

# The Artist and the Revolution

Being An Open Letter to Maxim Gorky

By Henriette Roland-Holst

**D**URING the period immediately preceding the world war, when Socialism had become tame and gentle throughout Western Europe, when it was at home in salons and drawing-rooms and even frequented court circles, many great scientists, artists and literary men called themselves "Socialist." Even as far back as the "forties" of the last century Socialism had already become fashionable. The rulers and diplomats had, by their fears of its name. To be known as a socialist was entirely harmless and placed no obstacles in the way of an "honorable" social career, the aspirations for higher positions and appointments to official positions. On the contrary, as part of a parliamentary majority of a ministry the Social Democracy, in the person of its leaders, controlled the appointment of officers and high functionaries and the bestowal of decorations.

Social Democracy was no longer hostile to Capitalism, it had become a part of civil society.

In the catastrophe of the world war, however, the Socialism of the official Social Democratic parties was tested and found wanting, the great literary men who were closely connected with these parties succumbed to the nationalistic and imperialistic cliques. Anatole France, Verhaeren, Wells, George Bernard Shaw, all the world's celebrated writers who adorned the progressive, humanitarian, pacifist and reformist Socialism since the beginning of the twentieth century were hurled upon the rocks of capitalist conscription by the awful flood of passionate desires aroused by the war. They became idolators and apostles of the nationalist-imperialistic idea and revealed how closely they were yet connected with the bourgeoisie, how impregnated with its ideology, and their complete inability to conceive the future of humanity in any other way than in the political and social forms of bourgeois society.

Romain Rolland alone, of all the celebrated writers of Western Europe, remained true to his cosmopolitan principles, in his ideas of conciliation between Germany and France, without the realization that the basis of such a conciliation was lacking in the present system of society. He presented a tragic figure—his moral courage, his absolute independence, his desperate struggle to save international thought and democratic liberty in the imperialistic face of Capitalism, and his initial impotence to understand that these could only be saved by war-like Communism, the mass action of the world proletariat for a new society.

As did Romain Rolland in the bourgeois West, so did you, Maxim Gorky, alone, of all the renowned poets and writers of the absolutist East of Europe, take a stand against the tide of nationalism. But while he held his stand in the name of an ideology which had no roots in the social system, in the name of a principle that could only arouse a few, you took a stand in the name of revolutionary international Socialism, the ideology that inspired the advance guard in Russia and called them to heroic deeds.

And we, the revolutionary Socialist artists, in small neutral Holland, where the political and social thought is in advance of the social struggle, where the revolutionists feed themselves on the ideal reflection of the struggle which is in action outside its boundaries, we looked with pride and love and warm comradeship to you, who, in the general renunciation, remained true to the International revolutionary ideal. We did not expect anything less from you. We knew your works and were aware of your love as a son and brother of the people thirsting for liberty. We knew you as an enemy, not only of Russian absolutism, but of Russian bourgeois and petty bourgeois society.

Did you not always condemn bourgeois society for its miserable narrow-mindedness, its cowardly fears and cringings? Were your works not a hymn of resistance and revolt against the fetters of old ideas and morals, of old forms and prejudices.

As long as the masses in Russia were too weak to wage war on coercion and oppression, you moulded your heroes after individual and individualistic rebels, from the gypsies and tramps. You never praised, as did the generation of great writers before you, the patience and docility of the peasants as their highest virtue, never was your social ideal that of submission, you always praised rebellion—the active uprising against the unbearable conditions from which the people suffered, against ignorance, tradition, prejudice. And as soon as the labor movement manifested its power you made it your hero.

In *The Mother* you have tried to picture something of the greatness of the first semi-proletarian revolution: the Russia of 1905, something of the greatness of the suffering and struggling masses, which for the first time appeared on the world's stage. You were as one with the idea of this struggle, the wrestling and

## FOREWORD

This article (translated from the Dutch by B. Auerhaan) is written by one of the most brilliant women in the revolutionary Socialist movement of Europe.

Henriette Roland-Holst is a member of the Communist Party of Holland, until recently the Social Democratic Party in Holland, which is the left wing expression of the Dutch Socialist movement. This party soon after the November 7 Revolution was designated by the Bolshevik Government as its representative to secure information from neutral and belligerent countries. The party publishes a daily newspaper in Amsterdam, *The Tribune*, which is a splendid exponent of revolutionary ideas, and which wages a merciless fight against the reactionary, petty bourgeois Socialism represented by the party of Peter Troelstra. Comrade Roland-Holst is associated with Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter on the editorial staff of the theoretical monthly magazine of the party, *The New Age*; she is also associated with Wynkoop of *The Tribune*.

Besides being active in the revolutionary movement, Henriette Roland-Holst is literary artist of the first magnitude, and is recognized as one of the foremost literary critics of Europe. *The Revolutionary Age* expects to print her articles regularly, as well as the articles of the brilliant group—Pannekoek, Gorter and Wonkoop.

seething peasant and proletarian masses. You remained true after the defeat; amidst the reaction of 1917 and the following years you remained true to the proletariat when so many lesser notables deserted—when nearly all the intellectuals sunk into obscurity and sensualism.

And in those years before, as well as during, the world war, you continued in close relation with the Russian Social Democracy, the party which Western Europe considered revolutionary. But when in February, 1917, Czarism collapsed under the attack of the workers' and soldiers' masses, it became evident we were mistaken.

A part of the Russian Social Democracy went over to the bourgeoisie,—as averse to revolutionaries as the official parties of Western Europe. Instead of supporting the slogan of the Bolsheviks: "All power to the Soviets," they allied themselves with the weak, hypocritical, politically impotent Russian bourgeoisie, marionettes whose actions were controlled by the great Capitalists in London and New York.

And when in November of the same year the Soviets pressed between the choice of surrendering Russia to the reactionary adventurers or attempting to make use of their power, choose the latter, they found the Menshevik and Right Social-Revolutionaries arrayed against them from the first day they assumed power. This meant that a great part of the specialized intellectuals and petty bourgeois decided against the attempt to realize the Socialist idea in Russia insofar as her economic development would allow. The break in the Social Democracy weakened the revolution, diminished its basis, lowered its moral and political superiority and made it impossible for the masses to conquer power and maintain their conquest without resorting to force. This relative weakness of the revolution, through the lack of unity amongst the masses, resulted in an inevitably severe, often cruel proletarian dictatorship. Indeed this lack of unity gave the dethroned oppressors and exploiters courage to repeatedly intrigue and conspire against the Soviet Government.

More than that, the Menshevik and Right Social-Revolutionaries supplied the men for the attempts of the reactionaries to enslave the masses again. Still the circumstances, out of which the revolution was born, multiply the terrors without end. "The revolution that was born out of the war" says Lenin in his *Letter to the American Workers*, "must necessarily go on through the terrible difficulties and sufferings that war created, through this heritage of destruction and reactionary mass murder." The revolution found Russia, economically and socially, in a state of terrible deterioration. It found starvation and general unemployment, the stores of supplies empty, the means of communication and traffic at a standstill. It found the old ties of docility and fear, which had kept the suppressed masses in check through their elementary instincts, gone as if by magic, it found their souls brutalized and savaged by the horrors and cruelties through which they had lived and which their masters

had taught them to commit. The revolution aroused in the masses for the first time human personalities but it could not prevent the awakening being accompanied by rough, wild, coarse egotism.<sup>1</sup>

This explains the wild chaotic character of the beginning of the proletarian revolution. The unchecked eruptions of desires, the anarchistic tendencies, which again and again came to the surface, the currents of cruelty and vengeance, which made for trouble and disturbance. These things are conceivable to us, but they are nevertheless not less terrible to our imagination and conscience.

And when you, Maxim Gorky, in the midst of all these terrors, when the revolution in its wild leap often destroyed everything that was to you holy and supreme, and which you trusted would be holy and supreme to the masses—freedom of the press and speech, justice and tenderness, humaneness and mutual interest—then your heart hesitated for a time and you wavered in your confidence in the revolution.

There are, perhaps, among us revolutionary intellectuals of Western Europe, some who sneer at your wavering and looked with disdain upon your internal struggle; writing-desk heroes, people without any power of imagination who cannot conceive what it means to be a living part of a social revolution. People without the wide and deep sympathy which is part of you, who in their own narrow jealousy and dull hatred were flattered by the rough instinctive deeds of the centuries—long enslaved masses.

To these then let my voice interpret the sentiments of those, who, revolutionary in mind and heart, even as you, Maxim Gorky, have hesitated, have struggled with themselves because they, with you, have, as far as it is possible in the imagination, lived through the soul shaking experiences of the proletarian revolution, have tasted its bitterness, have suffered its disillusionments, of those who have beheld the naked realities collide with their dream and threaten to destroy it. We revolutionary poets and writers cannot do different—and in this lies our power—than to erect within and around us a beautiful image of the proletariat as it wishes in its struggle for world freedom.

That image we admire, we love; it is a dream—and yet a glorious truth.

To trace its features in the deeds of blind egotism, of fierce hatred and beastly dissoluteness which accompanied the revolution and sometimes appeared to be the revolution itself, is hard and difficult.

We have to struggle and struggle to recognize it. We revolutionary artists have all absorbed the bourgeois culture, we are lavished with its unlimited wealth. We have grown with it, it was part of our very lives. In the proletarian revolution we see how rough hands destroy it.

The toiling masses have no reverence for bourgeois culture. How could they have? They never had a part in it! They destroyed with sensual pleasure that which we hoped would be treated gently. This aroused pain—and to conquer this anguish is hard and difficult. We have to struggle continuously to accomplish it.

We all, poets and artists, have our sympathies refined to the extreme, their feelings reach out to all the boundaries of life. The sufferings of the masses was the key that opened our souls to them. We were moved to the revolution by the sufferings and the destruction of the mass, insulted and humiliated, who because of their ignorance or their fanaticism were connected with the rulers, who were tortured, ill-treated and killed.

Our sense of justice, our humaneness goes out to these victims of the sins of others; we can easily prate about injustice, our hate is not like the hatred of the masses, hardened like stone by centuries of oppression, we can easily prate about humanity, we who have had every opportunity to train ourselves in humaneness, to relish the holy truths of Socialism; we who above all live in Socialism, its external appearance, its farthest objective, the realization of the Brotherhood of Man.

But the masses are in the stress of the struggle, wholly absorbed with the work that is necessary to bring about this unity; to repulse and conquer the bourgeoisie. And in this work of repulsion and overpowering they are often compelled to do things which offend our sense of justice and is abhorrent to our humaneness.

Thus the revolution, for which we have longed so fervently, brings countless symptoms which confuse us, make us unhappy, irritate, disturb and amaze us. It is the old-old difference between the dream and the reality. We must work undauntedly to abolish this difference.

<sup>1</sup>Trotsky—*Work. Discipline and Order*, Page 17.