

# The Character of the Russian Revolution

By Leon Trotzky

From "The Proletarian Revolution in Russia,"  
by N. Lenin and Leon Trotzky

THE liberal and Social-Revolutionist-Menshevik scribes and politicians are much concerned over the question of the sociological significance of the Russian Revolution. Is it a bourgeois revolution or some other kind of a revolution? At first glance, this academic theorizing may appear somewhat enigmatical. The liberals have nothing to gain by revealing the class interests behind "their" revolution. And as for the *petit bourgeois* "Socialists," they do not, as a general rule, make use of theoretical analysis in their political activity, but rather of "common sense," which is simply another name for mediocrity and lack of principle. The fact is that the Milyukov-Dan estimate, inspired by Plekhanov, as to the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution, contains not a single grain of theory. Neither *Yedinstvo*, nor *Retch*, nor *Den*, nor *Rabochaya Gazeta*, its head seriously affected, takes any pains to formulate what it understands by a bourgeois revolution. The intention of their manoeuvres is purely practical: to demonstrate the "right" of the bourgeois revolution to assume power. Even though the Soviets may represent the majority of the politically sovereign, even though in all the democratic elections, in city and in country, the capitalist parties were swept out with éclat,—“so long as our revolution is bourgeois in character,” it is necessary to preserve the privileges of the bourgeoisie, and to assign to it in the government a role, to which it is by no means entitled by the alignment of political groups within the country. If we are to act in accordance with the principles of democratic parliamentarism, it is clear that power belongs to the Social-Revolutionists, either alone, or in conjunction with the Mensheviks. But as “our revolution is a bourgeois revolution,” the principles of democracy are suspended, and the representative of the overwhelming majority, while the representatives of an insignificant minority get twice as many. To Hell with democracy! Long live Plekhanov's Sociology!

“I suppose you would like to have a bourgeois revolution without the bourgeoisie?” asks Plekhanov, slyly, invoking the support of dialectics and of Engels.

“That's just it!” interposes Milyukov. We Cadets would be ready to relinquish power, which the people evidently do not wish to give us. But we cannot fly in the face of science.” And he refers to Plekhanov's “Marxism” as his authority.

Since our revolution is a bourgeois revolution, explain Plekhanov, Dan, and Potressov, we must bring about a political coalition between the toilers and their exploiters. And in the light of this Sociology, the clownish handshake of Bublikov and Tseretelli is revealed in its full historical significance.

The trouble is merely this, that the same bourgeois character of the Revolution which is now taken as a justification of the coalition between the Socialists and the capitalists, has for a number of years been taken by these very Mensheviks as leading to diametrically opposite conclusions.

Since, in a bourgeois revolution, they were wont to say, the governing power can have no other function than to safeguard the domination of the bourgeoisie, it is clear that Socialism can have nothing to do with it, its place is not in the government, but in the opposition. Plekhanov considered that Socialists could not under any conditions take part in a bourgeois government, and he savagely excepted Kautsky, whose resolution admitted certain exceptions in this connection. “Tempora leagusque mutantur”—the gentlemen of the old regime so expressed it. . . . And that appears to be the case also with the “laws” of the Plekhanov Sociology.

No matter how contradictory may be the opinions of the Mensheviks and their leader, Plekhanov, when you compare their statement before the Revolution with their statements of today, one thought does dominate both expressions, and that is, that you cannot carry out a bourgeois revolution “without the bourgeoisie.” At first blush this idea would appear to be axiomatic. But it is merely idiotic.

The history of mankind did not begin with the Moscow Conference. There were revolutions before. At the end of the 18th century there was a revolution in France, which is called, not without reason, the “Great Revolution.” It was a bourgeois revolution. In one of its phases power fell into the hands of the Jacobins, who had the support of the “Sans-culottes,” or semi-proletarian workers of the city population, and who set up between them and the Girondistes, the liberal party of the bourgeoisie, the Cadets of their day, the neat rectangle of the guillotine. It was only the dictatorship of the Jacobins that gave the French Revolution its present importance, that made it “the Great Revolution.” And yet, this dictatorship was brought about, not only without the bourgeoisie, but against its very opposition. Robespierre, to whom it was not given to acquaint himself with the Plekhanov ideas, upset all the laws of Sociology, and, instead of shaking hands

with the Girondistes, he cut off their heads. This was cruel, there is no denying it. But this cruelty did not prevent the French Revolution from becoming Great, within the limits of its bourgeois character. Marx, in whose name so many mal-practices are now perpetrated in our country, said that the “whole French terror, was simply a plebeian effort to dispose of the enemies of the bourgeoisie.” And as the plebeian was very much afraid of the same plebeian methods of disposing of the enemies of the people, the Jacobins not only deprived the bourgeoisie of power, but applied a rule of blood and iron with regard to the bourgeoisie, whenever the latter made any attempt to halt or to “moderate” the work of the Jacobins. It is apparent, therefore, that the Jacobins carried out a bourgeois revolution without the bourgeoisie.

Referring to the English Revolution of 1648, Engels wrote: “In order that the bourgeoisie might engulf all the fruits that had matured, it was necessary that the revolution should go far beyond its original aims, as was again the case in France in 1793 and in Germany in 1848. This, to be sure, is one of the laws of the evolution of bourgeois society.” We see that Engels' Law is directly opposed to Plekhanov's ingenious structure, which the Mensheviks have been accepting and regarding as Marxism.

It may of course be argued that the Jacobins were themselves a bourgeoisie, a *petite bourgeoisie*. This is absolutely true. But is that not also the fact in the case of the so-called “revolutionary democracy” headed by the Social-Revolutionists and Mensheviks? Between the Cadets, the party of the larger and lesser propertied interests, on the one hand, and the Social-Revolutionists on the other hand, there was not, in any of the elections held in city or country, any intermediate party. It follows with mathematical certainty that the *petite bourgeoisie* must have found its political representation in the ranks of the Social-Revolutionists. The Mensheviks, whose policy differs by not a hair's breadth from the policy of the Social-Revolutionists, reflect the same class interests. There is no contradiction to this condition in the fact that they are also supported by a part of the more backward or conservative-privileged workers. Why were the Social-Revolutionists unable to assume power? In what sense and why did the “bourgeois” character of the Russian Revolution (if we assume that such is its character) compel the Social-Revolutionists and Mensheviks to supplant the plebeian methods of the Jacobins with the gentlemanly device of an agreement with the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie? It is manifest that the explanation must be sought, not in the “bourgeois” character of our revolution, but in the miserable character of our *petit bourgeois* democracy. Instead of making the power in its hands the organ for the realization of the essential demands of History, our fraudulent democracy deferentially passed on all real power to the counter-revolutionary, military-imperialistic clique, and Tseretelli, that Moscow-imperialist, even boasted that the Soviets had not surrendered their power under pressure, not after a courageous fight and defeat, but voluntarily, as an evidence of political “self-effacement.” The gentleness of the calf, holding out its neck for the butcher's knife, is not the quality which is going to conquer new worlds.

The difference between the terrorists of the Convention and the Moscow capitulators is the difference between tigers and calves of one age,—a difference in courage. But this difference is not fundamental. It merely veils a decisive difference in the personnel of the democracy itself. The Jacobins were based on the classes of little or no property, including also what rudiments of a proletariat were then already in existence. In our case, the industrial-working class has worked its way out of the ill-defined democracy into a position in History where it exerts an influence of primary importance. The *petit bourgeois* democracy was losing the most valuable revolutionary qualities to the extent to which these qualities were being developed by the proletariat which was outgrowing the tutelage of the *petite bourgeoisie*. This phenomenon in turn is due to the incomparably as compared with which Capitalism had evolved in Russia as compared with the France of the closing 18th century. The revolutionary power of the Russian proletariat, is based upon its immense productive power, which is most of all apparent in war time. The threat of a railroad strike again reminds us, in our day, of the dependence of the whole country on the concentrated labor of the proletariat. The *petit bourgeois*-peasant party, in the very earliest stages of the revolution, was exposed to a crossfire between the powerful groups of imperialistic capital on the one hand, and the revolutionary-internationalist proletariat, on the other. In their

struggle to exert an influence of their own over the workers, the *petit bourgeois* continued constantly harping on their “statesmanship,” their “patriotism,” and thus fell into a slavish dependence on the groups of counter-revolutionary capital. They simultaneously lost the possibility of any kind of liquidation even of the old barbarism which enveloped those sections of the people who were still attached to them. The struggle of the Social-Revolutionists and Mensheviks for influence over the proletariat was more and more assuming the form of a struggle by the proletarian party to obtain the leadership of the semi-proletarian masses of the villages and towns. Because they “voluntarily” handed over their power to the bourgeoisie, the Social-Revolutionists and Mensheviks were obliged to hand over the revolutionary mission to show that the attempt to decide fundamental questions of tactics by a mere reference to the “bourgeois” character of our Revolution can only succeed in confusing the minds of the backward workers and deceiving the peasants.

In the French Revolution of 1848, the proletariat is already making heroic efforts for independent action. But as yet it has neither a clear revolutionary theory nor an authoritative class organization. Its importance in production is infinitely lower than the present economic function of the Russian proletariat. In addition, behind 1848 there stood another great revolution, which had solved the agrarian question in its own way, and this found its expression in a pronounced isolation of the proletariat, particularly that of Paris, from the peasant masses. Our situation in this respect is immensely more favorable. Farm mortgages, obstructive obligations of all kinds, oppression, and the rapacious exploitation by the church, confront the Revolution as inescapable questions, demanding courageous and uncompromising measures. The “isolation” of our party from the Social-Revolutionists and Mensheviks, even an extreme isolation, even by the method of single chambers, would by no means be synonymous with an isolation of the proletariat from the oppressed peasant and city masses. On the contrary, a sharp opposition of the policy of the revolutionary proletariat to the faithless defection of the present leaders of the Soviets, can only bring about a salutary differentiation among the peasant millions, remove the pauperized peasants from the treacherous influence of the powerful Social-Revolutionist muzhiks, and convert the Socialistic proletariat into a genuine leader of the popular, “plebeian” revolution.

And finally, a mere empty reference to the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution tells us absolutely nothing about the international character of its milieu. And this is a prime factor. The great Jacobin revolution found opposed to it a backward, feudal, monarchistic Europe. The Jacobin regime fell and gave way to the Bonapartist regime, under the burden of the superhuman effort which it was obliged to put forth in order to maintain itself against the united forces of the middle ages. The Russian Revolution, on the contrary, has before it a Europe that has far outdistanced it, having reached the highest degree of capitalist development. The present slaughter shows that Europe has reached the point of capitalistic saturation, that it can no longer live and grow on the basis of the private ownership of the means of production. This chaos of blood and ruin is a savage insurrection of the mute and sullen powers of production, it is the mutiny of iron and steel against the dominion of profit, against wage slavery, against the miserable deadlock of our human relations. Capitalism, enveloped in the flames of a war of its own making, shouts from the mouths of its cannons to humanity: “Either conquer over me, or I will bury you in my ruins when I fall!”

All the evolution of the past, the thousands of years of human history, of class struggle, of cultural accumulations, are concentrated now in the sole problem of the proletarian revolution. There is no other answer and no other escape. And therein lies the tremendous strength of the Russian Revolution. It is not a “national,” a bourgeois revolution. Anyone who conceives of it thus, is dwelling in the realm of the hallucinations of the 18th and 19th centuries. Our fatherland in time is the 20th century. The further lot of the Russian Revolution depends directly on the course and on the outcome of the war, that is, on the evolution of class contradictions in Europe, to which this imperialistic war is giving a catastrophic nature.

The Kerenskys and Kornilovs began too early using the language of competing autocrats. The Kaledins too early grasped the contemptuously outstretched finger of counter-revolution. As yet the Revolution has spoken only its first word. It still has tremendous reserves in Western Europe. In place of the handshakes of the reactionary ringleaders with the good-for-nothings of the *petite bourgeoisie* will come the great embrace of the Russian proletariat with the proletariat of Europe.