

# **The Third International After Lenin. II. Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch (Part 1)**

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## **1. The Complete Bankruptcy of the Central Chapter of the Draft Program**

THE DRAFT PROGRAM Of the Comintern contains a chapter devoted to the questions of revolutionary strategy. It must be acknowledged that its intention is quite correct and corresponds to the aim and spirit of an international program of the proletariat in the imperialist epoch.

The conception of revolutionary strategy took root only in the post-war years, and in the beginning undoubtedly under the influence of military terminology. But it did not by any means take root accidentally. Prior to the war we spoke only of the tactics of the proletarian party; this conception conformed adequately enough to the then prevailing trade union, parliamentary methods which did not transcend the limits of the day-to-day demands and tasks. By the conception of tactics is understood the system of measures that serves a single current task or a single branch of the class struggle. Revolutionary strategy on the contrary embraces a combined system of actions which by their association, consistency, and growth must lead the proletariat to the conquest of power.

The basic principles of revolutionary strategy were naturally formulated since the time when Marxism first put before the revolutionary parties of the proletariat the task of the conquest of power on the basis of the class struggle. The First International, however, succeeded in formulating these principles, properly speaking, only theoretically, and could test them only partially in the experience of various countries. The epoch of the Second International led to methods and views according to which, in the notorious expression of Bernstein, "the movement is everything, the ultimate goal nothing." In other words, the strategical task disappeared, becoming dissolved in the day-to-day "movement" with its partial tactics devoted to the problems of the day. Only the Third International re-established the rights of the revolutionary strategy of communism and completely subordinated the tactical methods to it. Thanks to the invaluable experience of the first two Internationals, upon whose shoulders the Third rests, thanks to the revolutionary character of the present epoch and the colossal historic experience of the October Revolution, the strategy of the Third International immediately attained a full-blooded militancy and the widest historical scope. At the same time, the first decade of the new International reveals to us a panorama not only of great battles but also of the greatest defeats of the proletariat, beginning with 1918. That is why the questions of strategy and tactics should have constituted, in a certain sense, the central point in the

program of the Comintern. As a matter of fact, however, the chapter in the draft program devoted to the strategy and tactics of the Comintern, bearing the sub-title *The Road to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, is one of the weakest chapters, almost devoid of meaning. The section of this chapter that deals with the East really consists only of a generalization of the mistakes made and the preparation of new ones.

The introductory section of this chapter is devoted to a criticism of anarchism, revolutionary syndicalism, constructive socialism, Guild socialism, etc. Here we have a purely literary imitation of the *Communist Manifesto* which in its time inaugurated the era of the scientifically established policy of the proletariat through an ingeniously terse characterization of the most important varieties of Utopian socialism. But to engage now, on the tenth anniversary of the Comintern, in a desultory and anemic criticism of the "theories" of Cornelissen, Arturo Labriola, Bernard Shaw, or lesser known Guild socialists, means that instead of answering political needs one becomes a victim of purely literary pedantry. This ballast could easily be transferred from the program to the field of propaganda literature.

So far as the strategical problems are concerned, in the proper sense of the word, the draft program limits itself to such ABC wisdom as:

*"The extension of its influence over the majority of its own class ...*

*"The extension of its influence over the broad section of the toiling masses in general ...*

*"The day-to-day work of conquering the trade unions is of an especially high importance ...*

*"The winning of the broadest section of the poorest peasantry is also [?] of enormous importance ..."*

All these commonplaces, indisputable enough in themselves, are merely set down in rotation here, that is to say, they are brought in without any connection with the character of the historical epoch and, therefore, in their *present* abstract, scholastic form, could be introduced without difficulty into a resolution of the Second International. Quite dryly and sketchily the central problem of the program is considered here in a single schematic passage which is much shorter than the passage dealing with "constructive" and "Guild" socialism. This means that the strategy of the revolutionary overturn, the conditions and the roads to the armed insurrection itself, and the seizure of power – all this is presented abstractly and pedantically, and without the slightest regard to the living experience of our epoch.

We find here mention made of the great struggles of the proletariat in Finland, Germany, Austria, the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the September days in Italy, the events of 1923 in Germany, the general strike in England, and so forth, only in the form of a bald, chronological enumeration. Yet even this is to be found not in the sixth chapter, which deals with the strategy of the proletariat, but in the second on *The General Crisis of Capitalism and the First Phase of Development of the World Revolution*. In other words, the great struggles of the proletariat are approached here only as objective occurrences, as an expression of the "general crisis of capitalism" but not as strategical experiences of the proletariat. It is sufficient to refer to the fact that the rejection, necessary in itself, of revolutionary adventurism (putschism) is made in the program without any attempt to answer the question whether, for example, the uprising in Esthonia, or the bombing of the Sofia cathedral in 1924, or the last uprising in Canton were heroic manifestations of revolutionary adventurism or, on the contrary, planned actions of the revolutionary strategy of the proletariat. A draft program which in dealing with the problem of "putschism" gives no answer to this burning question is only a diplomatic office job and not a document of communist strategy.

Obviously, this abstract, supra-historical formulation of the questions of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat is no accident for this draft. In addition to the Bukharinistic manner of treating questions in general in a literary, pedantic, didactic, and not in an actively revolutionary way, there is another reason for it: the authors of the draft program, for reasons easily understood, prefer generally not to deal too closely with the strategical lessons of the last five years.

But a program of revolutionary action naturally cannot be approached as a bare collection of abstract propositions without any relation to all that has occurred during these epoch-making years. A program cannot, of course, go into a description of the events of the past, but it must proceed from these events, base itself upon them, encompass them, and relate to them. A program, by the position it takes, must make it possible to understand all the major facts of the struggle of the proletariat and all the important facts relating to the ideological struggle inside the Comintern. If this is true with regard to the program as a whole, then it is all the truer with regard to that part of it which is specifically devoted to the question of strategy and tactics. Here, in the words of Lenin, in addition to what has been conquered there must also be registered that which has been lost, that which can be transformed into a "conquest," if it has been understood and assimilated. The proletarian vanguard needs not a catalog of truisms but a manual of action. We will, therefore, consider here the problems of the "strategic" chapter in closest connection with the experiences of the struggles of the post-war period, especially of the last five years, the years of tragic mistakes of the leadership.

## **2. The Fundamental Peculiarities Inherent in the Strategy of the Revolutionary Epoch and the Role of the Party**

The chapter devoted to strategy and tactics does not so much as give a "strategical" characterization, coherent to any degree, of the imperialist epoch as an epoch of proletarian revolutions in contradistinction to the pre-war epoch.

To be sure, the period of industrial capitalism as a whole is characterized in the first chapter of the draft program as a "period of relatively continuous evolution and propagation of capitalism over the whole terrestrial globe through the division of still unoccupied colonies and the armed seizure of them."

This characterization is certainly quite contradictory and it obviously idealizes the whole epoch of industrial capitalism, which was an epoch of colossal convulsions, of wars and revolutions by far surpassing in this sphere the entire preceding history of mankind. This idyllic characterization was apparently necessary so as to provide at least a partial justification for the recent absurd contention of the authors of the draft program that at the time of Marx and Engels "there could not be any talk as yet" of the law of unequal development. But while it is false to characterize the entire history of industrial capitalism as a "continuous evolution," it is extremely important to demarcate a special European epoch which comprises the years 1871 to 1914, or at least to 1905. This was an epoch of the organic accumulation of contradictions which, so far as the internal class relations of Europe are concerned, almost never overstepped the bounds of legal struggle and so far as international relations are concerned, adjusted themselves to the framework of an armed peace. This was the epoch of the origin, the development, and the ossification of the Second International, whose progressive historical role completely terminated with the outbreak of the imperialist war.

Politics, considered as a mass historical force, always lags behind economics. Thus, while the reign of finance capital and trust monopolies already began towards the end of the nineteenth century, the new epoch in international politics which reflects this fact, first begins in world politics with the imperialist war, with the October Revolution, and the founding of the Third International.

The explosive character of this new epoch, with its abrupt changes of the political flows and ebbs, with its constant spasmodic class struggle between Fascism and communism, is lodged in the fact that the international capitalist system has already spent itself and is no longer capable of progress as a whole. This does not mean to imply that individual branches of industry and individual countries are incapable of growing and will not grow any more, and even at an unprecedented tempo. Nevertheless, this development proceeds and will have to proceed to the detriment of the growth of other branches of industry and of other countries. The expenditures incurred by the productive system of world capitalism devour its world income to an ever increasing degree. And inasmuch as Europe, accustomed to world domination, with the inertia acquired from its rapid, almost uninterrupted growth in the pre-war period, now collides more sharply than the other continents with the new relation of forces, the new division of the world market, and the contradictions deepened by the war, it is precisely in Europe that the transition from the "organic" epoch to the revolutionary epoch was particularly precipitous.

Theoretically, to be sure, even a new chapter of a *general* capitalist progress in the most powerful, ruling, and leading countries is not excluded. But for this, capitalism would first have to overcome enormous barriers of a class as well as of an inter-state character. It would have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time; it would have to enslave China completely, overthrow the Soviet republic, and so forth. We are still a long way removed from all this. Theoretical eventualities correspond least of all to political probabilities. Naturally, a great deal also depends upon us, that is, upon the revolutionary strategy of the Comintern. In the final analysis, this question will be settled in the struggle of international forces. Still, in the present epoch for which the program was created, capitalist development as a whole is faced with insurmountable obstacles and contradictions and beats in frenzy against them. It is precisely this that invests our epoch with its revolutionary character and the revolution with its permanent character.

The revolutionary character of the epoch does not lie in that it permits of the accomplishment of the revolution, that is, the seizure of power at every given moment. Its revolutionary character consists in profound and sharp fluctuations and abrupt and frequent transitions from an immediately revolutionary situation; in other words, such as enables the communist party to strive for power, to a victory of the Fascist or semi-Fascist counter-revolution, and from the latter to a provisional regime of the golden mean (the "Left bloc," the inclusion of the social democracy into the coalition, the passage of power to the party of MacDonald, and so forth), immediately thereafter to force the antagonisms to a head again and acutely raise the question of power.

What did we have in Europe in the course of the last decades before the war? In the sphere of economy - a mighty advance of productive forces with "normal" fluctuations of the conjuncture. In politics - the growth of social democracy at the expense of liberalism and "democracy" with quite insignificant fluctuations. In other words, a process of systematic intensification of economic and political contradictions, and in this sense, the creation of the prerequisites for the proletarian revolution.

What have we in Europe in the post-war period? In economy - irregular, spasmodic curtailments and expansions of production, which gravitate in general around the pre-war level despite great technical successes in certain branches of industry. In politics - frenzied oscillations of the political situation towards the Left and towards the Right. It is quite apparent that the sharp turns in the political situation in the course of one, two, or three years are not brought about by any changes in the basic economic factors, but by causes and impulses of a purely superstructural character, thereby indicating the extreme instability of the entire system, the foundation of which is corroded by irreconcilable contradictions.

This is the sole source from which flows the full significance of revolutionary strategy in

contradistinction to tactics. Thence also flows the new significance of the party and the party leadership.

The draft confines itself to purely formal definitions of the party (vanguard, theory of Marxism, embodiment of experiences, and so forth) which might not have sounded badly in a program of the Left social democracy prior to the war. Today it is utterly inadequate.

In a period of growing capitalism even the best party leadership could do no more than only accelerate the formation of a workers' party. Inversely, mistakes of the leadership could retard this process. The objective prerequisites of a proletarian revolution matured but slowly, and the work of the party retained a preparatory character.

Today, on the contrary, every new sharp change in the political situation to the Left places the decision in the hands of the revolutionary party. Should it miss the critical situation, the latter veers around to its opposite. Under these circumstances the role of the party leadership acquires exceptional importance. The words of Lenin to the effect that two or three days can decide the fate of the international revolution would have been almost incomprehensible in the epoch of the Second International. In our epoch, on the contrary, these words have only too often been confirmed and, with the exception of the October, always from the negative side. Only out of these general conditions does that exceptional position become understandable which the Comintern and its leadership occupy with respect to the whole mechanics of the present historical epoch.

One must understand clearly that the initial and basic cause - the so-called "stabilization" - lies in the contradiction between the general disorganization of the economic and social position of capitalist Europe and the colonial East on the one hand, and the weaknesses, unpreparedness, irresolution of the communist parties and the vicious errors of their leadership on the other.

It is not the so-called stabilization, arriving from nowhere, that checked the development of the revolutionary situation of 1918-1919, or of the recent years, but on the contrary, the unutilized revolutionary situation was transformed into its opposite and thus guaranteed to the bourgeoisie the opportunity to fight with relative success for stabilization. The sharpening contradictions of this struggle for "stabilization" or rather of the struggle for the further existence and development of capitalism prepare at each new stage the prerequisites for new international and class upheavals, that is, for new revolutionary situations, the development of which depends entirely upon the proletarian party.

The role of the subjective factor in a period of slow, organic development can remain quite a subordinate one. Then diverse proverbs of gradualism arise, as: "slow but sure," and "one must not kick against the pricks," and so forth, which epitomize all the tactical wisdom of an organic epoch that abhorred "leaping over stages." But as soon as the objective prerequisites have matured, the key to the whole historical process passes into the hands of the subjective factor, that is, the party. Opportunism which consciously or unconsciously thrives upon the inspiration of the past epoch, always tends to underestimate the role of the subjective factor, that is, the importance of the party and of revolutionary leadership. All this was fully disclosed during the discussions on the lessons of the German October, on the Anglo-Russian Committee, and on the Chinese revolution. In all these cases, as well as in others of lesser importance, the opportunistic tendency evinced itself in the adoption of a course that relied solely upon the "masses" and therefore completely scorned the question of the "tops" of the revolutionary leadership. Such an attitude, which is false in general, operates with positively fatal effect in the imperialist epoch.

The October Revolution was the result of a particular relation of class forces in Russia and in the whole world and their particular development in the process of the imperialist war. This general

proposition is ABC to a Marxist. Nevertheless, there is no contradiction whatever between Marxism and posing, for instance, such a question as: would we have seized power in October had not Lenin arrived in Russia in time? There is much to indicate that we might not have been able to seize power. The resistance of the party heads – for the most part, incidentally, they are the same people who determine policies today – was very strong even under Lenin. And without Lenin it would undoubtedly have been infinitely stronger. The party might have failed to adopt the necessary course in time, and there was very little time left at our disposal. During such periods, a few days sometimes decide. The working masses would indeed have pressed upwards from below with great heroism but without a leadership certain of itself and leading consciously to the goal, victory would have been little probable. In the meantime, however, the bourgeoisie could have surrendered Petrograd to the Germans and after a suppression of the proletarian uprising could have reconsolidated its power most probably in the form of Bonapartism, by means of a separate peace with Germany and through other measures. The entire course of events might have taken a different direction for a number of years.

In the German revolution of 1918, in the Hungarian revolution of 1919, in the September movement of the Italian proletariat in 1920, in the English general strike of 1926, in the Vienna uprising of 1927, and in the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927 – everywhere, one and the same political contradiction of the entire past decade, even if at different stages and in different forms, was manifested. In an objectively ripe revolutionary situation, ripe not only with regard to its social bases but not infrequently also with regard to the mood for struggle of the masses, the subjective factor, that is, a revolutionary mass party, was lacking or else this party lacked a farsighted and intrepid leadership.

Of course, the weaknesses of the communist parties and of their leadership did not fall from the sky, but are rather a product of the entire past of Europe. But the communist parties could develop at a swift pace in the present existing maturity of the objectively revolutionary contradictions provided, of course, there was a correct leadership on the part of the Comintern speeding up this process of development instead of retarding it. If contradiction is, in general, the most important mainspring of progress then the clear understanding of the contradiction between a general revolutionary maturity of the objective situation (despite ebbs and flows) and the immaturity of the international party of the proletariat ought now to constitute the mainspring for the forward movement of the Comintern, at least of its European section.

Without an extensive and generalized dialectical comprehension of the present epoch as an epoch of abrupt turns, a real education of the young parties, a correct strategical leadership of the class struggle, a correct combination of tactics, and, above all, a sharp and bold and decisive re-arming at each successive breaking point of the situation is impossible. And it is just at such an abrupt breaking point that two or three days sometimes decide the fate of the international revolution for years to come.

The chapter of the draft program devoted to strategy and tactics speaks of a struggle of the party for the proletariat *in general*, and of a general strike, and of the armed insurrection in general. But it does not at all dissect the peculiar character and the inner rhythm of the present epoch. Without comprehending these theoretically and “sensing” them politically, a real revolutionary leadership is impossible.

That is why this chapter is so pedantic, so thin, so bankrupt from beginning to end.

### **3. The Third Congress and the Question of the Permanence of the Revolutionary Process According to Lenin and According to Bukharin**

Three periods can be established in the political development of Europe after the war. The first period runs from 1917 to 1921, the second from March 1921 to October 1923, and the third from October 1923 up to the English general strike, or even up to the present moment.

The post-war revolutionary movement of the masses was strong enough to overthrow the bourgeoisie. But there was no one to bring this to a consummation. The social democracy, which held the leadership of the traditional organizations of the working class, exerted all its efforts to save the bourgeois regime. When we looked forward at that time to an immediate seizure of power by the proletariat, we reckoned that a revolutionary party would mature rapidly in the fire of the civil war. But the two terms did not coincide. The revolutionary wave of the post-war period ebbed before the communist parties grew up and reached maturity in the struggle with the social democracy so as to assume the leadership of the insurrection.

In March 1921, the German Communist Party made the attempt to avail itself of the declining wave in order to overthrow the bourgeois state with a single blow. The guiding thought of the German Central Committee in this was to save the Soviet republic (the theory of socialism in one country had not yet been proclaimed at that time). But it turned out that the determination of the leadership and the dissatisfaction of the masses do not suffice for victory. There must obtain a number of other conditions, above all, a close bond between the leadership and the masses and the confidence of the latter in the leadership. This condition was lacking at that time.

The Third Congress of the Comintern was a milestone demarcating the first and second periods. It set down the fact that the resources of the communist parties, politically as well as organizationally, were not sufficient for the conquest of power. It advanced the slogan: "To the masses," that is, to the conquest of power through *a previous conquest of the masses*, achieved on the basis of the daily life and struggles. For the mass also continues to live its daily life in a revolutionary epoch, even if in a somewhat different manner.

This formulation of the problem met with a furious resistance at the Congress which was inspired theoretically by Bukharin. At that time he held a viewpoint of his own permanent revolution and not that of Marx. "Since capitalism had exhausted itself, therefore the victory must be gained through an uninterrupted revolutionary offensive." Bukharin's position always reduces itself to syllogisms of this sort.

Naturally, I never shared the Bukharinist version of the theory of the "permanent" revolution, according to which no interruptions, periods of stagnation, retreats, transitional demands, or the like, are at all conceivable in the revolutionary process. On the contrary, from the first days of October, I fought against this caricature of the permanent revolution.

When I spoke as did Lenin of the incompatibility between Soviet Russia and the world of imperialism, I had in mind the great strategically curve and not its tactical windings. Bukharin, on the contrary, prior to his transformation into his own antipode, invariably expounded a scholastic caricature of the Marxian conception of a continuous revolution. Bukharin opined in the days of his "Left Communism," that the revolution allows neither of retreats nor temporary compromises with the enemy. Long after the question of the Brest-Litovsk Peace, in which my position had nothing in common with Bukharin's, the latter together with the entire ultra-Left wing of the Comintern of that time advocated the line of the March 1921 days in Germany, being of the opinion that unless the proletariat in Europe was "galvanized," unless there were ever new revolutionary eruptions, the

Soviet power was threatened with certain destruction. The consciousness that real dangers actually threatened the Soviet power did not prevent me from waging an irreconcilable struggle shoulder to shoulder with Lenin at the Third Congress against this putschistic parody of a Marxian conception of the permanent revolution. During the Third Congress, we declared tens of times to the impatient Leftists: "Don't be in too great a hurry to save us. In that way you will only destroy yourselves and, therefore, also bring about our destruction; Follow systematically the path of the struggle for the masses in order thus to reach the struggle for power. We need your victory but not your readiness to fight under unfavorable conditions. We will manage to maintain ourselves in the Soviet republic with the help of the NEP and we will go forward. You will still have time to come to our aid at the right moment if you will have gathered your forces and will have utilized the favorable situation."

Although this took place after the Tenth Party Congress which prohibited factions, Lenin nevertheless assumed the initiative at that time to create the top nucleus of a new faction for the struggle against the ultra-leftists who were strong at that time. In our intimate conferences, Lenin flatly put the question of how to carry on the subsequent struggle should the Third World Congress accept Bukharin's viewpoint. Our "faction" of that time did not develop further only because our opponents "folded up" considerably during the Congress.

Bukharin, of course, swung further to the Left of Marxism than anybody else. At this same Third Congress and later, too, he led the fight against my view that the economic conjuncture in Europe would inevitably rise; and that despite a whole series of defeats of the proletariat I expected after this inevitable rise of the conjuncture not a blow at the revolution, but, on the contrary, a new impetus to revolutionary struggle. Bukharin, who held to his standpoint of the scholastic permanence of both the economic crisis and the revolution as a whole, waged a long struggle against me on this viewpoint, until facts finally forced him, as usual, to a very belated admission that he was in error.

At the Third and Fourth Congresses Bukharin fought against the policy of the united front and the transitional demands, proceeding from his mechanical understanding of the permanence of the revolutionary process.

The struggle between these two tendencies, the synthesized, Marxian conception of the continuous character of the proletarian revolution and the scholastic parody of Marxism which was by no means an individual quirk of Bukharin's, can be followed through a whole series of other questions, big as well as small. But it is superfluous to do so. Bukharin's position today is essentially the self-same ultra-left scholasticism of the "permanent revolution," only, this time, turned inside out. If, for example, Bukharin was of the opinion until 1923 that without a permanent economic crisis and a permanent civil war in Europe the Soviet republic would perish, he has today discovered a recipe for building socialism without any international revolution at all. To be sure, the topsy-turvy Bukharinist permanency has not improved any by the fact that the present leaders of the Comintern far too frequently combine their adventurism of yesterday with their opportunist position of today, and vice versa.

The Third Congress was a great beacon. Its teachings are still vital and fruitful today. The Fourth Congress only concretized these teachings. The slogan of the Third Congress did not simply read: *"To the masses!"* but: *"To power through a previous conquest of the masses!"* After the faction led by Lenin (which he characterized demonstratively as the "Right" wing) had to curb intransigently the entire Congress throughout its duration, Lenin arranged a private conference toward the end of the Congress in which he warned prophetically: "Remember, it is only a question of getting a good running start for the revolutionary leap. The struggle for the masses is the struggle for power."

The events of 1923 demonstrated that this Leninist position was not grasped, not only by "those who



are led" but also by many of the leaders.

#### **4. The German Events of 1923 and the Lessons of October**

The German events of 1923 form the breaking point that inaugurates a new, post-Leninist period in the development of the Comintern. The occupation of the Ruhr by French troops early in 1923 signified Europe's relapse into war chaos. Although the second attack of this disease was incomparably weaker than the first, violent revolutionary consequences were nevertheless to be expected from the outset, since it had seized the already completely debilitated organism of Germany. The leadership of the Comintern did not take this into consideration at the right time. The German Communist Party still continued to follow its one-sided interpretation of the slogan of the Third Congress which had firmly drawn it away from the threatening road to putschism. We have already stated above that in our epoch of abrupt turns the greatest difficulty for a revolutionary leadership lies in being able to feel the pulse of the political situation at the proper moment, so as to catch the abrupt contingency and to turn the helm in due time. Such qualities of a revolutionary leadership are not acquired simply by swearing fealty to the latest circular letter of the Comintern. They can be acquired, if the necessary theoretical prerequisites exist, by personally acquired experience and genuine self-criticism. It was not easy to achieve the sharp turn from the tactics of the March days of 1921 to a systematic revolutionary activity in the press, meetings, trade unions, and parliament. After the crisis of this turn had been weathered, there arose the danger of the development of a new one-sided deviation of a directly opposite character. The daily struggle for the masses absorbs all attention, creates its own tactical routine, and diverts attention away from the strategical tasks flowing from changes in the objective situation.

In the summer of 1923, the internal situation in Germany, especially in connection with the collapse of the tactic of passive resistance, assumed a catastrophic character. It became quite clear that the German bourgeoisie could extricate itself from this "hopeless" situation only if the communist party failed to understand in due time that the position of the bourgeoisie was "hopeless" and if the party failed to draw all the necessary revolutionary conclusions. Yet it was precisely the communist party, holding the key in its hands, that opened the door for the bourgeoisie with this key.

Why didn't the German revolution lead to a victory? The reasons for it are all to be sought in the tactics, not in the existing conditions. Here we had a classic example of a missed revolutionary situation. After all the German proletariat had gone through in recent years, it could be led to a decisive struggle only if it were convinced that this time the question would be decisively resolved and that the communist party was ready for the struggle and capable of achieving the victory. But the communist party executed the turn very irresolutely and after a very long delay. Not only the Rights but also the Lefts, despite the fact that they had fought each other very bitterly, viewed rather fatalistically the process of revolutionary development up to September-October 1923.

Only a pedant and not a revolutionist would investigate now, after the event, how far the conquest of power would have been "assured" had there been a correct policy. We confine ourselves here to quoting a remarkable testimonial from *Pravda* bearing on this point, a testimonial which is purely accidental and unique because it is contradictory to all the other pronouncements of this organ:

*"If in May 1923, when the mark was comparatively stabilized and the bourgeoisie had achieved a certain degree of consolidation, after the middle class and the petty bourgeoisie went over to the Nationalists, after a deep crisis in the party, and after a heavy defeat of the proletariat, if after all this the communists are able to rally 3,700,000 votes, then it is clear that in October 1923, during the unprecedented economic crisis, during the complete disintegration of the middle classes, during*

*a frightful confusion in the ranks of the social democracy resulting from the powerful and sharp contradictions within the bourgeoisie itself and an unprecedented militant mood of the proletarian masses in the industrial centers, the communist party had the majority of the population on its side; it could and should have fought and had all the chances for success.” [1]*

And here are the words of a German delegate (name unknown) at the Fifth World Congress:

*“There is not a single class conscious worker in Germany who is unaware that the party should have engaged in a battle and not have shunned it.*

*“The leaders of the CPG forgot all about the independent role of the party; this was one of the main reasons for the October defeat.” [2]*

A great deal has already been related in discussions concerning what took place in the upper leadership of the German party and the Comintern in 1923, particularly during the latter part of the year, even though many of the things said did not correspond by far to what really took place. Kuusinen in particular has brought much confusion into these questions; the same Kuusinen whose job from 1924 to 1926 was to prove that salvation lay only in the leadership of Zinoviev, just as he applied himself from a certain date in 1926 to prove that the leadership of Zinoviev was ruinous. The necessary authority to pass such responsible judgments is probably conferred upon Kuusinen by the fact that he himself in 1918 did everything that lay in his modest resources to doom the revolution of the Finnish proletariat to destruction.

There have been several attempts, after the event, to attribute to me a solidarity with the line of Brandler. In the USSR these attempts were camouflaged because too many of those on the scene knew the real state of affairs. In Germany this was done openly because no one knew anything there. Quite accidentally, I find in my possession a printed fragment of the ideological struggle that occurred at that time in our Central Committee over the question of the German revolution. In the documents of the January 1928 conference, I am directly accused by the Political Bureau of a hostile and distrustful attitude towards the German Central Committee in the period prior to its capitulation. Here is what we find said there:

*“... Comrade Trotsky, before leaving the session of the Central Committee [September 1923 Plenum], made a speech which profoundly disturbed all the members of the Central Committee and in which he alleged that the leadership of the German Communist Party was worthless and that the Central Committee of the German CP was permeated with fatalism, sleepy-headedness, etc. Comrade Trotsky then declared that the German revolution was doomed to failure. This speech had a depressing effect on all those present. But the great majority of the comrades were of the opinion that this phillipic was called forth by an episode [?!], in no way connected with the German revolution, which occurred during the Plenum of the Central Committee and that **this speech did not correspond to the objective state of affairs.**” [3]*

No matter how the members of the Central Committee may have sought to explain my warning, which was not the first one, it was dictated only by concern over the fate of the German revolution. Unfortunately, events fully confirmed my position; in part because the majority of the Central Committee of the leading party, according to their own admission, did not grasp in time that my warning fully “corresponded to the objective state of affairs.” Of course, I did not propose hastily to replace Brandler’s Central Committee by some other (on the eve of decisive events such a change would have been sheerest adventurism), but I did propose from the summer of 1923 that a much more timely and resolute position be taken on the question of the preparation of the armed insurrection and of the necessary mobilization of forces for the support of the German Central Committee. The latter-day attempts to ascribe to me a solidarity with the line of the Brandlerite

Central Committee, whose mistakes were only a reflection of the general mistakes of the Comintern leadership, were chiefly due to the fact that *after the capitulation* of the German party, I was opposed to making a scapegoat of Brandler, *although*, or more correctly, *because* I judged the German defeat to be much more serious than did the majority of the Central Committee. In this case as in others, I fought against the inadmissible system which only seeks to maintain the infallibility of the central leadership by periodic removals of national leaderships, subjecting the latter to savage persecutions and even expulsions from the party.

In the *Lessons of October*, written by me under the influence of the capitulation of the German Central Committee, I developed the idea that under the conditions of the present epoch, a revolutionary situation can be lost for several years in the course of a few days. It may be hard to believe, but this opinion was stamped as "blacklist" and "individualism." The innumerable articles written against the *Lessons of October* reveal how completely the experiences of the October Revolution have been forgotten and how little its lessons have penetrated the consciousness. It is a typical Menshevik dodge to shift responsibility for the mistakes of the leaders on the "masses" or to minimize the importance of leadership in general, in order thus to diminish its guilt. It arises from the total incapacity to arrive at the dialectic understanding of the "superstructure" in general, of the superstructure of the class which is the party, and the superstructure of the party in the shape of its central leadership. There are epochs during which even Marx and Engels could not drive historical development forward a single inch; there are other epochs during which men of much smaller caliber, standing at the helm, can check the development of the international revolution for a number of years.

The attempts made recently to represent the matter as though I had repudiated the *Lessons of October* are entirely absurd. To be sure, I have "admitted" one "mistake" of secondary importance. When I wrote my *Lessons of October*, that is, in the summer of 1924, it seemed to me that Stalin held a position further to the Left (i.e., Left-Centrist) than Zinoviev in the Autumn of 1923. I was not quite abreast of the inner life of the group that played the role of the secret center of the majority faction apparatus. The documents published after the split of this factional grouping, especially the purely Brandlerist letter of Stalin to Zinoviev and Bukharin, convinced me of the incorrectness of my estimation of these personal groupings, which, however, had nothing to do with the essence of the problems raised. But even this error as to personalities is not a major one. Centrism is quite capable, it is true, of making big zigzags to the Left but as the "evolution" of Zinoviev has once again demonstrated, it is utterly incapable of conducting a revolutionary line in the least systematic.

The ideas developed by me in the *Lessons of October* retain their full force today. Moreover, they have been confirmed over and over again since 1928.

Among the numerous difficulties in a proletarian revolution, there is a particular, concrete, and specific difficulty. It arises out of the position and tasks of the revolutionary party leadership during a sharp turn of events. Even the most revolutionary parties run the risk of lagging behind and of counterposing the slogans and measures of struggle of yesterday to the new tasks and new exigencies. And there cannot, generally, be a sharper turn of events than that which creates the necessity for the armed insurrection of the proletariat. It is here that the danger arises that the policy of the party leadership and of the party as a whole does not correspond to the conduct of the class and the exigencies of the situation. During a relatively languid course of political life, such incongruities are remedied, even if with losses, but without a catastrophe. But in periods of acute revolutionary crisis, it is precisely time that is lacking to eliminate the incongruity and to redress the front, as it were, under fire. The periods of the maximum sharpening of a revolutionary crisis are by their very nature transitory. The incongruity between a revolutionary leadership (hesitation, vacillation, temporizing in the face of the furious assault of the bourgeoisie) and the objective tasks, can lead in the course of a few weeks and even days to a catastrophe and to a loss of what took years

of work to prepare.

Of course, the incongruity between the leadership and the party or between the party and the class can also be of an opposite character, that is to say, in cases when the leadership runs ahead of the development of the revolution and confounds the fifth month of pregnancy with the ninth. The dearest example of such an incongruity was to be observed in Germany in March 1921. There we had in the party the extreme manifestation of the “infantile disease of Leftism,” and as a consequence of it – putschism (revolutionary adventurism). This danger is quite actual for the future as well. That is why the teachings of the Third Congress of the Comintern retain their full force. But the German experience of 1923 brought before us the opposite danger in harsh reality: the situation is ripe and the leadership lags behind. By the time the leadership succeeds in accommodating itself to the situation, the latter has already changed; the masses are in retreat and the relationship of forces worsens abruptly.

In the German defeat of 1923, there were, of course, many national peculiarities but there also were profoundly typical features which indicate a general danger. This danger may be termed as *the crisis of the revolutionary leadership on the eve of the transition to the armed insurrection*. The rank and file of the proletarian party are by their very nature far less susceptible to the pressure of bourgeois public opinion. But certain elements of the party tops and the middle stratum of the party will unfailingly succumb in larger or smaller measure to the material and ideological terror of the bourgeoisie at the decisive moment. To dismiss this danger is not to cope with it. To be sure, there is no panacea against it suitable for all cases. But the first necessary step in fighting a peril is to understand its source and its nature. The inevitable appearance or development of a Right wing grouping in every communist party during the “pre-October” period reflects on the one hand the immense objective difficulties and dangers inherent in this “leap” and on the other hand the furious pressure of bourgeois public opinion. Herein lies the gist and the import of the Right wing grouping. And this is precisely why hesitations and vacillations arise inevitably in the communist parties at the very moment when they are most dangerous. In our party, only a minority of the party tops was seized by vacillations in 1917, and they were overcome, thanks to the harsh energy of Lenin. In Germany, the leadership as a whole vacillated and this irresolution was transmitted to the party and through it to the class. The revolutionary situation was thereby missed. In China where the workers and poor peasants were fighting for the seizure of power, *the central leadership worked against this struggle*. All these, of course, are not the last crises of the leadership in the most decisive historical moments. To reduce these inevitable crises to a minimum is one of the most important tasks of each communist party and of the Comintern as a whole. This cannot be achieved except by arriving at a complete understanding of the experiences of October 1917 and the political content of the then Right opposition inside our party in contrast to the experiences of the German party in 1923.

Herein precisely is the gist of the *Lessons of October*.

**Leon Trotsky**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti04.htm#p2-01>

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## Footnotes

[1] Pravda, May 25, 1924.

[2] Pravda, June 26, 1924.

[3] Documents of the Conference of the CPSU, January 1929, p.14.