution of the "village community" rests on a form of communal land holding. Under this system the village land belongs to the whole community, which distributes and redistributes it periodically among its members in accordance with their needs as determined by the size of the family and the number of its male working "hands." The peasant has no individual property in the land which he cultivates, he cannot alienate it or transmit it by inheritance.

The institution prevails in numerous countries in the earlier stages of agricultural development, and was in full operation in Russia before and after the emancipation of its peasants from serfdom in 1861. It was on this basis that the early theoreticians of Russian Socialism proclaimed the Russian peasant a Communist at heart and in practice, and reduced the task of the Socialist revolution to the extension of

the village community into a national system of communist production, freed from the economic exploitation of the land owning nobility and the political yoke of the tsarist régime. It was only in the beginning of the eighties of the last century, when the disappointing results of the communist propaganda among the peasants became increasingly obvious, and the institution of the village community itself showed definite signs of dissolution, that the Marxian school of Russian Socialism was founded under the leadership of George Plekhanoff. This school accepted the Marxian laws of economic evolution as valid for Russia as well as for other countries, pinned its hopes upon the development of capitalism in Russia, and transferred the propagandist center of gravity from the peasantry to the growing class of factory workers. The subsequently formed "majority wing" of the Russian Social Democracy (the Bolsheviki with Nicholai Lenin at their head) likewise accepted the Marxian concept.

In 1874, Peter N. Tkachoff, a Russian Socialist and adherent of the village-community theory, published a controversial "Open Letter to Mr. Frederick Engels," in which he set forth the conventional social-populistic views on the prospects of the Socialist revolution in Russia, including the following observation :

"We have no urban proletariat. This is admittedly true; but, on the other hand, we also have no bourgeoisie. * * * Our workers will have to combat only the political power—the power of capital is barely in

its inception with us. And you, my dear sir, certainly know that the struggle with the former is much easier than with the latter."

I quote the following instructive passages from Engels' reply:

"The revolution which modern Socialism seeks to accomplish is, briefly stated, the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie and a reorganization of society through the removal of all class distinctions. That requires not only a proletariat, which is to accomplish this revolution, but also a bourgeoisie, in whose hands the social forces of production have developed to a point which enables the ultimate abolition of class distinctions. * * * The existence of the bourgeoisie is in one direction as much a prerequisite for the Socialist revolution as the proletariat itself. The person, therefore, who says that such a revolution is easier to accomplish because although such country has no proletariat it has, on the other hand, no bourgeoisie proves thereby only that he has yet to learn the A, B, C of Socialism." * * *

"Tkachoff asserts that the form of society for which the Socialist movement of Western Europe strives will be introduced in Russia even before we in the West will reach it—and that with social conditions in which the classes of the proletariat as well as the bourgeoisie appear only sporadically and in a low stage of development. And it is claimed that all this is possible because the Russians are, so to say, the chosen people of

Socialism, and possess the artel (co-operative enterprise) and the communal property in land." * * *

"The system of communal land ownership in Russia has passed the period of its bloom and apparently approaches dissolution. Still the possibility undeniably exists that this social form may pass into a higher one. If it maintains itself until the conditions are ripe for such transformation, and if it thus proves itself capable of development in such a manner that the peasants will cultivate the soil not individually but collectively, it may be possible to bring about this transformation, so that the Russian peasants will not have to go through the transitory stage of individual farm ownership. This, however, can only happen if before the total dissolution of communal land ownership in Russia a proletarian revolution should be victoriously accomplished in Western Europe and should furnish to the Russian peasants the necessary conditions of such transformation, particularly the material conditions which he needs in order to bring about a revolution in his entire system of cultivation necessarily connected with such conditions. It is therefore pure nonsense for Mr. Tkachoff to say that the Russian peasants although 'proprietors' are 'nearer to Socialism' than the propertyless workers of Western Europe. Quite on the contrary. If there is anything that still may save communal land ownership in Russia and give it the opportunity to pass into a new live form it is a proletarian revolution in Western Europe." * * *

“How could the Russian community transform the gigantic forces of the capitalist production into collective property and instruments even before Capitalism has itself accomplished this revolution; how could the Russian village community teach the world to conduct large-scale industry for the collective benefit after it has already forgotten to cultivate the soil collectively?”

And again: “It is a historic impossibility for a lower stage in economic development to solve the riddles and conflicts which have sprung and can only spring from a much higher stage.”

It will be noticed that while Engels rejects categorically and *in toto* the idea of Russian leadership in the international Socialist revolution, he admits the possibility of establishing a communist régime in Russia without the necessity of her passing through all phases of capitalist development. This possibility is, however, conditioned on two important premises: (1) that the institution of the village community survive long enough, (2) that a proletarian revolution be first successfully accomplished in Western Europe.

In a much discussed letter of Karl Marx to a Russian journalist written at the same period (1877), the author expresses the following somewhat cryptic opinion: “If Russia will continue to follow the path which it has chosen since 1861, it will lose the most beautiful opportunity history has ever offered to a people, only to go through instead all the fatal conditions of the capitalist system.”

Marx does not here specify the conditions upon which Russia may avail herself of the "beautiful" historic opportunity, but there is no reason to assume that his views on the subject differed materially from those of Engels quoted above.

Several years later, when the heroic "Will of the People" had thrilled the whole Socialist world with a succession of brilliant and daring feats, and the revolutionary movement in Russia had assumed a more serious character, Marx and Engels, yielding to the general spirit and atmosphere of the time, made a larger concession to the possibilities of a Socialist revolution in Russia.

In a preface to Plekhanoff's Russian translation of the Communist Manifesto, they wrote, in 1882:

"Side by side with the rapidly developing capitalist swindle and embryonic system of bourgeois private property we find in Russia the largest part of the land in communal property of the peasants. The question is, can the Russian village community, this form of collective ownership of land already in a state of rapid dissolution, pass directly into a higher form of communist land ownership, or must it pass through the same process of dissolution which characterizes the historical development of the West? The only possible answer at this time is the following: If the Russian revolution will give the signal for a working class revolution in the West, so that both may supplement each other, then it is possible that Russian col-

lective land ownership may prove the starting point of communist development.”

The authors here concede that the revolution may first break out in Russia, but its success is made dependent upon a simultaneous proletarian revolution in the West and upon the preservation of communal land ownership. Twelve years later (in 1894) Engels expressed the opinion that Russia had already missed her historic opportunity, and concluded that without a general victory of the modern industrial proletariat contemporary Russia cannot accomplish a Socialist transformation either by the road of the village community or by that of capitalism.