

Chapter IX

VIOLENCE AND TERROR

The Russian Revolution has brought to the foreground another important question—the rôle of force in the Socialist movement.

The Socialists of the pre-war era assigned but a secondary part to force as a factor in the social revolution.

In his famous controversy with Edward Bernstein, Karl Kautsky stated the Socialist position in this language :

“The conception of revolution is not to be treated in the police interpretation of the term, in the sense of an armed rising. A party would be mad that would choose the method of insurrection on principle so long as it has at its disposal different, less costly, and safer methods of action. In that sense social democracy was never revolutionary on principle. It is so only in the sense that it recognizes that when it attains political power it cannot employ it for any purpose other than the abolition of the mode of production upon which the present system rests.”¹

¹ “Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm,” Stuttgart, 1899, page 181.

This was written in the early days of "revisionism," when Kautsky was the recognized spokesman of the radical wing of international Socialism. It undoubtedly represented the general Socialist attitude on the subject.

Rosa Luxemburg et al. The armed struggles into which the Russian Revolution was forced in defense of its achievements, and the brutal violence with which the Socialist Revolution of Finland and Hungary were put down by the capitalist forces in those countries, have led the exponents of the new Communism to revise the accepted Socialist attitude on the subject of force. While they do not, of course, advocate violence for the sake of violence, there is an unmistakable tendency in their speeches and writings to lay a growing emphasis on the factor of force. Not only do they proclaim the absolute inevitability of violence in the Socialist Revolution as an historical rule or forecast, but they insist upon including this theory in the every-day propaganda of Socialism.

Thus Lenin writes: "The necessity of systematically fostering among the masses this and only this point of view about violent revolution (its inevitability) lies at the root of the whole of Marx's and Engels' teaching, and it is just the neglect of such propaganda and agitation both by the present Social-Chauvinists and the Kautskian schools that brings their betrayal of it into prominent relief."²

² "The State and Revolution," page 25.

And Kameneff supports this view with the following argument :

“To move towards a seizure of power, not hoping to hold it, *and not preparing the conditions for holding it*, is simply foolhardiness ; to recognize the necessity for the proletariat conquering power, and to doubt the necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat, *to refuse to instruct the workers in this direction*—means consciously to prepare the betrayal of the cause of Socialism.”³ (Italics mine.)

Neither Lenin nor Kameneff nor any other Bolshevik authority stops to analyze the conditions and phases of the Socialist movement in which it becomes possible or proper to preach to the workers the alleged inevitability of violence or to “prepare the conditions” for holding power. And yet such an analysis must be made for the sake of avoiding confusion.

X The complete cycle of the Socialist movement may be divided into three main stages ; the preparation for the struggle to achieve power, the seizure of power, and defending the conquest of power—the pre-revolutionary, the revolutionary, and post-revolutionary periods of struggle. Of these the first stage is the longest and the most diversified in character and degree of maturity. It embraces all phases of the organized Socialist movement, from its inception as a mere in-

³ “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” London, 1920, p. 12.

strument of propaganda through the successive periods of organization and struggle to the point of development into a political force of recognized importance. It includes the entire process of Socialist growth from infancy to maturity, a process which in the countries of greatest Socialist strength, has taken from forty to fifty years. x

The test of Socialist progress in each country is the measure in which the masses of the workers rally to the support of the movement; the extent, spirit and consciousness of the class struggle. The process of Socialist growth may be described as *quantitative*, where, as in most countries of continental Europe, the organized labor movement is from its inception rooted in Socialist thought, and the prime Socialist problem is the physical increase of that movement. Or it may be designated as *qualitative*, where, as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the organized labor movement has attained to large dimensions, but lacks in clarity of class-consciousness, which the Socialists must endeavor to supply. In the countries of the former type the chief task of Socialism is organization, in the latter it is propaganda. But whether the immaturity of the Socialist movement is primarily physical or intellectual, it is clear that there is no sense or justification in "systematically fostering among the masses" the view of the hypothetical necessity of violent revolution at this preparatory stage. Not the temper of the Socialist revolution nor its physical aspect, but the preliminary

questions of its very desirability and feasibility, are then before the workers. The propaganda of violence as a present method or even as a prospective necessity under such conditions has always and rightly been rejected by Marxian Socialists. Violence as a species of "propaganda by deed" and premature revolutionary risings of workers are leaves from the book of Michael Bakunin, not Karl Marx.

It is only when the Socialist movement has developed to a point of strength and maturity at which it can successfully challenge the political rule of the bourgeoisie, when the objective and subjective conditions for a Socialist revolution are present, that the question of force or violence acquires a practical significance.

Must a Socialist revolution be accomplished by force? In discussing the question I am, for the time being, confining myself to the moment of the revolution, the act of capturing the powers of government.

The Communist authorities are unanimous and emphatic in answering the question in the affirmative.

"The substitution of a proletarian for the capitalist state is impossible without a violent revolution," categorically asserts Lenin.⁴ Bukharin propounds the doctrine that "every revolution means using force against the former dominators," and proclaims the slogan: "Overthrow the imperialistic governments by armed uprisings."⁵ Zinovieff defines civil war as "a

⁴ "The State and Revolution," page 25.

⁵ "Program of the Communists," pages 16 and 77.

function of the class struggle." ⁶ The Platform-Resolution of the Communist International declares that the class struggle inevitably transforms itself into civil war and that "the proletariat must resort to armed uprising," ⁷ and Kabakchieff, the Bulgarian delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International, reporting for the Committee on Constitution, lays down this sweeping principle:

"Only by an uprising, by the creating of a class army, and by the decisive, irreconcilable armed struggle can power be wrested from the hands of the exploiters, and the yoke of the capitalist order thrown off." ⁸

The hypothesis that at the decisive moment the ruling capitalist classes in the different countries will not surrender to the proletariat without a physical struggle has always been accepted as reasonable by the Socialists of the Marxian school. The new elements which Communism has introduced into the theory is the dogmatic certainty of the inevitability of violence and the tendency to consider it in the light of an offensive rather than defensive weapon.

Marx and Engels have on the whole, and particularly in their earlier writings, envisaged the social revolution

⁶ "Protokoll über die Verhandlungen, etc., in Halle," page 164.

⁷ "The Second Congress of the Communist International, etc.," pages 89 and 90.

⁸ Ibid., page 64.

as a violent struggle, although they admitted possible exceptions for some countries. But they never considered the element of force as an independent, constructive factor in the making of the revolution. Force may be "the midwife of every old society when it is pregnant with a new one" as Marx puts it, but the midwife is entirely impotent to bring a healthy child into the light of the world before it has been conceived and fully developed within the mother's womb.

Marx and Engels furthermore were confined almost entirely to aprioristic reasoning on the subject. They had no historic examples of concrete Socialist revolutions upon which to base valid empirical conclusions about the nature and psychology of such revolutions. The only instance of a proletarian uprising known to them was the Paris Commune, which can be compared only remotely with a modern Socialist revolution.

Within recent years, however, there have been several distinct cases in which Socialists have secured the power of government in their countries, and no scientific theory of revolution can to-day afford to leave out of account these valuable experiences.

In chronological order Finland was the first country in which the Socialists acquired political predominance. The conquest of power was secured in the first instance through a purely parliamentary victory. In the general elections of 1916, the Socialist party of Finland secured 103 seats in the Diet out of a total of 200. A coalition cabinet was formed which was presided over by Oscar

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Tokoi, a Socialist, with the other portfolios equally divided between Socialists and non-Socialists. It was this diet under Socialist leadership that proclaimed the independence of Finland on July 18th, 1917. The Kerensky government of Russia, acting in concert with the Finnish bourgeoisie, refused to recognize the validity of the Finnish declaration of independence, dissolved the diet and ordered new elections. The Socialist and labor organizations refused to recognize the legality of the new elections and of the bourgeois government based upon them. On January 27th, 1918, they proclaimed a general strike, drove out the new government and constituted a revolutionary Socialist government under the title of Provisional Government of the Peoples Republic of Finland. The rising was accompanied by little physical violence.

The inception of the Bolshevik revolution, in Russia, November 7th, 1917, is also to be traced to what may be termed a parliamentary victory, the securing of a majority in the Workers' and Soldiers' Council by the Bolsheviki. The Provisional government was abolished by a decree of the "Military Revolutionary Committee" of the Petrograd Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, who assumed the reins of government.

Comparatively slight resistance was made to the transfer of power, and the new government was able to record with satisfaction that "rarely has less blood

been spilled, and rarely has an insurrection succeeded so well."*

The short episode of Socialist power in Germany was preceded by mild outbreaks of revolt in the navy and by a one-day general strike. The revolution itself was carried through with almost bureaucratic formality. On November 9th, 1918, William II abdicated in compliance with the majority demand of the Reichstag. On the same day the Imperial Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, voluntarily transferred his office to the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert, and Philip Scheidemann proclaimed from a window of the Reichstag building the establishment of a republic with an all-Socialist government. On the 11th day of November a Council of Peoples' Commissars with the functions of a cabinet of ministers was constituted with three representatives of the Majority Socialists and an equal number of Minority Socialists. The death toll of the revolution was limited to a few persons killed in the course of minor riots incidental to demonstrations, on the 9th day of November.

The Austrian revolution was to a large extent a replica of the German. Upon the deposition of the Hapsburg dynasty on October 30th, 1918, the Diet proclaimed a republic and organized a provisional Council of State under Social-Democratic leadership. The transition was entirely bloodless.

* John Reed, "Ten Days That Shook the World," N. Y., 1919, p. 85.

The Socialist revolution in Hungary, March 24th, 1919, came to the workers of the country largely as a voluntary, and it may be added, fatal gift of the coalition government. The heavy peace terms of the Allied government and the starvation blockade inaugurated against the country together with the disquieting effects of the growing popular unrest induced the cabinet of Karolyi to abdicate "in favor of proletarian dictatorship" as an act of mingled surrender, spite and defiance.

The Paris Commune was to a large extent an incident of the Franco-Prussian war. In the defeat of French arms the Second Empire under Napoleon III was overthrown. The new republican government of Thiers sitting in Versailles did not yet have time to establish itself in power. The bulk of the bourgeoisie of Paris had fled in anticipation of the siege and the workers practically had the city to themselves. They also had the armed force of Paris, the National Guard, which had been organized during the war and was overwhelmingly proletarian. The humiliation of defeat, the sufferings of the war and the siege of 131 days, made the Parisian workers restive and rebellious. The latent antagonism between them and the Versaillan forces of the bourgeoisie came to a head when the latter attempted to capture the artillery of the National Guard on March 18th, 1871. The attempt was frustrated; a general municipal election was held on March 26th, and the Paris Commune was proclaimed on March 28th. The change of government was accomplished without bloodshed.

Of course, the precedents of these revolutions do not offer any guaranty for a peaceful "seizure of power" in future proletarian revolutions. The revolutions have in all cases occurred under extraordinary circumstances directly or indirectly prepared by war. But it must be borne in mind that social revolutions generally are quite apt to happen under unusual conditions, when the power of resistance of the ruling class is at least temporarily weakened. To assert the absolute inevitability of violence in the seizure of political power by the working class in the face of all historical experiences is at least somewhat rash.

Another question arises about the necessity of force to hold the political power conquered in a proletarian revolution. Here history tells a different tale.

The French Communards failed to realize the overshadowing and vital importance of the military defense of their government. Instead of burying their political differences and organizing all their forces and resources, so as to meet the attacks of their opponents by a strong, unified and disciplined resistance, they wasted precious time on academic discussions and factional controversies. And while the leaders of the proletarian insurrection talked, the wily chiefs of the bourgeois counter-revolution were busy preparing for action. After a number of preliminary skirmishes with varying military luck, the army of the Versaillese, reinforced by large numbers of military prisoners, whom Prussian yunkerdom had released for that purpose,

succeeded in entering Paris on the 21st day of May. A stubborn but unequal struggle of eight days ensued, and the last heroic defenders of the workers' republic were defeated. The bourgeoisie was enthroned once more, and the orgy of bestial revenge with which the guardians of "law and order" celebrated their victory knew no limits.

"When the struggle was over," records Lissagaray, the eloquent historian of the Commune, "the army was transformed into a huge platoon of executioners. More than 5,000 prisoners, who had been rounded up in the neighborhood of Pere la Chaise, were taken to the prison of La Roquette. A chief of batallion stood at the entrance and viewed the prisoners. Without addressing a single question to them he commanded "right" or "left." Those ordered to the left were instantly shot."¹⁰ It is estimated that no less than 20,000 workers were thus summarily executed in the first days of the bourgeois restoration, while about 14,000 were subsequently condemned by court martial to death, exile or prison.

"To find a parallel for the conduct of Thiers and his bloodhounds," says Karl Marx, "we must go back to the times of Sulla and the two triumvirates of Rome. The same wholesale slaughter in cold blood; the same disregard, in massacre, of age and sex; the same system

¹⁰ "Geschichte der Kommune von 1871," Stuttgart, 1894, page 351.

of torturing prisoners; the same proscriptions, but this time of a whole class; the same savage hunt after concealed leaders, lest one might escape; the same denunciations of political and private enemies; the same indifference for the butchery of entire strangers to the feud. There is but this difference, that the Romans had no mitrailleuses for the wholesale despatch of the proscribed, and that they had not "the law in their hands," nor on their lips the cry of "civilization."¹¹

The Finnish leaders of the Socialist revolution were by no means unmindful of the counter-revolutionary danger. They organized a Red Guard, composed of the flower of Finnish labor, as disciplined, determined and efficient a body as ever took the field for a good cause. If all they had to overcome were their own bourgeoisie, the Finnish workers would undoubtedly have remained victorious. But the international solidarity of exploiters proved too strong for them. The "White Guard" of the Finnish bourgeoisie was supported with arms and ammunition from Sweden and other countries and reinforced by regiments of trained German soldiers. The rebellious proletariat of the small country succumbed to the superior international force of capitalism, and capitalism took bloody vengeance. The reign of "white terror" inaugurated by the triumphant Finnish bourgeoisie was cold, cruel and thoroughgoing. Over 100,000 men, women and children were jailed; 15,000 workers were summarily exe-

¹¹ "Civil War in France," page 69.

cuted and 15,000 more died of starvation. The Socialist and labor movements of the country were outlawed, their papers suppressed and their headquarters turned over to the White Guard.

The Bolshevik government of Russia in the early days of its existence gave comparatively little thought to the defense of the revolution. The regular army was demobilized, and the only armed force upon which the revolutionary proletariat could rely consisted of a few ill-organized volunteer detachments of workers. Capital punishment was abolished, and the opposition was allowed full freedom of speech and press. This period of "rosy illusions" and "sentimental youth," as Kameneff terms it, lasted about six months. In the spring of 1918, appeared the first signs of active counter-revolutionary plots and these grew steadily in extent and seriousness. The sporadic attempts of the Russian bourgeoisie to set up opposition governments in one part of the country and in another would not have been serious if they had not been actively supported by the powerful governments of the Entente and by a series of artificially stimulated wars on the part of several border states. The Russian revolution did not succumb to the attacks because favorable conditions afforded it the time to organize an effective defense. The Russian bourgeoisie was weak, weaker than the bourgeoisie of any other important country in Europe. Standing alone it had neither the resources nor the capacity to organize a successful counter-revolution.

The foreign capitalist governments had just gone through the severest war in history. They were exhausted and their populations were war weary and restive. They could not and dared not enter into open and extensive warfare against Russia. The tremendous size and comparative economic self-sufficiency of the country palliated the effects of the blockade and protected it from effective occupation by hostile forces.

Besides the revolutionary government of Russia took energetic measures of defense upon the first sign of danger. In April, 1918, the Red Army was formed, and the organization was steadily improved and increased until it could successfully meet all armed attacks, while strenuous measures of political repression were taken to cope with counter-revolutionary propaganda. It was the timely organization of the Red Army and the prompt suppression of counter-revolutionary plots that saved Soviet Russia.

The experiences of Germany and Austria contribute but little to the study of post-revolutionary struggles. The revolutions in these countries found the people stunned by defeat, apathetic and demoralized, while the Socialist movement, particularly in Germany, was disunited and discouraged. The Socialists accepted power in a spirit of half-heartedness. They had no desire to hold it against substantial opposition, and made no preparations to defend it. They could neither maintain union in their own ranks nor hold their following in succeeding elections, and political power slip-

ped out of their hands as quietly and unostentatiously as it had come to them.

The leaders of the Hungarian Soviet republic also neglected to take energetic measures for the defense of the revolution. During the four months of their power they lived in a sort of a fool's paradise, relying largely upon the good will of the people for the safety of their régime. While a Red Guard and Revolutionary Tribunals were organized in outward imitation of the Russian model, the institutions were altogether inadequate and ineffective.

The invasion of hordes of Roumanian forces gave the embittered bourgeois of the country the long-hoped for opportunity to wreak bloody vengeance upon the revolutionary proletariat. They overthrew the Soviet government and inaugurated a reign of terror unparalleled in bloodthirstiness and bestiality.

Thus the experience of all proletarian revolutions shows that while the capitalist class, stunned and demoralized by the sudden and irresistible advent of the revolution, may for the time being surrender without resistance, it may be expected after the first period of surprise to recover its class morale and muster its scattered forces for a counter-attack. The counter-revolutionary struggle of the bourgeoisie begins after the successful proletarian revolution. As a rule, it has the full and active support of international capitalism. It is continuous, embittered and unrelenting, and woe to the rebellious workers if it finally succeeds.

In the historical instances before us it has not been the revolutionary proletariat that employed violence in the overthrow of the capitalist government. It was the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie that resorted to methods of violence in its efforts to overthrow the organized government of the workers. The force used by the revolutionary government of the workers to maintain itself in power was in all cases a defensive, not an aggressive force.

But whether such force is defensive or aggressive in its origin and character is after all a question of only academic importance. It is abundantly clear that a proletarian régime must at all times maintain an efficient and adequate organization to protect its conquests, and that it must be particularly alert and determined in the early period of its existence, when counter-revolutionary capitalist attacks are likely to be most frequent and dangerous.

What is the measure and extent of force required for the maintenance of the working-class rule or proletarian dictatorship?

When a capitalist government feels itself secure it relies upon the ordinary instrumentalities of its police and courts to put down all sporadic revolts against its authority. When such revolts assume more threatening proportions the government substitutes the stringent rule of martial law for the normal civil régime, and unceremoniously curtails or abolishes the established political rights of its opponents. Martial law in

intensified form and extended application becomes government terrorism—white bourgeois terror.

A working-class government is actuated by the same law of self-preservation. Normally it can afford a greater degree of toleration of political and class opposition than a capitalist government, because it is more securely rooted in the interests of the "immense majority" of the people. But when it is actively attacked it must defend itself with all power at its command, and when its existence is seriously endangered by counter-revolutionary movements creating a virtual state of civil war, it must resort to extraordinary measures of defense, military and political. It is under such circumstances, and such circumstances only that the proletarian dictatorship finds itself forced to institute the measures and organizations for summary repression which constitute the essence of revolutionary terror. It goes without saying that the régime of "terror" is in all cases a passing phase and disappears when the conditions which have produced it have been successfully overcome.

This conception of the rôle of terror in the proletarian dictatorship was generally held by the Socialists of the Marxian school, including the Bolsheviki. In the program of the Russian Social Democratic Party adopted in 1903, the measure of force implicit in the dictatorship is limited to such as "will allow it to crush all resistance on the part of the exploiters," and even upon their accession to political power the Communists

of Russia did not believe that such force would necessarily reach the dimensions of terror. On that point we have the convincing testimony of the Communist leaders themselves, particularly L. Kameneff, who declares:

“There can be nothing more mistaken than to assume that the Russian proletariat, or even its leader, the Communist Party, came into power with recipes, prepared in advance, of practical measures for the realization of the dictatorship. Only Socialist ignoramuses, or charlatans, could suggest that the Russian Communists came into power with a prepared plan for a standing army, Extraordinary Commissions, and limitations of political liberty, to which the Russian proletariat was obliged to resort for self-defense after bitter experience.”¹²

The Russian workers have been obliged to resort to the method of terror to cope with the threatening conditions which have developed in their country. Does it follow that the same conditions will face every proletarian revolution and force a similar course in all instances? On the basis of the general rule of cause and effect no such universal conclusion is warranted, and while Communist spokesmen are sometimes inclined to consider the terror as an inevitable feature of every proletarian dictatorship, the balance of their authority seems to reject the theory.

¹² “Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” page 9.

Thus Kameneff, who, in one place asserts categorically that "when persons calling themselves Socialists, declare that the *course* of dictatorship (referring distinctly to the feature of terror), admissible and explicable in Russia, is in no wise obligatory or inevitable for any other capitalist country, they proclaim a thing directly contrary to truth,"¹³ admits almost in the same breath that "the question regarding the degree of severity of the dictatorship, the extent and conditions of the limitations of the political rights of the bourgeoisie and limitation of political liberty in general, the application of terroristic methods, etc., is indissolubly linked with the question of the degree, forms, stubbornness and organization of resistance by the exploiters,"¹⁴ which must, of course, vary in every country.

Lenin lays down the rule in this explicit statement: "The Question, in what countries and in what national peculiarities of this or that Capitalism a wholesale or partial restriction of democracy will be applied to the exploiters, is the question of just those national peculiarities of capitalism and of this or that revolution."¹⁵ And the imaginative philosopher, N. Bukharin, who in one place assures us that "the capitalist states will not surrender without a struggle. They will fight desperately in order to prevent the proletariat from

¹³ "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat," page 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 9.

¹⁵ "The Proletarian Revolution," page 40.

securing world power,"¹⁶ in another place and in a more cheerful mood envisages a point in the growth of the proletarian world revolution at which the resistance of the capitalist class will weaken to such an extent that "finally all remnants of the bourgeois régime will in all probability surrender *in corpore* with all its organizations."¹⁷

On the whole it may be safely said that while a longer or shorter period of terror may become necessary under certain conditions of proletarian revolutions, the terroristic method is no more an inseparable feature of the proletarian dictatorship than the soviet is its inevitable form.

¹⁶ "Program of the Communists," page 19.

¹⁷ "The Process of World Revolution and the World System of Communism." From the German translation of St. Ramm.