

Chapter XI

EAST AND WEST

At this point in our discussion it may be useful to attempt a general comparison between the situation and problems of the Russian revolution and those that confront the Socialist movement in the West.

The Russian revolution from the very first was confronted not only by the difficulties and struggles which every proletarian revolution must anticipate, but also by a complex of special problems arising from the peculiar conditions of the country.

From the point of view of social and economic development it was a premature birth. It produced what Bukharin terms "a lower type."

The "inferiority" of the Russian revolution does not consist in the fact that it has failed to establish a Socialist or Communist order in full bloom. A Socialist revolution in the industrially advanced countries of the West will also not mean the immediate advent of Socialism. As in the case of Russia it can only be the starting point for a systematic realization of the Socialist program. But the concrete tasks of such a revolution will of necessity differ from those which confront Russia.

While the latter starts with a system of industries, largely socialized but entirely backward, the former will begin with a highly organized industrial order developed under individual ownership. The Russian problem is to build up the socialized industries as fast as possible. The problem of the proletarian revolutions in the West will be to transfer the industries into common ownership with little or no damage to their highly organized and finely adjusted mechanism and functions.

It seemed comparatively easy to abolish the private ownership of the few and scattered Russian industrial concerns by summary revolutionary decree, though even there the task of maintaining their efficiency under the sudden change proved vastly more difficult. In the countries of modern type, in which large-scale industry is the life nerve of the people, the process of transition from private to communal ownership must necessarily be more deliberate and cautious. Modern Socialism has never contemplated the summary socialization of the industries immediately after the proletarian revolution.

As far back as 1848, Marx and Engels (in the Communist Manifesto) asserted that "the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest *by degrees* all capital from the bourgeoisie," and laid down an elaborate program of measures for the gradual socialization of industries in "the most advanced countries." At that time the capitalist system of production was in its infancy. It has since grown enormously in the

complexity of its organization, and the task of Socialist transformation has become infinitely more delicate.

On the other hand the socialization of agriculture offers a more difficult problem to Soviet Russia than it will present to the proletarian revolutions in the countries of the West, in which land culture engages a much smaller portion of the population and is at once better organized and of lesser importance in the national economy.

"There can be no doubt," admits Lenin, "that, in a peasant country like Russia, Socialist reconstruction is a very difficult problem. Beyond doubt it was comparatively easy to overthrow enemies like the Tsardom or the power of the landowners. It was possible to carry this out in the center in a few days and throughout the country in a few weeks. But the problem we are tackling now is, of its very nature, one which can be solved only by long and stubborn effort. Here we have to fight step by step and yard by yard in the battle to secure the conquests of Soviet Russia and the communal tilling of the soil. Under no circumstances, of course, can such a change from small individual farming to communal tillage be completed all at once."¹

Lenin by no means overstates the difficulties of the situation. The question of land socialization in agricultural Russia is comparable to that of socializing

¹ "The Land Revolution in Russia," London, 1919, pp. 8 and 9.

the plants in the industrial West, and on the whole it may be said that the problems are of inverse difficulty and importance in the two different types of civilization.

This cardinal difference between Russia and the Western countries has forced the adoption of a different economic policy by the Russian Revolution than that to which the victorious working class in the more advanced parts of the world will presumably have to resort. The economic arrangements of Soviet Russia must therefore, at least in part, be considered specifically Russian rather than general features of the proletarian revolution.

Similarly the political institutions and measures of the Soviet republic may largely be traced to the peculiar feature of the Russian revolution that it was made and is being maintained by a prolétariat which constitutes but a small minority of the population. There is no sound reason to believe that the working class of the West, when it comes into power as a clear majority of the whole people, will find it necessary or useful to adopt the same contrivances and methods for holding power: that it will be bound to inaugurate a soviet form of government based on restricted and unequal franchise and indirect representation, to apply methods of political suppression and terròr in any form, or at least in the same form and degree as they have been resorted to in Russia.

With respect to the post-revolutionary program of Socialism the Russian example can thus not be accepted as conclusive upon all countries and in all points.

The problems so far considered are furthermore only such as arise from the inherent economic differences between Russia and the Western countries, problems that would survive even a Socialist revolution in the latter countries. But we must not overlook the difference between the situation of the Russian Socialists and their comrades in other countries which is created by their political status to-day.

In Russia the revolution has been accomplished. In other countries it is yet to come. In one case Socialism appears as a dominant state power, in the other as a struggling opposition movement. It is obvious that the two situations present radical differences in the immediate and practical tasks which they impose.

In Russia the Socialists are in possession of the powers of government and their immediate political task is to maintain themselves in power. In the Western countries the bourgeoisie is in political control, and the immediate political task of the workers is to wrest the power from the hands of their opponents.

And this task is by no means as simple as it appeared for a time to large sections of the international Socialist movement and particularly to the Communists of Russia.

Normally the western countries of Europe are much better prepared for a proletarian revolution than Russia was in 1917. Germany, Austria, England, France, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Holland, and Denmark have reached varying, but on the whole high, degrees of capitalist development with large class-conscious and well organized proletarian populations. Objectively they may thus be considered ripe for working-class political rule. The so-called subjective factors, i. e., the political demoralization of the bourgeoisie and the determination, readiness and preparedness of the workers to assume power, are for the moment lacking. The revolutionary spirit which flared up immediately before and after the conclusion of the war and produced the several Socialist and semi-Socialist revolutions and semi-revolutions, has for the time being been repressed by the crushing effects of the defeat in the Central countries, the heavy atmosphere of jingoism in some of the Entente countries, and principally by the economic misery of the world; the general condition of apathy and reaction in the western world has been further intensified by the disunion among and between the Socialists of the different countries.

The experience of the Russian revolution has also served to make the workers of Europe more cautious. The continuous war of the international capitalist powers against the workers' and peasants' republic at a time when the whole world seemed exhausted by war, and the relentless starvation blockade maintained

without a pretense of justification in international law, were concrete indications of the length to which the capitalist world will go in its efforts to suppress proletarian revolutions. Russia could hold out physically against the combined hostile powers of Europe and America because it is self-contained at least in the matter of food. The vast majority of the population, living in the villages, had enough to eat at all times; the town population suffered but did not starve. There is no country in western Europe that would be equally able to withstand such a siege. Not only that the countries are smaller and less self-sufficient by nature, but the very fact of their higher industrial development renders them more dependent upon each other for their daily subsistence. The perfection of the capitalist system of production has led to an international division of labor. Each modern country is specialized in a comparatively narrow range of industries, and depends upon other countries for the purchase of some of its products and the supply of some of its necessities. No industrial country of western Europe produces more than a mere fraction of its own food. If a proletarian régime should be established in England or France or Italy, it could be completely starved out by a general capitalist blockade within a few months, if not weeks. A Socialist revolution in the countries of Western Europe would thus face a very precarious career unless it be reinforced by a simultaneous or nearly simultaneous rising in one or more additional countries, who together could form a tolerably com-

plete economic world unit; or unless the Socialist movement in the other countries be so strong and determined as to prevent the capitalist governments from interfering with the new Socialist republic.

The prime task of the Socialist movement in these countries, therefore, is to revive and stimulate the spirit of revolutionary enthusiasm among the workers, to consolidate, train and prepare their own ranks for the decisive battle, and above all, to strengthen the bonds of solidarity and co-operation among the Socialists of the interdependent countries. For the Socialist movement in countries like the United States, in which the physical basis for the Socialist transformation is fully developed, but the working class is ludicrously immature politically and intellectually, the immediate need is for primary Socialist education.

These concrete tasks of Western Socialism presuppose liberty of propaganda, organization and political action. Without them a successful movement of the great working-class masses in modern countries is almost unthinkable. We are thus led to the practical distinction between democracy as an abstract ideal and what Kautsky terms Democracy as a method. Whatever may be thought of the operation and effects of a democratic form of government in a class state, the concrete democratic institutions, the liberty of the press, speech and meeting, the right of organization and the franchise, are practically indispensable to the conduct of a large-scale class struggle in the industrial and

political field. To the extent to which these institutions are curtailed by capitalist government, the Socialist propaganda is hampered. Nothing therefore is more reactionary in practice than the alleged super-revolutionary attitude of indifference or contempt for the "bourgeois-democratic" institutions as weapons in the fight of Socialism.

On this point again we are confronted by a vital difference between the policies of Socialist Russia and the Socialists of the West. Bukharin explains and illustrates this difference in his own delightfully frank, almost naive style. Says he:

"Another question must be put to us: Why did not the Bolsheviki *talk* about the abrogation of all the liberties of the bourgeoisie before? Why did they formerly themselves favor a bourgeois-democratic republic? Why did they formerly declare themselves in favor of the Constituent Assembly and *say nothing* of depriving the bourgeois of the right to vote? In a word, why have they now changed their program in regard to these questions?

"Very simply answered. The working class did not as yet possess the strength to go right out and storm the bourgeois fortress. It required preparation, a chance to collect its forces, the enlightenment of the masses, organization.

"It required, for example, the freedom of the press of the workers—its own press, not that belonging to

the masters. But it could not come to the capitalists and their government and state such a demand as, 'Messrs. Capitalists, shut down your press and publish my newspapers, workers' newspapers.' The working class would only have been ridiculed, for it is ridiculous to make such a demand of the capitalist; that would be asking him to cut his own throat. Such demands can be made only when the fight is about to be carried into the enemy's country. Therefore the working class said (*and our party also said*) '*Three cheers for the freedom of the press (the whole press, including the press of the bourgeoisie)!*' Or another example: It is plain that the employers' associations—those that force the workers out into the street, keep blacklists, etc.—are a great menace to the workers. But the working class could not step up and say, 'Close down your associations and open ours.' That implies breaking the power of capitalism. For this there was not sufficient strength. Hence *our party said at that time: 'We demand freedom of association (in general, not only for the workers).'*'

"Now the times are changed. There is no longer any necessity for a painful preparation for the conflict; we are now living in the period following the storm, following the first great victory over the bourgeoisie. Now the working class has set itself another task—to crush once and for all the resistance of the bourgeoisie." ² (Italics mine.)

² "Program of the Communists," pages 29 and 30.

The Socialist movement outside of Russia is still under the "necessity for a painful preparation for the conflict." According to Bukharin it still must proffer "Three cheers for the freedom of the press" (including the press of the bourgeoisie) and "demand the freedom of association" (for all classes). In short, it must fight for the maintenance and extension of democratic institutions. But would it not be crediting the bourgeoisie with a greater degree of generosity or stupidity than it possesses, to expect that it will accede to the Socialist demands for freedom of the press and association, if such demands are coupled with the cheerful assurance that when the "times change" and the working-class gains political power, it will use it to "crush once and for all" these same liberties of the bourgeoisie, as Bukharin clearly implies?

To paraphrase his own illustration, would it be quite rational to address the capitalist governments with a proposition like this: "Messrs. Capitalists, accord us full liberty of press, speech, meeting, association, voting, etc., so that we may freely conduct our struggle for your overthrow, and when we have succeeded through the instruments you have placed in our hands, we will use our victory to deprive you of all civil and political liberties?"

The Socialist demand upon the bourgeois state for the maintenance of democratic institutions will be effective and consistent only if it proceeds from the theory that a Socialist state will also tolerate political

opposition in all forms of normal propaganda and peaceful activity. A Socialist government will, of course, always maintain the right to suppress active counter-revolutionary plots aiming at its violent overthrow in the same way as a bourgeois government will always claim and exercise the right of suppressing active revolutionary plots for the overthrow of its rule.

Another phase of the same question is presented by the Bolshevik advocacy of "illegal work" in connection with the Socialist propaganda. The Platform-Resolution of the Communist International formulates the principle in the following language:

"In a country where the bourgeoisie, or the counter-revolutionary Social-Democracy is in power, the Communist Party must learn to coordinate its legal work with illegal work, *and the legal work must always be under the effective control of the illegal party.*" (Italics mine.) The same theory occurs again and again in the writings of Lenin and other Bolshevik authorities.

Social movements based on material interests and the ideas and ideals springing from such movements cannot be suppressed by physical force. This is almost axiomatic. If a Socialist or any other revolutionary movement will not be allowed to carry on its propaganda openly and within the law, it will find means to work secretly and against the law. But the method of secret and underground propaganda must always

remain inadequate to meet the manifold requirements of the class struggle in an advanced country. Even with their large daily press and own publishing houses; their meeting halls and public propaganda; their powerful unions, co-operatives and political organizations, their strikes, demonstrations and electoral campaigns, the modern Socialist and labor movements have a very difficult stand against the superior bourgeois facilities for influencing the masses of the people. What effect can the clandestine publication and meager distribution of a few revolutionary leaflets or publications or the holding of a few secret meetings be expected to have upon the titanic struggles of modern Socialism, in which millions upon millions of workers are pitched against the tremendous organized power of international capital?

The only notable instances in the history of modern Socialism in which "illegal" work was resorted to, were those in Russia under the Tsar and in Germany under Bismarck: In both cases the tactics of secrecy were forced upon the movement by absolute prohibition of open activities. In Russia the underground propaganda of Socialism, conducted through several decades with marvelous ingenuity and untold sacrifices, never reached more than a mere fringe of the population.

In Germany during the anti-Socialist laws the Social Democrats had their parliamentary elections as periodical gathering points and Parliament itself as a public forum, and they gained strength largely through

these instruments. Summing up the experience of this period Frederick Engels remarks in what may be considered his political Testament:

“And thus it happened that the bourgeoisie and the government came to a pass where they feared the lawful activity of the workers’ party far more than its unlawful activity; they dreaded the result of an election more than those of rebellion.”³

The Russian Communists, of course, also do not prefer illegal methods on principle.⁴ But their insistent emphasis upon the necessity of “co-ordinating” legal with illegal work tends to create the impression that both are of equal importance and efficiency, and to weaken the struggle for the maintenance of the right of open public propaganda.

The subordination of legal work (when illegal work also becomes necessary) to the “effective control of the illegal party,” would furthermore reduce the Socialist parties to the position of conspiratory organizations, and turn them back to the days of Blanquism, when it was still considered possible to have proletarian revolutions carried out “by small conscious minorities at the head of the unconscious masses.”

³ “After Fifty Years.”

⁴ Although some of their expressions would almost seem to convey that notion. Thus Lenin (“The Collapse of Second International,” page 52) charges that it was the possibility of acting within the law that reared “opportunism” within the labor parties of the period of the second International.