LENIN and TROTSKY

A study, and understanding, of the problems of policy and of administration confronting the workers' movement in every part of the world ought surely to be a part of our work as I.W.C.E.ers. Maurice Dobb here summarises the main issues behind the controversy between Trotsky and the leaders of the Comintern; issues which we, in our turn, must inevitably face one day—when we, in our turn, seize power.

IT can hardly be disputed that Lenin made a contribution to Marxist theory, which has good claim to the title of the Marxism of the twentieth century; and this theory he forged by revolutionary practice into a concrete living reality. Yet few of the ideas and conceptions which figure in the numerous continental controversies about the subject are known to us in this country, or studied—still less understood. For this reason any book which may familiarise us with the teaching and practice of Lenin is of inestimable importance to our movement; and accordingly one greets very eagerly the new book on Lenin from the brilliant pen of Trotsky, which a bourgeois publisher has seen fit to make available in an excellent English translation.*

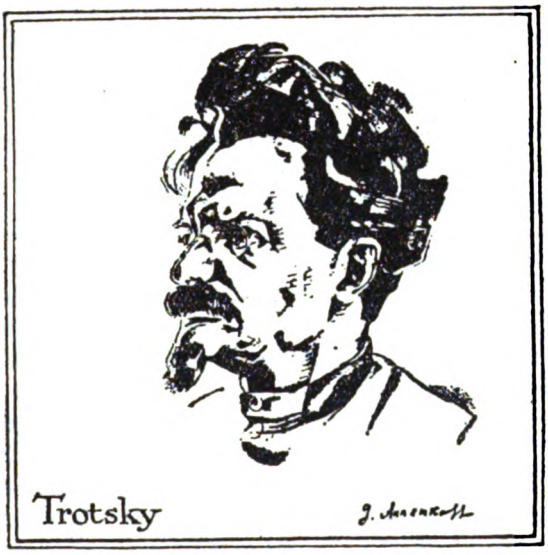
The book starts with interesting glimpses of Lenin in the days before the split in the Social Democratic Party in 1903, when he was at work in London, on the editorial committee of *Iskra*, along with Martov and Plekhanov. They were the days of the fight against the so-called "Economists"—those who were so obsessed with the economic factor and with the doctrine of "inevitableness," that they neglected the active role of a class in history, and the need to study the problems of active political organisation and agitation. In those days the fight was against those, on the one hand, who wished for a less intransigent tone towards the Liberals and even for working agreements with them against Czardom, and against the Social Revolutionaries and their individual terrorism, on the other hand. In the realm of theory the period saw the clarifying of ideas upon modern Imperialism, upon the agrarian question, and upon the "how" of the workers' struggle—questions which brought Lenin, of the new generation, into conflict with Plekhanov, his former teacher.

Through all these controversies one sees Lenin clearly and firmly pursuing a goal which received more definite formulation at each step, surely and carefully subordinating to that single aim every

* *Lenin*, by Leon Trotsky (Harrap, 7s. 6d. net).

detail on the road, so as to use persons and tactics when they serve this end and discard them when they had become an impediment. Untouched by internal conflicts and sentimentalisms which blur reality, his "keen, penetrating mind rejected all the external, the accidental, the superficial, in order to perceive the main roads and methods of action."

From the *Iskra* period we pass to interesting glimpses of the days



between April and October, 1917, of Lenin's courageous faith in the masses, his insistence that then was the time for the Party, on behalf of the masses, to seize power, and his struggle against those who desired merely the rôle of a "left wing" of democracy, and clung to legal democratic forms. To Lenin neither legality nor illegality were unswerving principles: everything was a tactic in the ruling strategy of rallying the masses *against* the bourgeois State. We see him—known in the spring of 1917, only as "a curious man who wrote little articles in a little newspaper" and was laughed at by the Kerenskyites in the Congress of Soviets—setting his teeth against "sentimental pacifism" and democratic illusions. At Brest-Litovsk, after the seizure of power, the flexibility of Lenin's realism showed itself even more clearly than before. Now it was necessary to make compromises to safeguard that power. The need was to combat those whose adherence to "principles" and love of heroic "attitudes" endangered the holding of power. Lenin insisted that the Peace, however humiliating, must be signed, in order to give a "breathing space" to the revolution and to consolidate its position. He won . . . and history has shown that he was right.

But in spite of these valuable pictures there is something a little unsatisfying and incomplete about Trotsky's book, and the story tails off into short disjointed comments about nationalism in Lenin, a reply to H. G. Wells, about Lenin's illness and then the grief at his death. There is a gap from 1903 to 1917, and this inevitably is a serious defect in the impression of Lenin conveyed. The chapters on 1917 certainly give rather to Trotsky himself the place of protagonist in the front of the stage, with Lenin assenting and commenting in the background, and with Kamenev, Kalinin, Stalin, Uritsky and Sverdlov and others occasionally appearing for a few moments from the wings. "Myself and Lenin" would hardly be an inappropriate title to the book. No doubt such a treatment is partly inevitable in personal sketches of this kind; but it necessarily causes one to look elsewhere for a complete study of Lenin and Leninism.

Nor is one likely to be satisfied if one looks to this book to find the roots of the present controversy between Trotsky and the leaders of the Comintern, and to find the differences between Lenin's view and Trotsky's and their points of agreement, on which Trotsky so emphatically insists. The publishers, with an eye to advertisement, announce it as the "book whose publication caused the exile of the author." Needless to say, the author has not been exiled—he has merely been requested to resign his post as chairman of the Military Council; nor is this the book that has given rise to the present controversy. A few shadows of the controversy are, of course, cast across its pages, such as the continual identification of Lenin's viewpoint with Trotsky's, for instance, and references to Lenin's differences from certain of the "old Bolsheviks"; but it is little use to go to this book to find the roots of the discussion. It is not here, but in the Preface to a later volume entitled "1917," that Trotsky expressed the views about which the controversy has waged.

To summarise the points at issue between Trotsky and the Comintern leaders is not easy in a short article; and it is made more difficult by the need to make certain assumptions and allusions which are largely unfamiliar to British worker-students. The start of the matter was when Trotsky, at the Conference of the Russian Communist Party in 1923, led the Workers' Opposition group against the E.C., criticising the official economic policy, and calling for a greater democratisation of the Party and the right to form opposition groups within it. These matters were fully discussed at the conference and the official standpoint was endorsed; and, in conformity with the usual policy of full and frank discussion before taking a Party decision and then complete unity in carrying the majority decision into effect, the opposition agreed to close the discussion and to abide by the conference verdict.

Then in the autumn of 1924, the third volume of Trotsky's "1917" was published, to which he contributed a controversial Preface. The overt motive of this was a plea for a study of October, 1917, and an insistence on its importance as an example to European workers when approaching a revolutionary situation; and from the experience of October Trotsky attempted to draw certain lessons. He starts by assuming that in order to give a revolutionary lead to the masses and to organise and carry through the struggle for power, a united, disciplined, and organised Party is needed, drawn from the most active elements of its class and holding the confidence of the masses.

> The rôle played in the bourgeois revolutions by the economically powerful bourgeois, its organisations, its municipalities, its universities, etc., can, in the Proletarian Revolution, only fall to the lot of the Party of the proletariat. . . . A possessing class is capable of wresting power from the hands of another possessing class, and maintaining it whilst supporting itself upon its riches, its culture and its innumerable connections with the old State apparatus. With the proletariat, however, nothing can replace its Party.

In the old Social-Democracy there was much talk of tactics, and these were conceived as separate tactics applying to separate departments—parliamentary, trade union, co-operative, etc.—and each was treated in isolation. Actually, however, the Workers' Party must be capable, not only of tactics—"the art of carrying out individual operations"—but of strategy—"the art of conquering power"; and it is the rôle of the Party to co-ordinate and control the various separate tactics—trade union, co-operative, parliamentary, etc.—in line with this wider class strategy.

Now, the greatest change of strategy is required when conditions so develop as to create a revolutionary situation—a situation where the enemy are sufficiently weak and vacillating and the working masses sufficiently strong and class-conscious to make a seizure of power possible. It then remains for "the Party of the proletariat to proceed from preparation, from propaganda, from organisation and agitation to the immediate struggle for power, to the armed insurrection against the bourgeoisie." The failure of the workers to follow the Russian example successfully in the revolutionary period at the end of the war—in Germany, Hungary, Austria, Finland, Italy—was due precisely to the absence of a Party suitably united and organised to effect this change of strategy.

So far Trotsky says little with which any disciple of Lenin would quarrel. But from it he draws a more precise conclusion. It is this change of strategy, he declares, which almost inevitably produces a crisis in the Workers' Party, bringing out the opposition of all the passive and conservative elements who tend to hold back from the new strategy of seizure of power. In 1917 this was represented by the old Bolshevik leaders, such as Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov;

and only the persistent energy of Lenin carried through the correct policy in October. At the April Conference of the Party Lenin first brought forward his slogan of "Down with the Provisional Government." To him it was necessary to prepare the masses for a clean break with the democratic parties. But the right wing of the Bolsheviks opposed this, declaring that the rôle of the Party was to help by "pressure" to "complete the democratic revolution." Some even said that the functions of the Soviets were temporary and must pass to the democratic institutions, and some that in Russia the workers' revolution needed to wait upon a socialist revolution in the West.

Trotsky declares that this hesitant right wing, over-estimating the forces of the enemy, under-estimating the strength of the workers, always tends to appear when transition to military insurrection is necessary, and this element must be strenuously opposed and its influence in the Party removed. This is what occurred in Bulgaria and Germany in 1923, when the Party failed to take advantage of a revolutionary situation and so suffered defeat. For in those countries there were hesitant Menshevik elements among the Party leaders, but no Lenin ; and, moreover, there was bad generalship from the centre (i.e., the Comintern)—though this is implied rather than explicitly stated—because the very elements who erred in 1917 hold the lead in the Communist International.

This Preface, which is a brilliant and persuasive piece of writing, the Party leaders in Russia declared to be a return by indirect means to the 1923 discussions, which it had been agreed to close. It was an indirect attack on the existing Party leaders. Their reply to Trotsky's attack takes the following line :—

First, they declare that the reference to the German and Bulgarian defeats in 1923 are misleading. In the case of Germany it was Zinoviev who first saw in August that the situation (thanks to the Ruhr occupation) was changing to a revolutionary one, and he sounded the alarm and summoned the E.C. of the German C.P. to Moscow to discuss with them the needs of the new strategy of seizing power. Trotsky all along supported the German "right" leaders of the C.P., such as Brandler, who failed to carry out preparatory military measures, gave exclusive attention to Saxony, and confined themselves to Parliamentary tactics and Governmental alliance with the Left Social Democrats. It was Trotsky, also, who opposed the inclusion of Ruth Fischer, representing the Left in the E.C. of the German Party, and who in January, 1924, signed a memorandum supporting what Brandler had done.

The mistake in Bulgaria was that, on the overthrow of the Stambolisky peasant government by the Fascist reactionaries of Tsankov, the C.P. of Bulgaria remained neutral instead of forming an alliance

with the peasantry. It was the leaders of the Comintern who immediately criticised this failure—a mistake speedily recognised by the Bulgarian leaders. The Tsankov regime involved a severe White Terror ; and rather than submit tamely to this the Bulgarian C.P. put up armed resistance, but having little preparatory contact with the peasantry was beaten. Only several months later does Trotsky come along with his criticisms of the two events.

Second, they declare that Trotsky has exaggerated the differences of opinion in 1917 in order to serve his purpose of identifying himself closely with Lenin and attacking Kamenev, Zinoviev, etc. Differences existed, as there naturally have always been at crucial points in the Party history ; but they gradually grew less until in October the Party was almost united behind the Lenin policy. Moreover, the erring comrades in question had admitted their mistakes in speech and writing, and in consequence were soon re-appointed with Lenin's approval to important posts in the Party.

Third, Trotsky places too exclusive importance on the military period of insurrection and on the purely military tasks of the Party. He neglects the less spectacular rôle of the Party during the slow (pre-revolutionary) process of building and of creating contact with the masses. Yet without this preparatory period there would have been no Party to carry through October, 1917 !

These divergencies of Trotsky's policy proceed from fundamental differences of outlook ; and these differences are epitomised in Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, in which is included his attitude to the peasantry. This theory, which he formulated during 1905, is briefly as follows :—When a revolutionary situation arises, the proletariat finds itself to be the only class without any real allies, and it is accordingly forced to form a military organisation and seize power, taking advantage of the temporary discontent among the peasantry and petit-bourgeoisie to make a temporary alliance with them. But as soon as the workers have seized power and proceeded to inaugurate Socialism, they inevitably come into conflict with the peasantry, and can only achieve victory by alliance with the workers of the West in a world revolution and a Workers' United States of Europe.

This clearly brings out the points in which Trotsky has differed from the official position since 1917. First, he opposed the Peace of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans, because he despaired of holding power unless there were a world revolution, and he preferred in consequence the "heroic" measures of a revolutionary war of defence, by which the workers of West Europe might perchance be stirred to action. Second, in the critical period before the introduction of the N.E.P. he proposed as a solution the militarisation

of labour. The Workers' Opposition had at that time put forward the syndicalist proposal for placing control of production in the hands of the trade unions. Trotsky combined this proposal with the plan to appoint military heads to the unions and to organise them on military lines. In this he left the peasants out of account, whereas Lenin, seeing that the crux of the matter lay in the relations with the peasantry, introduced N.E.P. and free trade in corn. Third, he put forward at the 1923 Conference, in opposition to the official policy, proposals based on the "Dictatorship of Industry."* This involved (*a*) opposition to the lowering of industrial prices, devised to overcome the "scissors" crisis (the high price of industrial and low price of agricultural goods, involving the inability of the peasants to buy industrial products); (*b*) a critical attitude to the financial reform and monetary stabilisation, since this involved restricting credit to industry, whereas inflation placed a "tax" on the peasantry to the benefit of industry; (*c*) the proposal to place more power with the State Economic Planning Council in order to enforce a single economic plan for industry; a proposal which was opposed by the official leaders because the Planning Council gave scant representation to agriculture, and would in practice have represented industry to the neglect of, or even in opposition to, agriculture.

To this policy, evidently traceable to a distrust of the peasantry and of the growth of their influence, the Communist leaders oppose the alternative of alliance with the peasantry for the maintenance of Soviet power. Naturally the position would be aided by a Socialist revolution in the West; but the position is not hopeless without it any more than it was hopeless in 1918. The solution is for the workers to forge a closer alliance with the peasantry; and this they can do, while at the same time transforming peasant economy into socialism, by giving the help of co-operative credits and selling agencies, in place of the middleman and the usurer; by extending education in the villages and spreading technical knowledge, experimental stations for agriculture, etc. And this governs also the relations of the Soviet State with the national movements of the East.

Such are the main lines of the controversy, on which the capitalist Press have seized so eagerly as a sign of the "weakening" of Soviet

* This policy is connected with an interesting theory which Preobraschensky has propounded in a recently published book, *The Fundamental Law of Socialist Accumulation*. This theory is that in the transition period Socialist industry must "exploit" the colonial areas (i.e., all domains of small property, including the peasantry), by keeping up the prices of industrial products, and so creating accumulation for the expansion of Socialist industry. In this way small property will be gradually forced out of existence. This he calls "primary socialist accumulation."

authority and its intransigence and intolerance. Such in main outline is Trotsky's position, which, whether right or wrong, has unfortunately formed a rallying point for many bourgeois elements in Russia among the specialists and old intellectuals and "nepmen," who seize on any hope of a "revision" of Communist policy.

To many the details of such a controversy may seem alien and irrelevant. If this is so, it but goes to show to what an extent we are unfamiliar with the ideas and practice of the Marxism of which Lenin was the exponent. Only a Kautsky who still lives in the nineteenth century, or a Macdonald who disavows Marxism, will deny that the lessons of the workers' struggle in other countries have an important bearing on the problems which lie ahead of our own movement, or that the problem of the seizure of power by the workers will present important points of similarity wherever it occurs. In our educational work we have hitherto paid much attention to abstract things like theories of value and Dietzgen. We have talked much about "historical necessity" and the determining effect of economic factors. In the last few years we have paid a welcome attention to modern Imperialism. But as yet we have dealt very little with what is the essential problem of post-1914 Marxism—a study of the political issues involved in the workers' struggle for power, and a careful examination of such revolutionary experience as that in which Russia and Central Europe during and since 1917 are rich. Trotsky complains that insufficient study has been given to the lessons of 1917. For us there has been very little study of the politics of any period, save the Paris Commune and a few superficial details about the Russian Revolution. We have talked much about the State in antiquity and under feudalism, and even framed certain generalisations about the democratic State of the nineteenth century; but of the detailed changes in the Imperialist State of to-day and the relation of the workers to it we know little. Moreover, such kernels of the controversy discussed in this article, as the rôle of a Workers' Party in the preparatory period of insurrection, in the seizure of power and in the subsequent period, or of relations with the peasantry and colonial peoples, we have left almost untouched; while the lessons of Russia in 1905 and 1917, of Germany, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, etc., since the war we have scarcely begun to study and compare with the conditions of our own movement to-day. This gap in our teaching we should make haste to fill. And, if we are wise, we shall study such questions—not slavishly and uncritically, but carefully and realistically—with the help of what Lenin thought and taught and carried into practice in connection with all these things.

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