

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



# weekly **worker**



**New light on April theses:  
Lars T Lih focuses on Lenin's  
polemic with Plekhanov**

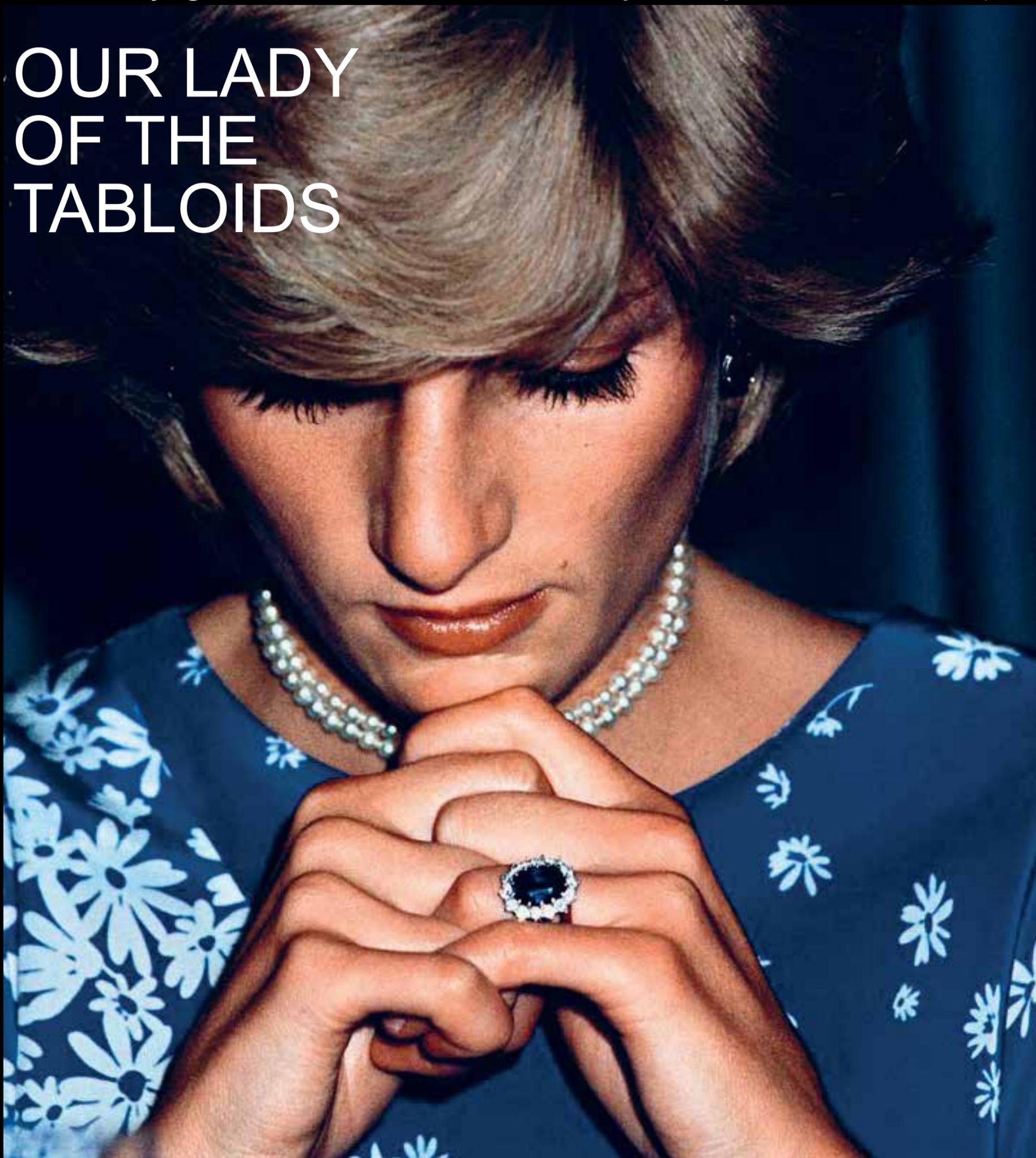
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**OUR LADY  
OF THE  
TABLOIDS**



# LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

## Opportunism

I attended the Communist Party of Great Britain's 2017 'Communist University' event - the first time I have done so in many years.

One item that kept coming up throughout the week was how to assess the significance of Lenin's April theses. CPGB comrades argued that, while the theses did mark a change in direction for the Bolsheviks in 1917, it was just a minor adjustment among comrades all pretty much on the same page and which was more or less consistent with all that had gone before, especially in regard to continuity of the slogan for a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'.

To back this up, the CPGB make much of the recent work done by academic historian Lars T Lih on the degree of difference within the Bolsheviks concerning Lenin's April theses. I have now read the five pieces on this question that Lih has published so far (available on John Riddell's blog - <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com> - as part of a projected seven-piece series) and write this letter to highlight what seems to be a significant problem with the narrative being presented.

The problem is that Lih and the CPGB find themselves in opposition to the central political figure involved in this 1917 dispute, as outlined in Lenin's *Letters on tactics* ([www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/x01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/x01.htm)), written in the days immediately following his presentation of the April theses.

Lenin provides the following context for writing *Letters on tactics*: "Both the theses and my report gave rise to differences of opinion among the Bolsheviks themselves and the editors of *Pravda*. After a number of consultations, we unanimously concluded that it would be advisable openly to discuss our differences."

As an aside, CPGB members and supporters might do well to note Lenin's emphasis on "openly" in reference to this case, with the clear implication that doing so was the result of a democratic decision which presumably had gone the other way on other issues.

So how did Lenin describe the opposition that met his presentation of the April theses? "... we hear a clamour of protest from people who readily call themselves 'old Bolsheviks' ..." How did Lenin characterise the "old Bolsheviks" who were making this "clamour of protest"? He wrote: "The person who now speaks only of a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' is behind the times; consequently, he has in effect gone over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle; that person should be consigned to the archive of 'Bolshevik' pre-revolutionary antiques (it may be called the archive of 'old Bolsheviks')."

And yet, throughout Communist University, it was exactly the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" slogan which the CPGB claimed was a central expression of the unbroken continuity of Bolshevik politics. We can only imagine what Lenin would have made of the idea that a political organisation in 2017 would still be holding firm to this slogan, taken from what must now be a very old and mouldy archive.

In his April theses, Lenin proposed an orientation towards agricultural labourers and the poor peasantry, as against the peasantry as a whole.

Alongside this he rejected any political support to the provisional government, critical or otherwise, and put forward the perspective of "a patient, systematic and persistent explanation" that soviets are "the only possible form of revolutionary government". Within about a month (according to Lih's research) this was to manifest in the Bolsheviks' public use of 'All power to the soviets!' that replaced 'For a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' as the main slogan regarding the nature of state power.

Perhaps the reader will at this point be wondering whether this discussion about political struggles in the Bolshevik Party in 1917 has any relevance for politics today. I believe it does and present the following related discussion at Communist University as evidence.

In a CU session on the rise of what is being called 'populism', I recounted my experience in Ireland with Sinn Féin's role in the anti-household/anti-water charges movement and more specifically my criticism of the Socialist Party's refusal to take a principled position of ruling out participation in a government with the openly pro-capitalist Sinn Féin, as they do with what they understand to be the three main capitalist parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party). As I have detailed on my blog (<https://revolutionaryprogramme.wordpress.com>), the Socialist Party consider this to be a question of clever tactics.

Jack Conrad described my understanding of working class independence as a matter of principle, which provided a framework for making concrete political positions and actions, as being a "shibboleth" and instead, exactly like the Socialist Party in Ireland, presented such decisions as merely tactical.

In what he somehow seemed to think was a killer blow against my insistence on the principle of working class independence being a guide to political programme, Conrad presented his understanding of the "cross-class alliance" that he believes both made the Russian Revolution and constituted the initial revolutionary government. This being the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry as a codification of the slogan, 'For the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' - which, as we see above, Lenin in 1917 described as belonging in the "archive of old Bolsheviks".

The CPGB link their narrative about the supposed "cross-class" nature of the forces that made the Russian Revolution to the supposed continuity of Bolshevism around the slogan of the 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'. This is then used to justify their "extreme tactical flexibility" approach to the question of applying the principle of working class independence in the here and now.

So, for the CPGB, the mass uprising of the proletariat supported by the peasantry *against* bourgeois rule in Russia in 1917 is supposedly directly politically equivalent to popular frontist alliances between proletarian and bourgeois parties in 2017!

All this political mumbo-jumbo is just an attempt to justify a rejection in concrete political practice of working class independence as a core principle of revolutionary Marxism. A clearer example of opportunism masking itself in an ahistorical reading of Marxism is harder to imagine.

**Alan Gibson**  
Co Cork, Ireland

## Enlightened

During your period 'offline' at the Communist University 2017, the world continued along its merry little way,

dumping various manure heaps of deception and duplicity - in harness with simple hypocrisy - as it did so. Here's a selection.

Via appearances at the head of memorial services and marches for those who died in Barcelona's car-ramming attacks, the so-called 'king' of Spain - alongside other members of his 'royal' family - tried to commandeer the raw emotions of local Catalan as well as national citizens; all of that on behalf of wider state machinery. With somewhat similar intent, back here in the UK our mass media gave blanket coverage to two 'princes', telling us how much they miss their late mother, Diana, a so-called Princess of Wales.

Also here in the UK, Labour continued in its attempts to straddle the canyon that lies between our parliamentary 'democracy' and anything even remotely close to true socialism - in this particular instance, by mildly modifying its posture and policies on the 100% fraudulently contrived matter of Brexit.

In pursuit of perpetuating their myths about 'great days of empire' and all the rest, clearly the mass/corporate media of Great Britain still find value in deploying sickly sentimentality. Also quite clearly, the capitalist state machine in Spain has recognised a golden opportunity within Islamism's murderous and nihilistic jihadist attacks to further its own sordid, toxic agendas (most notably, by deflecting attention away from far more substantial matters - such as top-level banking and political corruption, the current king's sister and brother-in-law recently being investigated for fraud, etc).

And the situation in respect of Corbyn and McDonnell's Labour Party? Well, if you try to straddle the fence between Britain's notionally democratic parliamentary system and any true representation of the interests of working people, inevitably your genitals will receive serious damage - even terminally so!

Nothing either surprising or unexpected in any of that, some might think. But what does remain both surprising and unacceptable is the continued plodding, trundling or otherwise head-banging and bludgeoning performance of 21st century communism. I use the term 'communism', but, to be more accurate, surely we should call ourselves the multi-fragmented and thereby blurry image of its ghost.

No doubt these comments or observations of mine are destined to be seen by many comrades as stemming from petty bourgeois negativity, allied to non-Leninist impatience. In any event, genuine apologies if all this comes over as super-critical and harsh - not to mention as 'detached' and pompousness-imbued arrogance.

However, comrades, at least in my personal experience of life, hard-nosed and thus unavoidably cruel truth, in conjunction with rock-solid honesty, offer the only viable method of escape for those trapped inside the suicidal vortex of a phony paradigm. Together they provide the only pathway out of any weed-entangled garden - any dark jungle or lonely wilderness. Only with those factors in full operation is it possible for people to break free from confines of their own making; from prisons built at least partially by their own design.

Comrades: given that it's difficult to know which of those is the most pertinent or simply a most fair-minded description of our current circumstances, I'll let those more experienced decide. What's absolutely undeniable, however, is that in effect we communists

are betraying most needs of both our domestic and the international working class. Indeed, doing so in arguably comparable manner to Corbynist Labour - even if not as outright poisonously as any 'royal' families.

Of course, we must dispatch all of them to that proverbial dustbin of history - both monarchists and reformist 'social democrats' alike. But simultaneously we must acknowledge partial responsibility for - and indeed feel all due shame about - the part we've played in permitting the continuation of both this utterly farcical farrago of our own organisational fragmentation and that ultra-criminal crap of their capitalist system.

In general terms, everything presented here relates to how things currently stand, rather than with an eye to any future, sensibly 'evolved' or freshly reformulated communist potential. In precisely that same context, no communist should forget where ignoring truth, honesty and objective facts ended up for the Stalinist USSR. If only those comrades from history had paid proper attention to the warnings from Leon Trotsky and others, how very differently things might have turned out in relation to 'globalisation' for our socialist values; in connection with securing permanence for our Marxist-Leninist ideas and ideals.

By way of a final note on developments whilst you met at your Communist University, not until statues of Karl Marx, VI Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Patrice Lumumba and Thomas Sankara are standing in public spaces within Charlottesville and other US cities will there have been any meaningful change in that nation's level of egalitarianism or real democracy. That is to say, either statues of those specific members of humankind or directly equivalent others who have come along in a meantime of class-conscious struggle and fully enlightened engagement.

**Bruno Kretzschmar**  
email

## Compass

John Beattie concludes his *Morning Star* article, 'Don't believe the hype, the SNP are not on the political left', with: "This is why Labour's journey back to the political left must stay on course. This strategy will help us expose the SNP's conservatism and win back our Scottish working class heartlands" (August 19). This is in sharp contrast to the opinion piece by South West Surrey Compass leader Steve Williams ('Sectarianism never results ...', August 21), where he advocates popular frontism.

Of his five examples, Podemos has yet to face its moment of truth. Leon Blum in 1936 only led to the French capitalist class capitulating to the Nazis - 'Better Hitler than Blum' was their slogan. Franco benefited from the refusal of both Socialist Party leaders, Largo Caballero and Juan Negrin (1936-39), to make a socialist revolution on Stalin's instructions, lest they frighten away the 'democratic imperialists'. Just before he allied with the not-so-democratic Adolph Hitler. And, the least said about the abject political cowardice and capitulation of Syriza, the better.

We should have all listened to South West Surrey Compass and backed Dr Louise Irvine and we might have unseated Jeremy Hunt, not to mention Zac Goldsmith. Compass called for a progressive alliance with the Liberal Democrats and others. Local officers Steve Williams, Kate Townsend and Robert Park were expelled. Steve, like many 'moderate' members, has no perspective other

than winning local parliamentary elections.

Speakers at Compass events include Ed Balls, Derek Simpson, Hilary Benn, Hazel Blears, Ed Miliband, Dave Prentis, Frances O'Grady, Jon Cruddas, Jon Trickett and Chuka Umunna. How to lose elections, anyone?

A July 6 YouGov poll gave Labour 46% and the Tories 38%. Labour is ahead of the SNP in Scotland (36%/31%). And that is surely down to outright rejection of Compass progressive alliances.

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Social being

Tony Clark makes a curious comment in the course of this running debate on the subject of energy policy (Letters, August 10). It's a bit off-topic, but still worth a mention.

According to him, Marxism is flawed in its assumption that social being determines consciousness (rather than the other way around). It's a bit like saying, says Tony, that "when a person crosses the road the decision was made by his legs rather than his consciousness". But I think he has got the wrong end of the stick and has misunderstood what is meant by "social being" in this context. I would refer him to Peter Stillman's useful article on 'The myth of Marx's economic determinism', in which Stillman observes: "Marx's aphorism - 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' - presents its assertion asymmetrically. Having denied the leftwing Hegelian stance that consciousness determines being, Marx reverses the terms, but adds 'social' - and 'social being' is not defined, but seems to be more extensive than merely forces (or forces and relations) of production and indeed as 'social' likely includes consciousness" ([www.marxists.org/subject/marxmyths/peter-stillman/article.htm](http://www.marxists.org/subject/marxmyths/peter-stillman/article.htm)).

To advance his argument, Tony Clark gives us the example of the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, which, "under Marxist leadership [sic], failed to transform the consciousness of the masses in the direction of a democratic socialist society, making it easier for the capitalist roaders to take over". In other words, according to him, the lack of socialist consciousness contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union, because social ownership of the means of production - ie, being - does not automatically lead to socialist consciousness.

But this is nonsense for the simple reason that there was no social ownership of the means of production in the Soviet Union. What there was, was (primarily) state ownership of those means and state ownership has no connection whatsoever with social ownership. Tony refers to Engels, but Engels was very clear about the distinction.

Thus, in *Socialism: utopian and scientific*, we find Engels dismissing "as a purely self-serving falsification by the Manchesterite [*laissez-faire*] bourgeoisie" the idea that state intervention in a system of free competition could be labelled 'socialism'. The trend towards joint-stock companies, trusts and, ultimately, state property, he wrote, "does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces".

On the contrary: "The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine - the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the

taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers - proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with. It is, rather, brought to a head. But, brought to a head, it topples over. State ownership of the productive forces is not the solution of the conflict, but concealed within it are the technical conditions that form the elements of that solution."

That solution, contended Engels, "can only consist in the practical recognition of the social nature of the modern forces of production, and therefore in the harmonising with the socialised character of the means of production. And this can only come about by society openly and directly taking possession of the productive forces which have outgrown all control, except that of society as a whole."

So, state ownership is here very clearly being contrasted with social ownership. State property is actually a form of private property - namely the collective property of the capitalist class as a whole, which is distinguishable from the individualised form of private property, such as normally obtains in the west. For Marx and Engels, the essence of private property, irrespective of what form it takes, consists in the separation of the direct producers from the products of their labour, which, under capitalism, gives rise to a system of wage-labour, such as existed in the Soviet Union, as it does everywhere else in a global capitalist world.

Of course, there was very little support or even awareness of an alternative to this system of generalised wage-labour called capitalism within the Soviet Union - or indeed unfortunately anywhere else in the world - and so it was hardly surprising that neither could there be found there anything resembling social or common ownership of the means of production, which is what the classical Marxian definition of socialism is based upon in the first instance.

**Robin Cox**  
email

## Safe passage

The news of migrants found locally in a container is awful, very sad and avoidable. It shows how desperate people have become to jump onto an overcrowded vehicle, knowing it is illegal and dangerous.

Every day we see people trying to flee persecution and/or poverty by cramming into boats in dangerous conditions. Increasing numbers drown, which is appalling. As the fifth wealthiest nation in the world, we have to do much, much more to join with other relatively wealthy nations in Europe, and elsewhere. We must provide the resources to enable safe migration to replace these dangerous and often illegal forms of transport. That would undermine the wicked 'people smugglers', who want to make quick profits out of other people's misery, with no regard for their safety or well-being.

People should be able to move freely and enjoy each other's cultures; or simply to move for work, or to be with family. Of course, it goes without saying that so-called developed countries like Britain should automatically provide sanctuary to those fleeing from terror, persecution or poverty.

Immigration has net benefits to host communities and countries, including economic ones. Migrants put in more than they take out - a fact some people simply won't accept. Therefore, state resources can, and must, follow migrants to ensure local services are expanded and no-one locally suffers. At the end of the day,

we are one global people, divided by wealth, not race, and it is our political and moral duty to welcome all migrants, whilst ensuring funding travels with them to sustain services. We must stop demonising migrants and give them safe passage.

**Pete McLaren**  
Rugby

## Fast and furious

It has come to the attention of the undersigned that one of the most crucial questions of today's workers' movement is criminally absent from the pages of the supposed radical press. That is the question of which of the *Fast and furious* films is the most revolutionary.

The lives and struggles of an unlikely group of misfit DVD thieves, portrayed in the eight-part epic, poses more clearly the question of proletarian dictatorship than a million mealy-mouthed words about tweaking the capitalist system of production that passes for Marxism in much of the left today.

Enver Hoxha, when talking of the art of Socialist Albania, proclaimed: "When you read them, hear them or see them, you are seeing and feeling the pulse of the life and struggle of our people." This is the sensation that the most oppressed layers of society will feel when they are temporarily transcended to voyeurs of the most acute acts of class struggle ever portrayed on screen. It's not just the sheer number of imperialist nations, Amerikkka, UKKK, etc that are struggled against in the series, but also the resolve and proletarian discipline of the actors on the stage of the 'revolution portrayed'.

Take *Furious 7*. The gang disrupt a Emirati Prince's decadent birthday party; in a light comedy scene Roman (played by Tyrese Gibson) demonstrates his ability to ruthlessly lampoon bourgeois culture. The excitement doesn't stop there, as our heroes of labour destroy not only one of the world's most wanton symbols of excess and inequality, a \$3.4 million dollar sports car, but strike a blow against two of Abu Dhabi's skyscrapers, in what is not just one of world cinema's greatest scenes, but also a guide to action for the

world proletariat.

Later in the film James Wan combines tasks of the vanguard Leninist movement when he has 'Hobbs' (played by Dwayne 'the People's Champion' Johnson) take down a Predator drone (an obvious and ingenious attack on imperialism's role in Pakistan, that will be celebrated throughout the neocolonial world), and uses the downed drone's mini-gun against a stealth helicopter, sent as an attempt to drown in blood the intrepid Marxists at the centre of the story.

However, the series never confines itself to just taking on the imperialist states of the world, but also attacking financial institutions. In *Fast 5* the gang, while pursued by Reyes, a Brazilian cartel boss, and the Diplomatic Security Service, expropriate a bank vault by ripping it from a building. They then proceed to smash the police vehicles in pursuit with said vault. Where is Alex Callinicos's praise for such revolutionary fortitude!?

A list of victories against capitalism (matched by no Trotskyite organisation in the world ...) could be printed in the pages of your journal, but that would miss the overall themes of the films: the complete rejection and breaking down of bourgeois family relations, the Stakhanovite determination of the heroes and the adherence at all times to 'Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention of the Chinese People's Liberation Army'.

Nevertheless, for all their revolutionary potential, the *Fast and furious* films have never received the proper Marxist analysis which they deserve. It is one of the goals of this letter to bring to notice the important lessons such films offer, especially to many sections of workers who have not been introduced to Marxism-Leninism, but to also start the debate and analyse their merit. We hope this is not the last we will hear of our favourite gang's anti-capitalist actions.

**Steffan Bateman**  
Acting sectarian for the *Fast and Furious* Communist Party (One More Trilogy faction)

# Summer Offensive

## Stepping up to the plate

I am pleased to report that the CPGB's annual fundraising drive, the Summer Offensive, raised a total of £26,580. This fell short of our £30,000 target, but in the circumstances was still a remarkable achievement.

For a number of reasons the SO lasted a mere seven weeks this year - as compared to the usual two-month period, which has often been extended by a couple of days to nine weeks. In other words, we should be more than pleased with the 2017 result.

Amongst the dozens of contributors, two stand out - comrades TB and YM both raised just over £2,500. That includes the cash that came in as a result of their efforts, as well as what they personally donated. Their achievements were recognised at the August 18 celebratory meal, held at the end of Communist University, as were those of many other comrades, including DG, who still came up to the mark despite difficult personal circumstances.

I also ought to mention comrade PK, who featured in my last column three weeks ago. His fundraising efforts had meant cutting out little things like a visit to the barber's and so we were pleased to introduce a

not entirely novel idea to this year's SO - a sponsored shave and haircut! This added an extra £55 at the very last moment ('before' and 'after' photos are available for those who want proof!).

As *Weekly Worker* editor, I know only too well what the Summer Offensive means. Despite our monthly fighting fund, the cash we raise does little more than cover our basic costs. But every year the money that we at the *Weekly Worker* receive from the SO gives us a massive boost - not only in terms of much needed office equipment and so on, but in providing the extra finance to cover such things as the extra printing costs for supplements and so on. It also provides a much needed breathing space and allows for a little relief, when it comes to the constant demands on our resources.

Every year we demand a lot of our members and supporters - and every year they step up to the plate. 2017 has proved to be no exception.●

**Peter Manson**

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

# ACTION

## London Communist Forum

**Sunday September 3, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Followed by open discussion and reading group: study of August Nimitz's *Lenin's electoral strategy from Marx and Engels through the revolution of 1905*. This meeting: chapter 2, 'Revolutionary continuity' (continued).

Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk); and Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](http://www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk).

## McStrike protest

**Saturday September 2, 2pm to 4pm:** Solidarity with the first ever UK McDonald's strike. Protest outside McDonald's HQ, 11-59 High Road, East Finchley, London N2.

Organised by BFAWU: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1746794358681863/>.

## Crafting peace

**Saturday September 2, 11am to 6pm:** Anti-war craft fair, Mill Hill Chapel, City Square, Leeds LS1.

Organised by Leeds Coalition Against War: [www.lcaw.co.uk](http://www.lcaw.co.uk).

## Moment of disbelief

**Sunday September 3, 1.30pm:** Book launch, the Old Bookshop, 8 High Street, Downham Market, Norfolk.

Featuring STWC member William Alderson's *Moment of disbelief* - poems on war, terrorism and refugees.

Organised by King's Lynn Stop the War: [www.facebook.com/KingsLynnStoptheWar](http://www.facebook.com/KingsLynnStoptheWar).

## Stop arming Israel

**Monday September 4, 9am till late:** Protest, Western Terrace, Excel Centre, Royal Victoria Dock, 1 Western Gateway, London E16.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org/events/stop-arming-israel-arms-fair-protest](http://www.palestinecampaign.org/events/stop-arming-israel-arms-fair-protest).

## Radical bargains

**Saturday September 9, 11am to 3pm:** Book sale of radical left and Marxist literature, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1.

Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org).

## No to the arms trade

**Saturday September 9, 10am:** Art exhibition, ExCeL Exhibition Centre, London Docklands, Royal Victoria Dock, 1 Western Gateway, London E16.

Organised by Art The Arms Fair: <https://artthearmsfair.org>.

## Stop the cuts

**Saturday September 9, 12 noon:** March against budget cuts. Assemble College Green, Park Street, Bristol BS1.

Organised by Bristol People's Assembly: [www.facebook.com/BristolPeoplesAssembly](http://www.facebook.com/BristolPeoplesAssembly).

## Scrap the pay cap

**Sunday September 10, 1pm:** Rally at TUC Congress, Arundel Suite, Holiday Inn, 137 King's Road, Brighton BN1. Confirmed speakers: John McDonnell, Mark Serwotka (PCS), Steve Gillan (POA), Ronnie Draper (BFAWU), Sean Hoyle (RMT), Amy Murphy (Usdaw).

Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: <http://shopstewards.net>.

## Living with trauma

**Tuesday September 12, 6.30pm:** Meeting, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. How to cope in Iraq.

Organised by Tadamun (Iraqi Women Solidarity): <http://solidarityiraq.blogspot.co.uk>.

## Scottish campaign against Trident

**Wednesday September 13, 7pm:** Discussion opened by Scottish activists, Committee room 6, Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1.

Organised by Birmingham Socialist Discussion Group: 07771 567496.

## No to war

**Wednesday September 20, 6.30pm to 8.30pm:** Rally, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1.

Organised by North London Stop the War: [www.facebook.com/nlondon.stwc.7](http://www.facebook.com/nlondon.stwc.7).

## Social histories of the Russian Revolution

**Thursday September 28, 6.30pm:** Discussion meeting, Birkbeck, University of London, 26 Russell Square, London WC1. 'Taking power: remaking the family, levelling wages, planning the economy'. Speaker: Wendy Goldman.

Organised by Social Histories of the Russian Revolution: <https://socialhistories1917.wordpress.com>.

## Tories out!

**Sunday October 1, 12 noon:** National demonstration on opening day of Conservative Party conference. Assemble Castlefield Arena, Rice Street, Manchester M3.

Organised by People's Assembly: [www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk](http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk).

## Making a world without war

**Monday October 2, 7.30pm:** Talk, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speaker: Dr Scilla Elworthy.

Organised by Conway Hall Ethical Society: <https://conwayhall.org.uk/ethical-society>.

## Capital and historical materialism

**Thursday October 5, 7pm:** Lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Marx's approach to the analysis of capitalist society. Speaker: Dr Jonathan White (*Theory and Struggle*).

Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org).

## CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

## ANNIVERSARY

# Our lady of the tabloids

Twenty years on, Britain is still not over the death of Diana Spencer. Paul Demarty investigates the cult of the 'people's princess'



**A marriage made in hell**

It was 20 years ago today (assuming, eager reader, that you are looking at this on the evening of publication) that Diana Spencer, princess of Wales, met a grisly end in a road tunnel in Paris.

Her death, along with lover, Dodi Fayed, and their intoxicated, hapless driver, Henri Paul, was tragic in the generic sense that all such incidents are. Yet the wider culture of Britain marks the anniversary not for that reason, plainly enough. A BBC radio documentary stretched credulity when it was announced as the story of the "most extraordinary life of the 20th century" - picture Lady Di, towering in influence above Lenin, Freud, Stalin, Hitler and innumerable other singular figures in an eventful period - yet we can almost imagine it an innocent accident on the part of the continuity announcers.

The cult of Diana Spencer has, in 20 short years, persisted stubbornly in the national ideology. In the end, it is no surprise; for what her death accomplished is no less than the fusion of the contemporary form of celebrity culture with the British monarchy - a rather odd thing to be martyred for indeed - but more immortality than most people will enjoy.

## Time immemorial

It is, of course, true that the royals have always been celebrities of one sort or another, and particularly since the Victorian era, when the grandeur of empire was projected in part through the perceived personal virtues of the crown: in contrast to the savagery of the colonial natives, Victoria was supposed to represent temperance and civilisation; and her austere Protestant virtues were hailed, by English Toryism at least, as an antidote to the popery and radical ferment of the continent (not to mention Ireland). Before that, the sexual incontinence of George IV and the life in sin of his brother, William IV, were the subject of public scandal-mongering, as was the notorious madness of their father, George III. And the pattern continued in the last century - we need only mention Edward and Mrs Simpson.

What all these have in common, however, is a particular fetishism of the monarchy, very typical of constitutional monarchies in general, as a symbolic representation of the antique moral inheritance of the country. In this light, to take one example, the prohibition against Catholics taking the

throne - whose origins lie in the close association between the Roman church and monarchical absolutism at the time of the 1688 revolution, but can scarcely have much popularity today - must be maintained anyway; the projection of continuity is essential, even when it is continuity of a 'revolutionary' stipulation. We even tolerate - how to put this - the various royal houses' habit of pushing at the edges of the incest taboo, in service to the idea that the nobility of the national character is somehow present in concentrate form in royal blood (even though they are 'all German' ...). The moral turpitude of George and William is a problem because it pierces the moral veil: the monarchy is revealed to be much like us - hostage to the appetites of the flesh and all that.

Diana, in contrast, succeeded in the public mind because she was 'just like us'. The question of how she gets to be just like us is hardly an uninteresting one. This is, on the face of it, a peculiar view of things. Not all of us are born into a family with a 200-year-old earldom; plenty of us fail our school exams, but not many do so at an exclusive private school, and fewer yet proceed from there to finishing school in some remote corner of the Alps. It is to our great advantage and benefit, moreover, that we are not typically coerced into marriage with the Prince of Wales. Though the wedding was a major public event, Diana was not yet the Lady Di we know today; merely a strikingly young, saucer-eyed Sloane.

What changed was, of course, the long and messy divorce, imperfectly concealed by the Palace, but whose details leaked out, drip by drip. The marriage seems to have been a sham from the get-go. Charles agreed to it only when he was forbidden from making a queen-in-waiting out of the divorced Camilla Parker-Bowles. Kings needed virgin brides. Diana was sold to him as a brood-mare, and fulfilled her side of the 'bargain', producing two male heirs; Charles continued on with the woman who actually interested him (and with stubbornly promoting the eccentric opinions that bored everyone else). It did not take long, under those circumstances, for his wife to find physical satisfaction in the company of other men, one of whom - James Hewitt - turned his charm into the mother of all kiss-and-tell stories. Between Hewitt's actions and Andrew Morton's famous

biography of the princess, published to wide sensation in 1992, the 'fairytale marriage' gave way to the usual, ugly procedure of divorce, which - given the stakes - took over four years.

It is sometimes said, when a footballer is caught doing cocaine or saying something racist, that the 'back page has made the front page'. With the Diana saga, it was the society column that made the front page; the comings and goings of the aristocracy is a peculiarly English fixture in the middlebrow press, of which we are so rightly ashamed, but the gossip about countesses, baronets and debutantes is usually a world away from the pap-snaps and romantic speculation of tabloid celebrity gossip. The divorce of the century changed that, at least in the case of the royal family.

## Dianolatry

To be a celebrity in the sights of the British gutter press is a schizophrenic calling. Stars flip violently from heroes to villains, seemingly over the course of weeks. A heartfelt tell-all, in aid of some charity or another, will be given extensive and seemingly respectful coverage, fully vetted and agreed by one's 'people'; on the other hand, perceived indiscretions (sex and drugs, especially) bring forth moralistic finger-wagging and sometimes torrents of bile.

Freud described religion as the result of the primal horde's guilt for overthrowing the alpha-male, and, while his speculations on this point are worthless as anthropology, something similar seems to be at work in the tabloid and middlebrow press's two-decade run of uninterrupted Dianolatry; this is the very picture of bad conscience. Now that she is reinvented as a secular saint, no paper will say anything bad about Diana, but she was routinely pilloried when she was alive.

Her sins were many. She was criticised for speaking openly about the dismal experience of marriage to Charles, and the malignant character of the royal family in general. She was blamed for the breakdown in the marriage - she was too thick to satisfy that great mind of our time, Charles Windsor; she blew hot and cold; and - what else? - she was mad! When she owned up to a history of severe mental illness, publicity-seeking psychiatrists were found to give us a long-distance diagnosis of borderline personality disorder.

The opposite, of course, was also true. If Diana came off badly, she did no worse than Charles, whose bizarre sex-talk with Parker Bowles was raked over in detail. Her charity work was approvingly covered. And despite the best efforts of the Palace press office, the displays of frailty played in her favour. She was, after all, just like us. Future queens suffer from post-natal depression too, as it turns out. The royals, stuck now with their male descendants in a broken home, despised the woman who had caused so much chaos; but, as her tabloid audience grew, so tabloid readers began to take sides: with her.

The result was the spectacular scenes of mass hysteria that greeted her death, which took even the tabloids by surprise. Rapidly they fell into line; Tony Blair delivered his famous 'people's princess' spiel; Elton John hit number one with a hastily rewritten 'Candle in the Wind'. We cannot merely put this down to 'bread-and-circuses'-type rote patriotism: Diana was too despised by her own class for that. A genuine spontaneous element arose here, reminiscent of the irrational fondness of peasant rebellions in feudal monarchies for this or that pretender to the throne, who would sweep away the vicious lords and do right by the common folk. Conspiracy theories proliferated - why, even the *Weekly Worker's* own correspondent, Jack Conrad, told readers that "when I heard the news of her death, I frankly admit my initial suspicion was that MI5 - or some other shadowy arm of the state - had bumped [her] off", though he concluded that such an arrangement was "highly improbable".<sup>1</sup>

## How they live now

Such speculations are still rife, and still promoted by the more desperate sections of the gutter press. What lies behind them is, after a fashion, the same stuff that lies behind the conspiracy theories surrounding John F Kennedy.

In that case, there is a need, on the part of many millions of Americans, especially among those old enough to remember the event first-hand, to believe that America had faced a fork in the road, and might have taken the path that led it away from its catastrophic war in Vietnam, and obviated the need for a Nixon in reaction to the crippling of American liberalism in the jungles of Indochina, but was prevented from doing so by certain men in black hats, who diverted the course of national

history to blood, lies and corruption. In the case of Diana, we are likewise dealing with wishful thinking, the wish for what is, in relative terms, a random and bloody demise to resolve itself into a neat picture, with good on one side and evil on the other.

The truth is that the events of 20 years ago do not show the establishment acting in ruthlessly efficient concert, but rather in a state of disarray and desperately leaking authority. The result, ultimately, was a reconfiguration of the royal family's public image. The queen remained more or less as she was, albeit more so - more taciturn, more the humble vessel of the glamour of state power, more dedicated to the letter of her ritual duties. She exists as a sort of self-parodic Victoria, whose reign she has just exceeded, in her puritanical dedication to the narrowest possible interpretation of her role. Charles continues to ride his hobby-horses and generally make a tit out of himself; we suspect that he is not inclined to listen to even the most sensible advice from Palace PR people.

It is the grandsons who are the most telling, for - as we on the left like to say - the youth are the future. They have been more or less donated to the tabloid press which so hounded their mother. Their every interview is trimmed and scripted to perfection - we are reminded, alas, of the post-match interviews of well-trained footballers. The same seven or eight banalities tumble forth. We have been treated of late to no end of confessions that they were - heaven forefend - rather put out by the sudden death of their mother. Nothing about them will ever surprise us.

The point is that, whereas Diana was able to play the tabloid celebrity game, however perilously, as a way of gaining a power base against the family in which she had become trapped, today that same family has essentially sold her children to be the willing servants of the same media apparatus. Its sordid behaviour with respect to Diana, and more or less every celebrity significant enough to merit tabloid notice, seems not to bother the royals, who are happy to cling on to whatever dignity is afforded them in these cynical times. On this front, the media won and, while its power - or rather its *appearance* of very great power - has been badly shaken these past few years, there is still life in the old dog yet.

Lurking in the background here is a larger historical pattern, whereby hegemonic capitalist powers, when they are supplanted, are forced first onto the ground of total subservience to finance capital, and from thence - when even the bankers have tired of fading glory - to the tedious afterlife of tourism. This process is most clearly visible, unsurprisingly, where it is most complete. Take Venice, once a dominant trading power, then a money laundry, and now - and for the last 200 years or more - a sinking pile of trinkets for the amusement of city breakers. There, we predict, stands London, a decade or two hence. Or perhaps less: the possibility of a catastrophic outcome from Brexit negotiations is equally the possibility of a very sharp 'leg down' in this process.

Dead she may be, but Britain will be in ever greater need of photogenic martyrs like Diana, and we predict a long afterlife for her •

## Notes

1. 'Death of a troublesome princess' *Weekly Worker* September 4 1997.

## ANALYSIS

# Understanding the ‘populist moment’

Populism has been used as a catch-all definition covering everyone from Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders to Evo Morales and Rodrigo Duterte. But what is populism and what is its historical background? Kevin Bean gives some answers

‘Populism’ was the word of the year in 2016 and has continued to make the headlines in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Politicians as radically different as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States, and movements as diverse as Podemos in Spain and Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), have frequently been labelled ‘populist’ by commentators and political opponents. In stretching the term to include the Bolivian left leader, Evo Morales, and the Philippines president, Rodrigo Duterte, in its own motley collection of populist politicians, *The Economist* shares the widely-held view that populism expresses “a rejection of the political establishment” and as such presents a serious, if ill-defined, threat to the status quo in the USA and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

It has been suggested that one of the significant features of these disparate popular revolts against the elites is their relatively sudden emergence and rapid growth, as a result of an appeal to previously unrepresented voters or ‘socially excluded’ groups.<sup>3</sup> Supporters of Brexit, for example, have been widely described as disaffected, ‘left-behind’ voters living in ‘post-industrial areas’, whilst Trump’s presidential triumph has been similarly attributed to the anger and alienation of voters in the USA’s Rust Belt states.<sup>4</sup> Commentators covering the 2017 French presidential elections provided an added refinement to this analysis, arguing that Marine Le Pen of the rightwing National Front and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the leftwing La France Insoumise (France Unbowed) movement were fishing in the same electoral pool for support amongst “the enraged and disengaged” and were thus merely right and left variants of the same populist politics.<sup>5</sup>

As *The Economist* puts it, “populism’s belief that the people are always right is bad news for two elements of liberal democracy: the rights of minorities and the rule of law”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, not only do populist ideas originate far beyond conventional politics, but the leaders and parties that espouse populism must be seen as unrestrained ‘outsiders’ in revolt against the established order. Fears that these ‘outsiders’ might get their hands on the state machine and govern in the supposed interests of their supporters - ‘the people’ - underlies much contemporary commentary on populist movements.

Superficially, these assessments appear to be a rehash of the old thesis that the ‘extremes’ of left and right share common, totalitarian characteristics and ultimately present the same authoritarian threat to liberal democracy.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in equating Donald Trump’s rabble-rousing speeches and incoherent tweets with a nascent fascism, the rather strained comparison between contemporary political turmoil and the rise of Nazism in the 1930s has become commonplace in the more excitable sections of the media.<sup>8</sup>

It is easy to dismiss these fears as hysterical exaggerations or to argue against the liberal equation of inchoate leftist currents such as Podemos with Trump’s reactionary ‘redneck’ base. However, the reasons why these very different movements are defined as part of the same ‘populist moment’ bears further investigation. As Marco D’Eramo notes, populist movements never define themselves as ‘populist’. It is a description used by others as an insult rather than as a tool for analysis and, as such, may



Something in common: Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán

reveal more about those who use it than those being described.<sup>9</sup> The popularity of ‘populism’ in political and academic commentary in the early 21st century clearly reflects fears that bourgeois democracy is seriously threatened in the face of the developing capitalist crisis.<sup>10</sup> Following Brexit and Trump’s presidential victory of 2016, many serious commentators appeared to believe that popular discontent with out-of-touch political and financial elites had reached such a level that the established technocratic politics and managerial parties of both left and right might disintegrate in the face of new challenges from below.<sup>11</sup> Similarly before Emmanuel Macron’s presidential victory and the “astounding landslide” for his ‘centrist’ La République En Marche, the media had been filled with dire predictions that the populist tide was sweeping all before it.<sup>12</sup>

However, Macron’s victory - alongside a series of electoral setbacks for the AfD, the UK Independence Party, Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, amongst others - seems to suggest that the worst fears of both the commentariat and bourgeois politicians have failed to materialise in 2017. Even so, the sense of unease that these movements created has not subsided and forthcoming parliamentary elections in Germany, Italy, Austria, Norway and the Czech Republic could still throw up some surprises for establishment politicians. Moreover, an understanding that these populist currents in their various forms reflect a much deeper crisis in the capitalist political and economic system remains strong amongst academics, bourgeois commentators and political leaders in the developed world.<sup>13</sup>

### The history of an elusive idea

The idea of ‘the people’ and their relationship to democracy has always been ambiguous in the history of bourgeois politics and continues to be so today. In the early modern period many theorists, using the classical language of ‘plebeians versus patricians’, defined ‘the people’ positively and even ennobled them during the revolutionary political struggle between democracy and aristocracy.<sup>14</sup> Thus ‘the general will’ of the *demos* and ‘the sovereignty of the

people’ in various forms became powerful and positive ideological themes in the great 17th and 18th century English, American and French revolutions.<sup>15</sup> However, as those revolutions also showed, ‘the people’ could be identified in a less elevated fashion as ‘the mob’, ill-educated, emotionally immature and easily swayed by demagogues.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the French Revolution added to ruling class dread of the ‘dark masses’, which were to remain a constant threat throughout the 19th century. For many sociologists and psychologists these anxieties were heightened by the experience of fascism in the 20th century. The literature of collective psychosis, crowd behaviour and charismatic political leadership, as it developed from the 1890s, also became obsessed by fear of the masses.<sup>17</sup>

This period also coincided with the initial development of populism in its modern sense in the 1880s and 1890s in movements such as the Farmers’ Alliances and the People’s Party in the USA.<sup>18</sup> These largely rural movements arose in a period when primary agricultural producers and related social strata were being squeezed by an intensification of market relationships and capitalist production. Framing political conflict as a struggle between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’, they identified the elite with corrupt, urban-based politicians, corporate and financial power, and other parasitic ‘special interests’, who exploited ‘the people’ both economically and politically.<sup>19</sup> The conflict often took the form of a culture war, between those who defended the stability of tradition against the uncertainties of modernising change. In this narrative ‘the people’ - often defined as small working farmers and small-town artisans - were often seen as the productive backbone of society, embodying the essence of the nation. Politically, class distinctions between petty rural property-owners and the urban-based working class could be both consciously obscured and subsumed under the banner of ‘the people’, giving populism a certain social force in some western and southern US states in the late 19th century.

Despite its agrarian radicalism and democratic language, American populism was generally hostile to explicitly class-based politics and socialism, preferring instead to uphold small-scale capitalism and the nation as its ideal. Populism, as an ideological

framework, remained important in American politics throughout the 20th century. Politicians of all stripes from FDR and Huey Long in the 1930s to George Wallace in the 1950s and 1960s made use of populist rhetoric to position themselves on the side of ‘the average American’.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, albeit supposedly from the left, the Occupy movement of 2011-12 drew on long-established populist tropes, with its claims to represent the ‘99%’ against the Wall Street financial elite.<sup>21</sup>

If the United States provides some of the best known models of populism, Europe and South America saw the development of other types of national-popular movements and parties during the late 19th and 20th centuries. From Ireland and Portugal through to Poland and Hungary in the 1920s and 1930s, populist parties emerged as political actors, identifying ‘the people’ with their small-farmer base and championing agrarian and rural interests against urban elites and finance capital.<sup>22</sup> In many newly established states, these parties also played an important role in nation-building through mobilising and politicising recently enfranchised rural populations.<sup>23</sup> Similar patterns were also evident in movements in former colonial and semi-colonial countries, such as Peronism in Argentina. In these cases populist movements also drew support from the cities, where recently urbanised workers still retained social links with the countryside and initially identified as plebeians rather than class-conscious workers.<sup>24</sup>

Similar questions about the nature of populism and its relationship to forms of state-building and the reconstitution of national-popular politics have also been posed recently in eastern Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of Stalinism. The re-emergence of populist parties in the 1990s, particularly the electoral success enjoyed by Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary and the Polish Law and Justice Party, add a further element to the discussion on populist politics and its relationship to older forms of nationalism and fascism.<sup>25</sup>

In the light of these international and historical perspectives my next article will go on to explore further the relationship between populism and the various political, economic and cultural facets of the contemporary crisis. Having apparently dodged the populist bullet in France and elsewhere in western Europe so far in 2017, can the ruling class and their political

parties continue to hold the line against ‘the populist threat’? ●

### Notes

1. This is an edited version of the first part of a talk given at the CPGB’s 2017 Communist University. This article will introduce the topic and consider the historical context for the development of populism, while the following article will examine the implications for the future trajectory of politics.
2. ‘What is populism?’ *The Economist* December 19 2016: [www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains-18](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/12/economist-explains-18).
3. M Broening, ‘The rise of populism in Europe: can the center hold?’ *Foreign Affairs* June 3 2016.
4. Eg, Bagehot, ‘A tale of two cities’ *The Economist* February 20 2016; J Pacewicz, ‘Here’s the real reason Rust Belt cities and towns voted for Trump’ *The Washington Post* December 20 2016.
5. P Rimbart, ‘Un barrage pent en cacher un autre’ *Le Monde Diplomatique* June 2017. A similar analysis also emerged after the US presidential election, when research showed that both Trump and Sanders appealed to similar groups of voters and that some who had voted for Sanders in the primaries switched to Trump in preference to Clinton in the general election. See D Kurtzleben, ‘Here’s how many Bernie Sanders’ supporters ultimately voted for Trump’ *NPR* August 24 2017: [www.npr.org/2017/08/24/545812242/1-in-10-sanders-primary-voters-ended-up-supporting-trump-survey-finds](http://www.npr.org/2017/08/24/545812242/1-in-10-sanders-primary-voters-ended-up-supporting-trump-survey-finds).
6. ‘What is populism?’ *The Economist* December 19 2016: [www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains-18](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/12/economist-explains-18).
7. For a recent example of this type of argument see Z Williams, ‘Totalitarianism in the age of Trump: lessons from Hannah Arendt’ *The Guardian* February 1 2017.
8. Eg, HDS Greenway, ‘Seeds of fascism sprout anew in Trump’s America’ *Boston Globe and Mail* June 6 2017.
9. M D’Eramo, ‘Populism and the new oligarchy’ *New Left Review* July-August 2013.
10. The growth of opposition to the European Union from the early 2000s provided the necessity for an explanation of this ‘new’ phenomenon, whilst the work of Cas Mudde did much to bring the term into popular usage amongst academics in this period. See C Mudde *Populist radical right parties in Europe* Cambridge 2007 and C Mudde, ‘The populist radical right: a pathological normalcy’ *West European Politics* 2010, 33 (6).
11. See, for example, a series of articles on ‘the Euro-populists’ in the *Financial Times* August 15 2017: [www.ft.com/euro-populists](http://www.ft.com/euro-populists).
12. A-S. Chassany, ‘The French town that shows how Marine Le Pen could win’ *Financial Times* April 10 2017.
13. M Wolf, ‘The economic origins of the populist surge’ *Financial Times* June 27 2017.
14. The classical origins of the idea of ‘the people’, as used in the French Revolution, is discussed (in different ways) by J Israel *A revolution of the mind: radical enlightenment and the intellectual origins of modern democracy* Princeton 2010 and S Wahnich *In defence of the terror: liberty or death in the French Revolution* London 2012.
15. See, amongst many other histories of these revolutions, E Hazan *A people’s history of the French Revolution* London 2014; and J Rees *The Leveller Revolution: radical political organisation in England, 1640-1650* London 2016.
16. The classic account, which continues to shape views of the French Revolution and revolution in general is E Burke *Reflections on the revolution in France* London 2012.
17. Gustave Le Bon’s 1896 influential account *The crowd: a study of the popular mind* (London 2012) was only the first of a whole school that stressed the irrational and primitive nature of ‘the popular mind’. Bowdlerised versions of Freud’s ideas on the unconscious and the nature of man in mass society only added to these fears of ‘the masses’ and ‘populist politics’.
18. See S Hahn *A nation without borders: the United States and its world in an age of civil wars 1830-1910* London 2016, chapter 12.
19. Some elements of these politics can be found in John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The grapes of wrath*. The 1940 film adaptation by John Ford, in presenting a sympathetic image of Roosevelt’s ‘new deal’, also showed the continued resonance of populist themes in American politics and society.
20. In Orson Welles’ 1941 film *Citizen Kane* Charles Kane’s newspapers and election campaign speeches reflect this populist rhetoric and identification with the ‘common man’.
21. A Jamieson, ‘Occupy Wall Street reunites five years later: “It never ended for most of us”’ *The Guardian* September 19 2016.
22. For one view of this relationship in Ireland see K Allen *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour: 1926 to the present* London 1997.
23. See A Gella *The development of class structure in Eastern Europe: Poland and her southern neighbours* New York 1989.
24. D James *Resistance and integration: Peronism and the Argentine working class, 1946-1976* Cambridge 1993.
25. For a summary of some recent academic debates see H Kriess and TS Pappas (eds) *European populism in the shadow of the great recession* London 2015.

## ITALY

# Pisapia's deadly embrace

How productive will Italy's latest 'left unity' project turn out to be? Toby Abse investigates

The recent attempt to unify the groups to the left of Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD), which started with the gathering of around 5,000 people in Rome's Piazza Santi Apostoli on July 1, seems to have ended in failure - allegedly because of a falling-out over the public embrace between Giuliano Pisapia, the former Rifondazione Comunista deputy and then mayor of Milan (2011-16), and the ultra-Renzian Maria Elena Boschi<sup>1</sup> at the Milanese *Festa de l'Unità* on July 21.

Although it is likely that this ostentatious public display of affection, which made the evening news headlines on the principal state television channel, will be remembered for decades by many with no great knowledge of, or indeed any interest in, Pisapia's politics, its political significance is more debatable. In reality, the apparent failure of the unity project was probably inevitable, given the extremely vague nature of the proposed organisation and its reliance, not on a clear political programme, but on what was in effect a leadership cult around Giuliano Pisapia.

The provisional name devised by Pisapia for what seemed to be intended as a new electoral combination rather than a genuine political party - *Insieme* (Together) - always appeared meaningless and absurd. Indeed, it was as lacking in political content as George Galloway's chosen designation for his electoral vehicle, *Respect*. Pisapia's political *modus operandi* is all too reminiscent of Galloway: the same lack of any belief in internal democracy or collective decision-making; the same abrupt, opportunist zigzags; the same reliance on an inner circle of sycophants with no real political or social weight of their own, who derive their authority by responding to their master's every whim.

It may well be that some of those who gravitated towards Pisapia on July 1 were looking for an Italian Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn, but he does not seem to be a consistent leftwing social democrat or somebody capable of galvanising a youthful mass movement of the kind we have seen in the UK or US. Nor is he even a charismatic left populist like Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France or Pablo Iglesias in Spain, both of whom are capable of challenging all the neoliberal mainstream parties from a distinctly radical, if ideologically incoherent, position.

The launch in March of Pisapia's Campo Progressista did nothing to clarify the already confused situation amongst the fragmented forces to the left of the PD. Indeed, Campo Progressista - as lacking in any clear programme as *Insieme* was to be a few months later - might even have been intended as a wrecking operation aimed at weakening the strongest left challenge to Renzi (in electoral terms at least) - the social democratic Articolo 1- Movimento Democratico e Progressista (MDP).

## Left split

The MDP was the product of a significant left split from the PD in February, when Renzi provoked figures such as Pierluigi Bersani, his predecessor as PD secretary, into leaving the PD rather than continuing their losing battle to reverse Renzi's neoliberal policies inside an organisation in which the space for serious political debate, as distinct from popularity contests, seemed to be disappearing. The MDP has a substantial

parliamentary presence - 42 deputies and 16 senators. Whilst it has remained part of the parliamentary majority sustaining Paolo Gentiloni, the current PD prime minister, the MDP could wipe out Gentiloni's narrow majority in the senate this autumn, should he and his finance minister, Pier Carlo Padoan, put forward the kind of neoliberal austerity budget that is widely expected.

The MDP's less widely used alternative title - *Articolo 1* - is an explicit reference to article 1 of the Italian constitution of 1948, which states: "This republic is based on labour". The MDP has repeatedly emphasised that it wants to overturn Renzi's Jobs Act and restore workers' rights of the kind embodied in the now repealed article 18 of the 1970 Workers' Statute; that it supports a more progressive taxation system in terms of both income and property; and that it wants more public investment to kick-start the economy - in short, the MDP has a clear left social democratic programme roughly equivalent to Jeremy Corbyn's 2017 election manifesto, as opposed to the programmatic vacuum of Pisapia's Campo Progressista. Renzi's Berlusconi emphasis on cutting taxes, reiterated in a speech in late July, is utterly incompatible with this.

The poor PD results in the June local elections have led to further defections to the MDP amongst local and regional councillors in a number of localities, ranging from the 'red regions' of Tuscany and Emilia to Puglia in the south. Although the PD has a far higher paper membership than the MDP, the MDP is recruiting key activists - what the old Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) would have called 'cadres'. The MDP has quite deliberately aimed to build up a proper membership structure with local branches in as many localities as it can. This is in marked contrast to Pisapia's Campo Progressista, which combines vague movementist rhetoric with a very opaque top-down structure. It is worth noting that the MDP even organised rival festivals in competition with the PD's *Feste de l'Unità*<sup>2</sup> in quite a number of places in the red regions this summer.

Although justice minister Andrea Orlando, Renzi's principal challenger in this year's PD primary (leadership contest), has emphasised the need to stay in the PD to fight to change Renzi's neoliberal policies, he is well aware that many of his own followers - including some key figures in his home city of La Spezia, who defected to the MDP in July - have thrown in the towel and there has been

intermittent press speculation about a further split in the PD at some point soon.

Since I have provided quite a lengthy exposition of the MDP's strengths, something needs to be said about its principal weakness - its association with Massimo D'Alema. The 68-year-old D'Alema has been a professional politician for his entire adult life, starting off as an official in the PCI's youth movement, before playing a leading role in the liquidation of the party in 1989-91. He subsequently played a major role in all the PCI's successor organisations - Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS), Democratici di Sinistra (DS) and ultimately the PD, at one stage as party leader and another as prime minister (1998-2000).

The one thing he has never been, up until this year at least, is a figure identified with the left wing of any of these post-communist parties. He was far more inclined to compromise with Berlusconi than any of his major colleagues in the PDS or DS. His recent vociferous opposition to Renzi's authoritarian attempt at constitutional reform in 2016 was, as many observers pointed out, in marked contrast to his enthusiastic cooperation with Berlusconi over a similar proposal in 1996-98.

His unscrupulous scheming is notorious - he definitely played a role in toppling Romano Prodi from the premiership in 1998, and is widely suspected of being the organiser behind the treachery of the 101 PD parliamentarians, whose failure to vote for Prodi as president of the republic in 2013 paved the way for Giorgio Napolitano's re-election for an unprecedented second term. Nonetheless, D'Alema's suitability as a candidate in next year's parliamentary election is really a matter for the MDP (or for the voters in any potential primary of the united left) - and Pisapia's attempt to impose a pre-emptive veto against D'Alema, to which I will return later in this article, was bound to be regarded as unacceptable by the MDP leadership.

## Sinistra Italiana

The MDP is not the only left opposition to Renzi's PD with representation in parliament. The other substantial grouping is Sinistra Italiana (SI). The original SI was the product of an earlier and much smaller split from the PD - its first incarnation was a purely parliamentary group that united a handful of former PD leftwingers with Nichi Vendola's Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL). However, SEL dissolved itself at its congress earlier this year, and Vendola's supporters became the leading group

of the current SI, which is now both a parliamentary group and a proper political party with branches and formal membership.

However, the fusion of the remnants of SEL with the former PD left has not resulted in the creation of a force larger than the original SEL at the time of the February 2013 general election, when it entered parliament via an electoral pact with the PD. The problem, as so often happens in Italy, is that a large number of the parliamentarians elected on SEL's 2013 list had split to the right in response to Vendola's left turn, after SEL's electoral pact with the PD in 2013 failed to produce a left government, and the PD formed a coalition with forces to its right instead. Some shameless opportunists have defected to the PD - most notoriously Gennaro Migliore, once a close associate of Fausto Bertinotti in the heyday of Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), who has become an ultra-Renzian. Others have preferred the slightly more moderate version of social democracy offered by the MDP to the more intransigent and oppositional version offered by SI.

SI, unlike the MDP, is not part of Gentiloni's majority, even if it sometimes votes with him if it regards a measure as supportable. It is certainly open in principle to an electoral pact with groups to its left - such as the PRC - for the 2018 general election, just as it was to joining the Lista Tsipras for the 2014 European election. Whilst SI does not rule out joint work with the MDP, it is far more wary of Giuliano Pisapia - indeed many rank-and-file members, who feel he has travelled a long way to the right since the days of his involvement with them in first the PRC and then SEL, detest him.

Of course, there are other groupings to the left of the PD, apart from the MDP and SI. Pippo Civati, who split from the PD more or less contemporaneously with the original SI, after an unsuccessful challenge to Renzi for the PD leadership in 2013, has a small group known as *Possibile*, which works under the SI umbrella in parliament, but is not an organic part of that party. The PRC still exists, but it is a shadow of its former self. It lost all of its parliamentarians in the 2008 general election, and most of its local councillors in subsequent contests. Moreover, it no longer has a national daily paper, and gets very little mainstream media publicity.

For what it is worth, *Corriere della Sera's* opinion polls, which group the PRC along with the left populist Italia dei Valori, the Verdi (Greens) and Rivoluzione Civile (a group which started off as an electoral cartel in the 2013 general election), have in recent months consistently given the four groups a combined total of 1%.

The more sectarian left groups like the hard-line, orthodox Trotskyist Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori, and the Stalinist Partito Comunista, both of which sometimes contest elections, would have absolutely no interest in any left unity project, regardless of its programmatic basis. However, one group that may be involved in such a process, but is very wary of Pisapia, is the Coalizione

Civica, led by Anna Falcone. This was set up in June, and plans to hold local meetings in a large number of cities over the weekend of September 30-October 1. Given the instrumental use of the rhetoric of movementism, horizontalism and *civismo* (public spirit) by Pisapia's clique, it is interesting that the one group that is sincere about such notions rejects Pisapia and his personality cult: according to Falcone, "Personalism is a grave political error. It is a way to degrade and mortify politics and drive people away." Falcone also pointed out that "Today the PD is not a party of the left. It embraced Blairism when it had already failed".<sup>3</sup>

## Conditions

Whilst Pisapia's abrupt cancellation of a planned meeting on July 25 with the MDP's Roberto Speranza to discuss further steps to turn the *Insieme* project into something more concrete may have owed something to his intense annoyance at any criticism of his very public embrace of Boschi, there are deeper divisions between the two sides. Pisapia's narrow clique seems to be demanding that the MDP dissolve itself in September; that the new organisation should not have anything as 'old-fashioned' as formal membership; that there should be no primaries to choose its candidates; that D'Alema must not be a candidate under any circumstances; and that SI, Coalizione Civica and other organisations to the left of MDP should be automatically excluded from the project, whilst obscure Christian Democratic fragments, which had fallen out with Renzi, should be welcomed into the new 'centre-left'.

Pisapia's bag-carriers may say they do not want to be "a party of 20,000" (presumably a fairly accurate estimate of the MDP's strength), but one suspects Pisapia's personal following in the absence of the organised cadres of the MDP would be insufficient to get the Campo Progressista through any likely electoral threshold. Renzi may ultimately find it very useful to incorporate Pisapia and some of his fan club into a joint list as left cover for the PD, provided he does not have to make any genuine concessions on his neoliberal programme of lower taxes and reduced employment rights, and perhaps the self-important and slippery former mayor intends to follow this course.

In any event, the MDP would be very foolish to accept Pisapia's intolerable conditions - so far it has emphasised that SI should be included in any unity project. An MDP-SI fusion without Pisapia, and ideally open in principle to forces further to the left, would provide us with far better opportunities ●

## Notes

1. Boschi was the minister in Renzi's government most publicly associated with his unsuccessful attempt to undermine Italy's 1948 constitution. She has also been widely accused of a conflict of interest, being involved in bailing out the Banca Etruria, a bank on whose board of directors her father served, at one point as vice-president.
2. *L'Unità* is now definitely defunct as a daily paper, so the PD's continuing use of the phrase *Feste de l'Unità*, inherited from the PCI, has been the object of widespread mockery. Renzi's contempt for anything connected with the old PCI tradition - so alien to his own Christian Democratic background - was well illustrated by the *Unità* saga over the last couple of years. After allowing the old paper to go into liquidation, presumably because it still gave space to minority views, he revived it with a reduced staff and a dogmatic editorial line full of vicious swipes against his opponents. However, even this did not satisfy him, and the paper was allowed to go bankrupt a second time. Renzi has now created an online paper for the PD, significantly called *Democratica*, wiping out the last taint of Antonio Gramsci.
3. *Il Manifesto* August 20.



Public: Maria Elena Boschi and Giuliano Pisapia

# 1917



Peasants vital to Russian Revolution: 'Still with you' - Anne Bobroff-Hajal

# Lenin glosses the April theses

In this fifth part of his series, Lars T Lih focuses on Lenin's April 21 1917 *Pravda* article, 'A basic question'

In April 1917, Lenin was churning out articles for *Pravda* at an alarming rate. One such article is 'A basic question', written on April 20 and published the next day. This article later made its way into Lenin's *Collected works*, where it is easily available today. It is in no way a hidden or undiscovered document - and yet, in the context of a new look at the events of spring 1917, 'A basic question' becomes a remarkable and revealing document. I have therefore newly translated it and provided a commentary.

Officially, this article is a rejoinder to a critique of the April theses by Georgy Plekhanov that was published on April 20 (a translation of Plekhanov's article will be found in the appendix below). In reality, Lenin is less interested in refuting Plekhanov than in reassuring Bolshevik *praktiki* (the mid-level activists who did the hands-on 'practical' work of the party).

Sergei Bagdatev was a Bolshevik *praktik* who was also an ardent advocate of soviet power; part 4 of this series saw him expressing his misgivings that some aspects of Lenin's April theses might hamper the drive to establish soviet power.<sup>1</sup> His underlying worry was about the class basis of the ongoing revolution: was Lenin really saying that we do not need the peasant as an ally, as implied by the April theses and various other comments? In 'A basic question', Lenin emphatically responded to this worry: 'No, that isn't what I meant - that isn't what I meant at all!'

## Plekhanov on Lenin's 'ravings'

Back in the 1880s, Plekhanov was a pioneer in popularising Marx's message and applying it to Russian conditions, thus earning the title of 'the father of Russian Marxism'. Since then, he had always played a significant role in Russian social democracy, although one that was often far from constructive. During the war, he became an ardent defencist of a pronounced anti-German bent. After the February revolution, he returned to Russia only a few days before Lenin and promptly founded a newspaper - *Edinstvo* (Unity) - that took up a position on the extreme right of the socialist spectrum.

When Lenin arrived in Russia, he first read out his theses at a meeting of social democratic activists; a few

days later, on April 7, they were published in *Pravda*. In this article, after presenting the theses, Lenin snapped at Plekhanov for describing his arrival speech as "raving". In response, Plekhanov pointed out that it was not he, but a reporter from *Edinstvo*, who had been present at the speech - nevertheless, now that he had read the theses, he himself was perfectly willing to endorse the characterisation. A raving madman has no sense of time or place; similarly, Lenin's programme had no connection with Russia in 1917, but only with some abstract never-never land, where socialism was already objectively possible. Plekhanov then embarked on an extensive refutation of the theses.<sup>2</sup>

Plekhanov's analysis is almost exclusively focused on the first thesis, the one that rejects 'revolutionary defencism'. Much of his critique is based on a clear misinterpretation - although, to be fair, Plekhanov's reading might fit Lenin's words well enough if you knew nothing at all about his general views. Plekhanov argues that Lenin assigns *all* blame for the present war to Russia's imperialism and for this reason portrays Germany as an innocent victim. According to Lenin (says Plekhanov), we should all humbly apologise to Germany.

In the same opening thesis, Lenin demands that "a complete break be effected in actual fact with all capitalist interests". Plekhanov seizes on these words to demonstrate that Lenin must be thinking of full socialism, since he denies that the capitalists have any legitimate interests. Plekhanov also quotes thesis 8: "It is not our immediate task to 'introduce' socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the supervision [*kontrol*] of the Soviets of Worker Deputies."<sup>3</sup> This thesis, he says, represents Lenin's sop to his Marxist conscience, especially since state *kontrol* of production and distribution is perfectly compatible with capitalism, as the present war had shown.

Plekhanov now moves in for the kill: if Lenin's rejection of all capitalist interests only makes sense under full socialism, and if the objective conditions for socialism are not present, then Lenin is no more than an anarchist who rejects the basic principles of Marxism - the same basic principles that earlier, when he was still a Marxist, he defended with energy. To illustrate

his point about anarchism, Plekhanov looks back to the first congress of the International in 1889. At this congress, the anarchists called for instant socialist revolution and dismissed the Marxists as "opportunists" who were content with measly reforms like the eight-hour day. But the Marxists decisively rejected the profoundly unrealistic utopianism of the anarchists - just as the Russian workers should reject Lenin today.

At this point, Plekhanov makes a crucial move in his argument: if the objective conditions for socialism are not present, then there also exists no rationale for a "seizure" of the political *vlast* (power) by the workers and poor peasants.

Socialist politics, based on the teachings of Marx, has, of course, its logic, he argues. If capitalism has not yet attained in any given country its highest point - the point at which it becomes an obstacle for the further development of productive forces - then it is absurd to summon the workers, both urban and rural, and the poorest part of the peasants to overthrow it. If it is absurd to summon the elements just named to overthrow capitalism, then it is no less absurd to summon them to the seizure of the political *vlast*.

In support of this conclusion, Plekhanov cites the famous epigram by Engels: there is no greater tragedy than for a class to take power before its time. Plekhanov seems almost to be saying that a majority of the population should not have sovereignty until the objective conditions for socialism are present.

A week after the appearance of this article, Plekhanov repeated the gist of his argument in a short article entitled 'To the students'. Since this article is the official inspiration for 'A basic question', I have provided a translation in the appendix. As before, Plekhanov condemns those who "call the Russian toiling masses to the seizure of the political *vlast*, since this can only make sense, given the presence of the objective conditions needed for social revolution". In this formulation, Plekhanov uses a term that clearly refers to a majority of the population: "the toilers" or "toiling masses" (*trudiashchiesia*). This rather ungainly term had a definite meaning in Russian social democratic discourse and referred to everybody who lived by physical labour: that is, workers, peasants and the urban 'petty

bourgeoisie'. Thus it was essentially synonymous with *narod*, the people.

Before proceeding, we can draw a few lessons just from looking at Plekhanov's critique. First, Plekhanov's instant condemnation of the April theses was at least partly based on a clear misunderstanding, since Lenin obviously did not believe that Russia was solely responsible for the war. But, when we read in secondary accounts that Plekhanov and others rejected the theses as the ravings of a madman, the assumption seems to be that these critics were responding to Lenin's actual argument, which they immediately and accurately understood.

Second, Plekhanov moves very quickly from highfalutin assertions about "the objective conditions of socialism" to his desired political conclusion of "support in solidarity" for the actually existing Provisional government. But, of course, there are a myriad of motivations for opposing and even overthrowing the government led by Prince Lvov that had nothing to do with "overthrowing capitalism". Long before Lenin's April theses, *Pravda* had asserted that the Provisional government could not satisfy the essential needs of the workers and peasants, and therefore the "full satisfaction of their demands is possible only when full and complete *vlast* [*vsia polnota vlasti*] is in their own hands" (editorial of March 14, drafted by Kamenev).

Third, is it not fair to say that Plekhanov's interpretation is also the prevailing interpretation today? According to Plekhanov, Lenin is calling for a seizure of political power by the "toiling masses" that can only be justified by socialist revolution. He therefore needed to trash earlier Bolshevik doctrine and replace it with an anti-Marxist 'anarchism'. In Plekhanov's version of the 'rearming' narrative, of course, Lenin's rearming of the party is profoundly to be regretted.

Plekhanov refuted Lenin by means of the following syllogism:

- *Major premise*: the seizure of political power by the toiling masses is only justifiable if the objective conditions for socialism are present.
- *Minor premise*: the objective conditions for socialism are *not* present in Russia in 1917.
- *Conclusion*: Lenin's call for a seizure of political power by the toiling masses

is *not* justifiable, but rather "an insane and extremely harmful attempt to sow anarchistic confusion and division within the Russian land".

Let us now ask ourselves: how will Lenin respond to this argument? A number of possibilities suggest themselves. He might reject Plekhanov's assertion about the absence of the objective conditions for socialism in Russia in 1917. Or he might deny that socialism had to wait until objective conditions are present. In both these cases, Lenin would indeed be rearming the party with a vengeance. At the cost of rejecting the basic tenets of so-called 'Second International Marxism' in general and old Bolshevism in particular, he would then be able to proclaim the socialist character of the revolution.

Alternatively, Lenin could assert that Plekhanov completely misunderstood his argument: Lenin called for soviet power *not* because he assumed the socialist character of the revolution, but simply because the seizure of political power by the toiling masses is justified and even mandated by basic democratic principles. In this case, there is no radical break either with old Bolshevism or international 'revolutionary social democracy' and thus no need to rearm the party.

Having considered these different possibilities, let us turn to 'A basic question' and observe how Lenin proceeds.

## Lenin's refutation

Lenin begins by asking why Plekhanov fixates on the anarchist-Marxist clash in 1889 and ignores the Basel manifesto, passed unanimously by an emergency congress of the Second International that was convened in 1912 to protest against the war. The manifesto mandated proletarian revolution if war should break out - at least, that is how the Bolsheviks read it. I have written elsewhere of the fundamental importance of the Basel manifesto to Bolshevism from 1912 to 1917.<sup>4</sup> For our present purposes, we note that Lenin is far from rejecting 'Second International Marxism' - rather, he is arguing that the necessary objective conditions for socialist revolution *are* present - in western Europe, as shown by an authoritative statement by the highest body of the Second International.

Lenin then goes on to say in essence: of course I am not proposing socialism in *Russia* at the present time! Russian peasants are small owners; they are

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therefore not socialists; they constitute the majority of the country; socialism cannot be enforced against the majority. To suggest otherwise would truly be raving. But (continues Lenin) does this state of affairs have anything to do with the "basic question" now facing Russia: who should have the political *vlast*? Of course not! We Bolsheviks are fighting for full democracy, and democracy - even as defined by the wretches at *Rech* (the newspaper of the liberal Kadet party and its leader, Paul Miliukov) - means majority rule, does it not?

Lenin then begins to expound his own new idea of "steps toward socialism". To do this, he makes a distinction between two sections of the *narod*: the socialist masses (proletarian and semi-proletarian) and the non-socialist masses (the 'toiling masses' proper). The mission of the socialist proletariat to provide political leadership for the whole *narod* had always been the heart of old Bolshevism's 'hegemony' scenario. This mission is the main motivation Lenin gives here for his "steps toward socialism": these measures will "enhance the role, significance and influence upon the population especially by the city workers, as the vanguard of the proletarians and semi-proletarians of town and country".

To illustrate his vision of the relation between the ongoing revolution and socialist transformation, Lenin points to three examples of the kind of measure he has in mind: nationalisation of the land, merger of all local banks into one national bank, creation of a compulsory sugar syndicate. According to Lenin, these measures all have the following features in common:

- They are *not* socialist measures *per se*, but in fact completely compatible with capitalism (as Bagdatev put it, these measures are part of the minimum programme). "Would [land nationalisation] be a socialist revolution? No. It is still a bourgeois revolution." Looking ahead, Lenin envisages these measures carried out by a "democratic peasant state".

- These are not wild, utopian measures put forward by an "anarchist" out of touch with reality. They have long been advocated by moderate socialists and non-socialists alike. Indeed, the tsarist government itself resorted to sugar syndicates.

- These measures can and will be supported by the peasantry. That is, Lenin rejects any misapprehension that his "steps toward socialism" implies a break with the peasants.

- Such measures will increase the leadership potential of the socialist proletariat among the *narod*. Lenin shows that he is far from abandoning the pre-war hegemony scenario of class leadership.

Lenin ends his article by invoking the traditional Bolshevik scenario of international revolution: a "genuine transition to socialism" will be possible in Russia after (and only after) a socialist revolution in Europe.

To sum up: like most historians today, Plekhanov pictured the April theses as a radical break with Marxism as he understood it and as Lenin himself had understood it in the past. Lenin is at pains to refute this picture: his vision of steps toward socialism is *not* radical, but rather consistent with international 'revolutionary social democracy', with old Bolshevism's hegemony scenario, and with common sense.

## Lenin's target audience

So far, I have analysed Lenin's article more or less according to its official self-description as a refutation of Plekhanov. Yet, when we set this article against the backdrop of the discussion going on in Bolshevik circles during the two April conferences (city and all-Russian), we will easily see that the real aim of his article is to reassure Bolshevik *praktiki* and to allay their misgivings about the April theses.

Plekhanov's first extensive analysis of the April theses was published in a

newspaper article dated April 9-12. Lenin did not bother to respond. On April 20, Plekhanov issued a short squib that repeated a central charge from his earlier analysis. This time Lenin hit back with a major statement. Why? The timing gives us the answer. The Petrograd city conference was in session (the conference ran from April 14 to April 22). Almost immediately afterward, an all-Russian party conference was scheduled to begin its work; its dates are April 24 through 29.

By April 20, Lenin had heard from Petrograd activists such as Bagdatev about their misgivings, and he knew he was likely to hear more of the same from Bolsheviks further afield at the upcoming conference. He therefore decided (we may assume) to seize the opportunity presented by Plekhanov's squib in order to clarify his stand and avoid unnecessary confusion. Somewhere, perhaps in *What is to be done?*, Lenin states his preference for setting forth his views in attack mode, so that he would often wait until a suitable target presented itself. By yelling at Plekhanov, Lenin could avoid being either too offensive or too defensive with his own followers. The subtext was: Plekhanov has clearly misinterpreted my views - don't you do the same!

This subtext target accounts for the large parts of Lenin's article that have little direct connection with anything said by Plekhanov. When Plekhanov talked about objective conditions, for example, he had in mind principally the level of productive forces, and his articles attacking Lenin say nothing about the peasants. In contrast, Lenin's article talks about the peasants more or less from beginning to end.

As we have seen in part 4 of this series, the central misgiving of Lenin's friendly Bolshevik critics was the status of the peasant ally. We can thus decode Lenin's message to his party comrades as follows:

Are you worried that I am unaware that the current revolution, whatever label we choose to give it, embodies our longstanding Bolshevik vision of the proletariat leading the peasant majority? Don't be worried - I am perfectly aware that Russia is a peasant country. I certainly do not argue that we have to win the peasants over to 'our point of view' - that is, wait until they are committed socialists - before fighting for soviet power.

The activists further tell me they are not sure whether my enthusiasm for 'steps toward socialism' means that I reject the need for peasant allies. Again, don't be worried! The measures I have in mind are bound to appeal to the peasants - in fact, they will also strengthen the class leadership that is the heart of our shared Bolshevik vision.

To sum up: the *praktiki* asked for clarification, and Lenin's 'A basic question' was aimed at providing exactly that.

## Bukharin on 'A basic question'

When I drafted this commentary on Lenin's article, I was unaware of any other writer who had given any attention to it. As it turns out, in 1924 Nikolai Bukharin quoted it at length and drew essentially the same conclusions as I have. More than any other Bolshevik leader, Bukharin made it his business to set out the basic ideological rationale of the Bolshevik party/state - its constitutional principles, one might say. This particular article is one of his many mid-20s polemical attacks on the party opposition, yet we can easily abstract from these attacks in order to bring out crucial aspects of the party's deeply-felt image.<sup>5</sup>

Relevant to the present commentary and to my whole series on 'All power to the soviets!' are the following conclusions: the hegemony scenario

arising out of the 1905 revolution was a central part of the Bolshevik outlook before, during and after the revolution of 1917. 'A basic question' is an application of hegemony to the political dynamics of 1917. There is a direct line between the outlook expressed in this article and Lenin's final articles from early 1923, particularly 'On revolution'. Bukharin insists on the continuity of outlook from the 1905 revolution on:

The arguments among us [Russian social democrats before the war], as is known, boiled down to a considerable degree to the question of the *worker-peasant bloc*, of an alliance *between the working class and the peasantry*, and of the *hegemony* of the proletariat in this 'alliance' or 'bloc'. Now, in the eighth year of our revolution and our dictatorship, we clearly see the *enormity* of this problem, which for the first time was given clear foundations by Vladimir Ilich [Lenin] and which later became one of the cornerstones both of the theoretical and practical structure of Bolshevism. Only at the present time has this question come up in all its enormous dimensions.

Bukharin uses 'leadership' (*rukovodstvo*) as a synonym for 'hegemony'. Owing to the constraints of the Lenin cult, Bukharin cannot be explicit about Kautsky's role in the elaboration of the hegemony scenario (see No2 in the present series<sup>6</sup>) and therefore over-emphasises Lenin's originality. Nevertheless, Bukharin shows the roots of NEP-era policies in the older debates of Russian social democracy. Bukharin's banner-word for NEP was the "link" or *smychka* between peasant and worker, but in this article he ties this word and this concept firmly to the hegemony scenario central to Bolshevism before, during and after the revolution. Bukharin also points to the worldwide dimension of hegemony: the leadership of the European proletariat *vis-à-vis* the peasantry in the colonies.

The hegemony scenario was central to three distinct stages of the revolution (Bukharin's emphasis throughout):

- Prior to the seizure of power, the working class must have the support of the peasantry in *the struggle against the capitalists and landlords*.

- After the seizure of power, the proletariat must secure for itself the support of a considerable section of the peasantry in *the civil war*, right up to the moment when the proletarian dictatorship has been consolidated.

- And after that? Can we really limit ourselves to regarding the peasantry *only* as cannon-fodder in the fight against the capitalists and the large landlords? *No*. Once and for all, we must understand the full logic of this 'no'. After its victory, the proletariat *must at all costs live side by side* with the peasantry, for the peasantry represents the majority of the population, with great economic and social weight... It must be realised that the proletariat has *no choice* in this. It is *compelled*, as it builds socialism, to carry the peasantry with it. The proletariat *must learn* to do this, for, unless it does so, it will not be able to maintain its rule.

To document his point that hegemony was still operative after the February revolution, Bukharin, like ourselves, turned to the article, 'A basic question'. After giving a long citation (the passage is indicated in the appendix), he comments:

Let's turn our attention to Lenin's approach to the question. He asks constantly: what is "*the peasant*" saying? This is no accident. On the contrary, this reveals a great revolutionary clear-headedness that is typical of the proletarian leader [*vozhhd*]. [The Bolsheviks must act] so that they will *not be severed from the peasant base*, so that

they can rely on gradual measures to *pull the muzhik* [peasant] along behind the working class.

For Lenin did not see the peasantry as an inevitable foe intent on smashing all our skulls, but as a potential ally who will sometimes grumble and will now and then cause the working class some unpleasantness, but who must potentially be brought around to the proletarian cause, so that it is one of the component forces in our struggle for a proletarian economic regime.

Bukharin finds the same logic in the scenario for the future sketched out by Lenin in his final articles:

If we keep to the line of the worker-peasant bloc, we will endure. Just don't be foolish, just don't make big mistakes, just take the greatest care on this very point, just don't shout unnecessarily at the *muzhik*, and pursue a policy that will preserve the proletariat's role as leader.

## Conclusions

The world would be a better place if the attention now given to Lenin's epigrammatic, enigmatic April theses was transferred to the straightforward and plain-spoken gloss found in 'A basic question'. Lenin's article from mid-April 1917 makes three big points. First, soviet power - the "seizure of the political *vlast* by the toiling masses" - is justified and indeed mandated by basic democratic principles. Second, a crucial political goal is expanding as much as possible "the role, significance and influence upon the population especially by the city workers, as the vanguard of the proletarians and semi-proletarians of town and country". Third, certain specific policy measures are recommended on the grounds that they will obtain majority peasant support, as well as increase the leadership potential of the proletariat.

Earlier we observed that *if* Lenin felt compelled to proclaim the socialist character of the revolution, he had two choices in responding to Plekhanov: he could argue *either* that the objective conditions for socialist revolution were present in Russia in spring 1917 *or* that socialist revolution did not depend on objective conditions, as understood by earlier Marxists. Lenin made neither argument - instead, he aggressively argued the opposite. Russia's peasant majority showed that the objective conditions were *not* present. This circumstance removed socialism from the immediate agenda, since "establishing socialism against the will of the majority" is an absurdity.

Looking back to old Bolshevism, as it took shape during and after the revolution of 1905, 'A basic question' justifies Mikhail Kalinin's statement in April that "the method of thinking [in Lenin's theses] remains an old Bolshevik one that can cope with the peculiarities of the present revolution". The logic behind the hegemony scenario of old Bolshevism was that the socialist proletariat - precisely because of its socialist convictions - was called upon to lead the Russian *narod* in accomplishing goals that were non-socialist, but vitally necessary for historical progress. The constant in this scenario is the idea of class leadership, while the identification of specific policy goals remains open-ended. The policy measures Lenin advocated as steps toward socialism were therefore no break with the logic of the hegemony scenario; as Vladimir Nevsky put it, "Lenin's position [in the April theses] was the natural development of the doctrine that he had worked out long ago in the previous periods of the history of our party."<sup>7</sup>

In 1917, 'All power to the soviets!' was an effective slogan because soviet power was the means to so many diverse ends: traditional revolutionary

aims such as confiscation of gentry land; a democratic peace; effective response to the national economic crisis; protecting revolutionary institutions against attack; and finally - more and more prominent, as the year progressed - creating a 'tough-minded *vlast*' that could effectively govern the country. Among these aims, the specific measures that Lenin saw as steps toward socialism did not become a prominent part of the Bolshevik message - they were, so to speak, the fine print backing up the general promise to tackle the economic crisis.

Traditionally, social democrats saw the peasants as an obstacle to direct socialist transformation (although a worthy ally in accomplishing the hugely ambitious 'minimum programme'), since 'petty-bourgeois' peasants were deemed unlikely to support socialism. Trotsky's 'permanent revolution' scenario of 1905-07, for example, is based on the assumption that peasant resistance will bring down a socialist regime unless it received help from abroad. Lenin's 'A basic question' reflects this standard view of the peasant as only a partial ally - and yet, in hindsight, we can see that it marks a crucial shift in perspective. The emphasis now is not on limitations, but rather on how far forward the proletariat can go *with* peasant support. This shift in emphasis marked the beginning of some crucial developments in the Bolshevik outlook.

In 1917, Lenin argued that peasants could and would support preliminary steps *toward* socialism, although rapid progress in genuine socialist transformation in Russia remained dependent on help from the west European proletariat, armed with state power after a revolution. By the end of 1919, the Bolsheviks were starting to wake up and smell the coffee about European revolution: there was not going to be one in the near future. On the other hand, 1919 also saw the Bolsheviks beginning to focus on a long-term partnership with the 'middle peasant' - a term barely used in 1917. The social base for socialist construction was thus undergoing a drastic displacement.

By the time he wrote his final articles in early 1923, Lenin envisaged a slow but steady progress toward socialism in Russia, even without the help of the European proletariat-in-power, but relying on the support of the Russian peasantry. This final vision can be seen as a natural evolution from original old Bolshevism's wager on hegemony: that is, on the socialist proletariat as a leader of the *narod*. Lenin's 'A basic question', written at a crucial juncture in Bolshevik history, can help us understand the logic of this long-term evolution ●

This article was originally published at <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com>.

## Notes

1. 'Thirteen to two' *Weekly Worker* supplement, July 27 2017.
2. G Plekhanov, 'On Lenin's theses: why ravings can sometimes be of interest', published in *Edinstvo* April 9-12; text taken from G Plekhanov *God na Rodine* Paris 1921, Vol 1, pp19-29.
3. Note that in the April theses Lenin talks about "soviets of worker deputies" - that is, the theses do not yet reflect the basic political reality of "soviets of worker and soldier deputies" (see Nos 3 and 4 in this series for further comment).
4. "A new era of war and revolution": Lenin, Kautsky, Hegel and the outbreak of World War I', in A Anevias (ed) *Cataclysm 1914: the First World War and the making of modern world politics* Leiden 2014, pp366-412. The Basel manifesto was reprinted in *Pravda* in March 1917, prior to Lenin's arrival.
5. N Bukharin, 'The theory of permanent revolution', originally published in *Pravda* December 28 1924; a translated text can be found in FC Corney (ed) *Trotsky's challenge: the 'literary discussion' of 1924 and the fight for the Bolshevik revolution* Brill 2016, pp514-54. I have modified this translation slightly after consulting the original text in *Pravda*.
6. 'All power to the soviets' *Weekly Worker* May 4 2017.
7. V Nevskii *Istoriia RKP(b): kratkii ocherk* (1926) St Petersburg 2009, pp502.

## APPENDIX

# Lenin refutes a misreading of the April theses

## 1. G Plekhanov, 'To the Association [*artel*] of Socialist Students, in answer to an invitation for a rally celebrating May 1' (from *Edinstvo*, April 17 1917)

**D**ear comrades!  
I greatly regret that my poor health - I hope, only temporary - does not allow me to express my support in person. But nothing can be done about it and I am compelled to limit myself to talking with you in written form. The adhesion of as many people of higher education as possible is very important for the liberation movement of

the international proletariat. Education helps us investigate phenomena and evaluate them historically. Since I am speaking with people who are working to improve their education, I permit myself to bring your attention the following remarkable circumstance:

The decision to celebrate May 1 was taken by the Paris International Socialist Congress in 1889. At this Congress were

representatives from many capitalist countries that stood then on a higher level of economic development than Russia has attained today. The anarchists proposed to the congress that it call the proletariat to social revolution. The congress, in which Marxists had a majority, invited the proletariat to work for the eight-hour day. It understood that the social - to be more exact, the socialist - revolution presupposed a long work of

enlightenment and organisation in the depths of the working class.

Today, among us, this is forgotten by people who call the Russian toiling masses to the seizure of the political *vlast*, since this can only make sense, given the presence of the objective conditions needed for social revolution. These conditions do not yet exist, and it behoves you, who are familiar with the

scientific method, to bring all this as often as possible to the attention of those who need to know it. The task of the parties of the left in Russia consists of the systematic strengthening of the positions achieved by the revolution that has just taken place. To achieve these tasks, they should not overthrow the Provisional government - as some political fanatics wish - but support it in solidarity ●

## 2. Lenin's reply: 'A basic question<sup>1</sup> (How the socialists who have gone over to the bourgeoisie argue)' *Pravda* April 21 1917

Mr Plekhanov illustrates this kind of argument very well. In his First of May letter to the Association of Socialist Students published in today's *Rech* [Kadet/liberal], *Delo Naroda* [SR], and *Edinstvo* [Plekhanov's newspaper], he writes:

It (the International Socialist Congress of 1889) understood that the social - to be more exact, the socialist - revolution presupposed a long work of enlightenment and organisation in the depths of the working class.

Today, among us, this is forgotten by people who call the Russian toiling masses to the seizure of the political *vlast*, since this can only make sense, given the presence of the objective conditions needed for social revolution. These conditions do not yet exist ...

And so on in the same strain, right up to an appeal for "support in solidarity" of the Provisional government.

This argument of Mr Plekhanov is the typical argument of a small group of 'has-beens' who call themselves social democrats. And because it is typical it is worth dealing with at length.

First of all, is it reasonable or honest to quote the First Congress of the Second International and not the last one?

The First Congress of the Second International (1889-1914) took place in 1889; the last, in Basel, in 1912. The Basel manifesto, adopted *unanimously* by all, speaks precisely, definitely, directly and clearly (so that not even the Plekhanovs can twist the sense of it) of a *proletarian revolution*, and furthermore, speaks of it *precisely in connection* with the very war that broke out in 1914.

It is not difficult to understand why those socialists who have gone over to the bourgeoisie need to 'forget' the Basel manifesto as a whole, or this, the most important part of it.

Secondly, the seizure of political power by "the Russian toiling masses", writes our author, would "only make sense, given the presence of the objective conditions needed for social revolution".

This is a muddle, not an idea.

Even if we grant that the word 'social' here is a misprint for 'socialist', this is not the only muddle. What classes do the Russian toiling masses consist of? Everybody knows that they consist of workers and peasants. Which of these classes is in the majority? The peasants. Who are these peasants, as far as their class position is concerned? Small or very small proprietors. The question arises: if the small proprietors constitute the majority of the population and if the objective conditions for socialism are lacking, then how *can* the majority of the population declare in favour of socialism? Who can say anything or

who says anything about establishing socialism against the will of the majority?

Mr Plekhanov has got mixed up in the most ludicrous fashion at the very outset.

To find himself in a ridiculous position is the very least punishment a man can suffer, who, following the example of the capitalist press, creates an 'enemy' of his own imagination instead of quoting the exact words of this or that political opponent.

Further. In whose hands should "the political *vlast*" be, *even* from the point of view of a vulgar bourgeois democrat from *Rech* [the official newspaper of the liberal Kadet party]? In the hands of the majority of the population. Do the "Russian toiling masses", so ineptly discussed by our muddled social-chauvinist, constitute the majority of the population in Russia? Undoubtedly they do - the overwhelming majority!

How then, without betraying democracy - even democracy as understood by a Miliukov - *can* one be opposed to the "seizure of the political *vlast*" by the "Russian toiling masses"?

The deeper into the wood, the thicker the tangles. Each step in our analysis opens up new abysses of confusion in Mr Plekhanov's ideas. The social chauvinist is against the political *vlast* passing to the majority of the population in Russia!

Mr Plekhanov is talking about something he doesn't understand. He has also confused - though Marx as far back as 1875 made a point of warning against such confusion - the "toiling masses" with the mass of

**Convenient target:  
Georgi Plekhanov -  
former Marxist turned  
social chauvinist**

proletarians and semi-proletarians. We shall explain the difference to the ex-Marxist, Mr Plekhanov.

[The passage quoted by Nikolai Bukharin, discussed in my commentary, begins here.] Can the majority of the peasants in Russia demand and carry out the nationalisation of the land? Certainly it can. Would this be a socialist revolution? No. It is still a bourgeois revolution, for the nationalisation of the land is a measure that is not incompatible with the existence of capitalism. At the same time, it is a *blow* to private ownership of the most important means of production. Such a blow would *strengthen* the proletarians and semi-proletarians far more than was the case during the revolutions of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

Further. Can the majority of the peasants in Russia declare for the merging of all the banks into one, in a way that will ensure that there will be a branch of a single nationwide state bank in each village?

It can, because the convenience and advantage for the *narod* of such a measure are unquestionable. *Even* the 'defencists' could be for such a measure, as it would heighten Russia's capacity for 'defence' enormously.

Is it economically possible to carry out such a merger of all the banks immediately? Without a doubt, it is fully possible.

Would this be a socialist measure? No, this is *not yet* socialism.

Further. Can the majority of the peasants in Russia declare in favour of the syndicate of sugar manufacturers passing into the hands of the government, under the supervision [*kontrol*] of the workers and peasants, and the price of sugar being lowered?

It certainly can, for this would benefit the majority of the *narod*.

Is such a measure possible economically? It is fully possible [The passage quoted by Bukharin ends here], since the sugar syndicate has not only developed economically into a single industrial organism on a state-wide scale, but it was already under tsarism subject to supervision by the 'state' (that is, bureaucrats serving the capitalists).

Would the taking over of the syndicate into the hands of a democratic-bourgeois/peasant state be a socialist measure?

No, this would not yet be socialism. Mr Plekhanov could have easily convinced himself of that if he had recalled the well-known axioms of Marxism.

The question is: would such measures as the merging of the banks and turning over the sugar manufacturing syndicate to a democratic peasant government *enhance* or *diminish* the role, significance and influence of the proletarians and semi-proletarians among the general mass of the population?

They would undoubtedly enhance them, for those measures *do not* arise from small producers; they are made possible by those 'objective conditions' which were *still* lacking in 1889, but which *already* exist now.

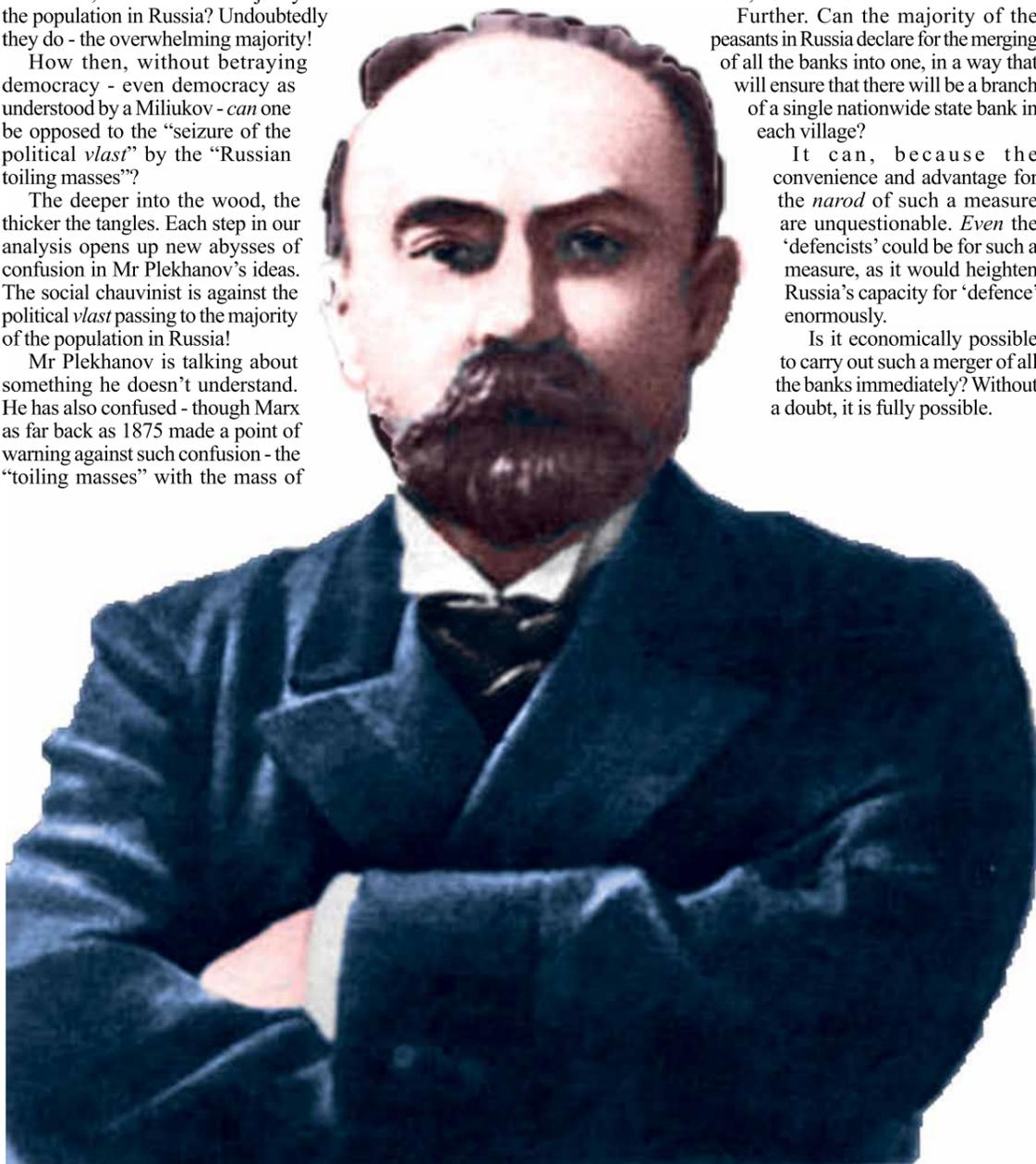
Such measures would inevitably enhance the role, significance and influence upon the population especially by the city workers, as the vanguard of the proletarians and semi-proletarians of town and country.

After such measures, further *steps* towards socialism in Russia will become fully possible, and - given the aid to the workers here that will come from the more advanced and experienced workers of western Europe, who have broken with the west-European Plekhanovs - Russia's *genuine* transition to socialism would be *inevitable*, and the success of such a transition would be *assured*.

This is how every Marxist and every socialist who has not gone over to the side of 'their own' national bourgeoisie should argue ●

### Notes

1. 'A basic question' (literally, 'One of the basic questions' - *Odin iz korennykh voprosov*), VI Lenin *CW* Vol 31, pp300-03. Another translation is available on the Marxists Internet Archive: [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/20g.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/20g.htm).



## REVIEW



# Giving 1917 real meaning

This is a wonderful, scintillating book: it makes a fateful year in world history come alive, in the sense that all significant actors in the drama and upheaval of Russia in 1917 come under the spotlight and are displayed in action. As with all the best historical writing, we get to feel the enveloping atmosphere of the times and places, and what it was like to live through the events. (The author visited Russia for the purpose of writing this book, and acknowledges help from there).

Following a short historical introduction extending from tsar Peter the Great, who reigned from 1682 to 1725, through to the two-man murder of the sinister monk, Rasputin, in December 1916, we are treated to nine months of 1917 - February to October - in which the *dramatis personae* make their entrances and play their parts. Key individuals are used to illustrate the social classes in interaction - the nobility, bourgeoisie, workers and the vast peasant majority. More diffuse groupings are not forgotten - women, the non-Russian nationalities, the 'intelligentsia', writers and artists (the last two sparingly, but seemingly mentioned where relevant to the narrative). Institutions are given due attention - the army and navy (from generals down to infantrymen, from admirals to sailors); the Russian Orthodox Church gets a mention, but no more. Above all the councils (soviets) in their various shapes and guises are given due weight - predominantly the Petrograd Soviet, which acquired "delegates countrywide" on becoming the All-Russian Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in March 1917 (p105).<sup>1</sup>

Political parties and movements also play their roles: the proto-fascist Black Hundreds<sup>2</sup>; the 'Octobrists', supporters of tsar Nicholas's October 1905 Manifesto (the court party); the Constitutional Democrats ('Kadets', from *kah, deh*, the sounds of the initial letters of their name in Russian), the party of the "liberal bourgeoisie"; the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs), the main pro-peasant grouping; and in their wake the Trudoviks (pro-peasant populist, their main spokesman being the lawyer, Alexander Kerensky). Then we have the Social Democrats,

## China Miéville **October: the story of the Russian Revolution** Verso, 2017, pp369, £18.99

divided into the so-called Mensheviks ('minority') and Bolsheviks ('majority') - these names refer back to the party's Second Congress held in exile in 1903, and do not reflect the degree of mass support and influence in early 1917 of what are by now two distinct parties. Anarchists appear in their usual form as "groups springing up" (the phrase seems to have originated with Michael Bakunin). Also, less dramatically, Leon Trotsky's relatively small following, the so-called Interdistrict Organisation (Mezhraiontsy), gets its fair share of coverage.

Leading individuals, of course, feature prominently - Nicholas II (reigned 1894-1917), his brother, the grand duke Michael, other famous political names of the time, such as Alexander Guchkov (Octobrist), Pavel Milyukov, founder of the Kadet party and foreign minister in the Provisional government, holding office from March 2 to April 29; Mikhail Rodzianko, a co-founder of the Octobrists; Kerensky; Victor Chernov of the SRs; Social Democrats, such as the Georgians, Nikolai Chkheidze and Irakli Tsereteli; Julius (Yulii) Martov; Alexandra Kollontai; Lenin and Trotsky; Zinoviev (Lenin's old comrade); and the eventual notorious ruler of the USSR, Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvili, better known as Stalin. Even Lenin's faithful comrade Vladimir Bonch-Bruyevich - the name is surely unforgettable quintessentially Russian - gets coverage. Generals Mikhail Alekseev, Aleksei Brusilov and Lavr Kornilov play leading roles militarily and politically.

The sweep and detail of the narrative is most impressive, but, above all, the masses of ordinary men and women, non-Russian peoples, workers and peasants, not only feature as actors, but are recorded from time to time as speaking - and shouting, where necessary.

We are treated to a series of panoramic shots of those nine months; they bring the events beautifully into focus in a way that does not seem to have been done in English since John

Reed's classic *Ten days that shook the world* (first published in 1919).

What comes through, crucially, is the immense power of the popular forces which swept onto the political stage like a dam bursting in 1917 - a trinity of workers (spurred on by the women of Petrograd on International Women's Day, now celebrated on March 8 annually), soldiers and peasants - *once they began to move in concert*.

### Dual power

Rather than go through the narrative, which would spoil things for those wishing to read the book, let us look at a number of important themes and topics that China Miéville covers - the role of women, dual power, the 'sealed train', Lenin in 1917 (and the left's unintentionally comic tradition), the July Days, October and its legacy to 1941, Alexandra Kollontai and, last but not least, the European dimension.

The author judiciously quotes Kollontai, on her return to Russia, as saying: "But wasn't it we women, with our grumbling about hunger, about the disorganisation in Russian life, about our poverty and the sufferings born of the war, who awakened a popular wrath?" (p94). She underlined the fact that the revolution started on International Women's Day: "And didn't we women go first out to the streets in order to struggle with our brothers for freedom, and even if necessary to die for it?" ("With our brothers" - the words evoke the beginning of original communism, as depicted in the work of Chris Knight, Camilla Power, Ian Watts, Jerome Lewis *et al* in the Radical Anthropology Group.)

Comrade Miéville describes a procession to the Tauride Palace on March 19, when a diverse crowd of 40,000 demonstrators demanded that women be given the right to vote. And he touches on the role of the *soldatki* - soldiers' wives - who took independent action. For example, in Kherson province early in the year they forced their way into certain homes, 'requisitioning' luxuries:

Not only did they flout laws and intimidate the authorities wherever they possibly could: there were also direct acts of violence. The state flour trader who did not want to offer them his goods at discounted price was beaten by a band of soldiers' wives, and the *pristav*, the local police chief, who wanted to hurry to his help, escaped the same fate by a hair's breadth (p115).

There is some useful discussion of *dvoyevlastie* (dual power) - the balance from February onwards between the Committee of the Duma, out of which came the Provisional government, and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies, which, as a revival of the institution of 1905, prepared its own plans. The antagonism between the two was the basis of the dual power. Early on, the question of military discipline was raised:

... the soviet put together a draft resolution. It stressed that soldiers' committees were important. It proposed soviet democracy within units, combined with military discipline on duty. The soldiers, the gathering urged, should send representatives to the duma's military commission, and recognise its authority - *in so far as it did not deviate from the opinion of the soviet* (p68 - original emphasis).

"In so far as" in Russian is *postol'ku-poskol'ku* - "a formulation key to dual power, and its contradictions" (p84).

Naturally this situation was inherently unstable, as recognised both by the Octobrist leader, Guchkov - who complained that the Provisional government wielded no real power, while the soviet controlled such things as troops, railway and postal and telegraphic services - and by Leon Trotsky.<sup>3</sup>

### Lenin's return

The book gives useful information on the so-called 'sealed train', in which Lenin and some other comrades crossed

German territory on their way back to Russia. Martov, apparently, was instrumental in arranging, via the Swiss authorities, this safe passage in exchange for the release of German and Austrian internees in Russia (p88). Lenin demanded that there should be no passport controls, stops or investigations along the way, and that there would be no enquiry into the passengers' details - all this because he was aware that collaboration with the enemy could be construed as treason (as it later was).

On March 21 the German embassy accepted his terms, and 28 individuals, including Lenin, Krupskaya, Zinoviev, Zlata Lilina (mother of Zinoviev's young son, Stefan), Karl Radek and Inessa Armand, set out from Zurich. At the Swiss border they transferred to a two-coach train - one full of Russians and the other for the German escort. Stops did take place, however, and it appears that the passengers attracted the attention of Social Democrats eager to meet Lenin, who apparently asked his companions to tell one persistent trade unionist to "go to the devil's grandmother" (p104). The passengers travelled via Stuttgart, Frankfurt and Berlin, eventually reaching the north German coast at Sassnitz, where they transferred to a Swedish steamer. Landing at Trelleborg on Sweden's southern coast, they then proceeded to Stockholm and thence by sleighs across to Finland (p106).

This account given by Miéville appears to clear up the mystery in the matter: perhaps a better description would be 'secret train'.

Upon arriving at Petrograd's Finland station on April 3, Lenin began to intervene in his customary energetic fashion, following a warm welcome from assembled Bolsheviks. In the car that drove him from the station he asked Kamenev: "What's this you're writing in *Pravda*? We saw several issues and really swore at you" (p108). Through to June he stuck to his basic position of justifying an uncompromising opposition to the Provisional government by "patiently explaining" that the real root of the crisis was "the pilfering of the bourgeoisie" (p143). Comrade

# What we fight for

Miéville quotes his interjection at the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (held from June 3-24) on June 4, when the Menshevik leader, Tsereteli, outlined a policy for a possible all-socialist government, but declared that no party was advocating such:

"There is," he said, "no political party in Russia which at the present time would say 'Give us power'". To which from the depths of the room an immediate heckle came back: "There *is* such a party," shouted Lenin (p143).

However, Lenin is not treated in the book as some uniquely charismatic sage, who had the answer to every political problem. On the occasion of an attempt to evict a group of anarchists from a villa they were occupying, and a demonstration was called in the face of Tsereteli's determination to suppress it, together with threats by the Black Hundreds, Lenin at first urged that the party should participate. But then he swung round to supporting a proposal that it be cancelled. "The fact is that Lenin had blinked," comments comrade Miéville (p151).

Lenin even abstained when the vote was called - very uncharacteristic. This provoked a comment from Igor Naumov, a member of the Bolshevik delegation to the Soviet: "If the cancellation was correct, when did we make a mistake?" This affords Miéville the opportunity to point to a well-known left tradition - exaggeration of successes and refusal ever to acknowledge mistakes. He quotes "the vinegary humorist", Nadezhda Teffi, to the effect that "If Lenin were to talk about a meeting at which he, Zinoviev, Kamenev and five horses were present, he would say 'There were eight of us'" (p152).

Likewise during the July Days, at a certain point when the Bolshevik leaders were debating what to do, word reached them that the armed masses were approaching, eager to establish soviet power. This prompted someone to ask in astonishment: "Without the sanction of the central committee?" (p173). (The late Labour MP and broadcaster, Brian Walden, is reported to have said in the early 1960s, "I would be in favour of a revolution if I could control it".)

## July Days

The July Days (especially July 3 and 4) were the most critical period in 1917 for the Bolsheviks up to that time, and China Miéville discusses them extensively (pp167-97).

This chapter is particularly useful, as such moments have occurred more than once in a revolutionary situation (eg, Germany 1919 and 1921; Portugal 1975), where a section of the population is anxious to take action, but does not have sufficient support for that to succeed. The revolutionary party, therefore, has to try to hold its supporters back, so as to allow time for larger masses to be won over. A street demonstration began on July 3 and turned violent. Marchers overturned trams, revolutionary soldiers set up machine gun posts on the bridges of the Neva, and left and right clashed in the street. The mood on the left was insurrectionary: "... this movement could not be reversed. The question for the Bolsheviks, then, was whether to shun it, join it or attempt to lead it" (p173).

The party decided to go with the flow, and gave the demonstration its official blessing. But the movement lacked direction, and the crowds dispersed with the coming of darkness. The next day, which was still more violent, involved the capture by sailors from Kronstadt of the great Peter and Paul Fortress

(p182), but the struggle overall was still not conclusive. At this point Pável Perverzev, the minister of justice, announced he had evidence purporting to prove that Lenin was a German spy (p179). The situation was instantly transformed - the rumour being spread by "the sensationalist hard-right rag *Zhivoye Slovo* ('The Living Word' - no prizes for naming the current British equivalent newspaper). Warrants went out for the arrest of Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Kollontai, Anatoly Lunacharsky ... and Trotsky, who had demanded flamboyantly that his name be added to the list (p189). Criminal gangs raised their heads, issuing their own warning against "street justice" (pp191-92). Kerensky underlined the trend of events by replacing Brusilov as Russia's commander-in-chief by the more rightwing Kornilov around July 15-16 (pp194-95).

Kornilov's rise and his rivalry with Kerensky as potential rightwing dictator of Russia are well documented, and there seems no point in going into a detailed discussion of Miéville's treatment of the topic here. Suffice it to say that Kornilov was defeated militarily and arrested.

We can pick up the tale on the morning of October 10, as the author's action-packed retelling of the drama reaches its climax. The Bolshevik CC meets in Nikolai Sukhanov's flat, attended by 12 out of 21 members, including Lenin in disguise as "a clean-shaven, bespectacled, grey-haired man - 'every bit like a Lutheran minister', Alexandra Kollontai remembered" (p261 - photos of Lenin as himself and as "Konstantin Petrovich Ivanov" are reproduced in the book).

We are told on p263 that "Lenin wanted insurrection the next day". He may have wanted it then, but the resolution he drafted (quoted on p262) does not set a date - how could it? It reads:

The CC acknowledges the international situation as it affects the Russian Revolution ... as well as the military situation ... and the fact that the proletarian party has gained majorities in the soviets - all this, coupled with the peasant insurrection and the swing of popular confidence to our party, and, finally, the obvious preparation for a second *Kornilovschina* [Kornilov affair] ... makes armed insurrection the order of the day ... Recognising that an armed uprising is inevitable and the time fully ripe, the CC

instructs all party organisations to be guided accordingly and to consider and decide all practical questions from this viewpoint.

## Epilogue

China Miéville's final chapter (pp305-20) gives us a fleeting glance over the fortunes of the new Soviet state, when, on October 25, Lenin, addressing the Congress of Soviets, declared: "We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order."<sup>4</sup>

There would appear to be 17 distinct events listed in this epilogue - all would be worth looking at separately, but space is short. We are informed, *inter alia*, of the Left SRs' decision to join the new government in December 1917 (p308). The long awaited Constituent Assembly refuses to endorse the Bolshevik-led regime, but is dispersed and fails to provide an effective rallying point for what for a while looks like an exhausted counterrevolution.

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3 1918) detonates the resignation of the Left SRs from the government. This is followed by a denunciation by the SR heroine, Maria Spiridonova, of food requisitioning by the state (p309) and the ostensible Left SR uprising in June 1918 (I hope to discuss this in a forthcoming piece on Europe between the first and second world wars, together with a number of further events listed in the book). A discussion follows of the armed actions of the Czechoslovak Legion in May 1918, the civil war (1918-21) - Miéville gives a succinct and accurate résumé of why the Whites lost, the unspeakable suffering of the Russian people at this time (pp311-12), the institution of the Cheka (red secret police) led by Feliks Dzerzhinsky, who is quoted as saying at the end of 1918, while drunk: "I have spilt so much blood I no longer have any right to live" (p312). It is recorded that a Cheka newspaper called for the use of torture against enemies of the revolution, whereupon the Soviet authorities closed the organ down (*ibid*).

The 1921 ban on factions in the Communist Party is duly noted; likewise what has been called 'Lenin's last struggle' (the title of a book by Moshe Lewin) is mentioned briefly. The so-called 'Lenin testament' is very briefly alluded to, about the need to remove Stalin as party general secretary. Lenin's death in 1924 (p313) leads to the emergence of a grotesque Lenin cult (which his wife in particular objected to).

The rest of the list comprises

Stalin's main initiatives - the push for 'socialism in one country' (a complete denial of Marx's world revolution perspective), the forcible defeat of the Left Opposition, and the speech by Stalin in 1931, where he said: "We have 10 years to catch up with the west - either we do it or they will crush us". In contrast to all the above, there is (as necessary) a brief mention of the moves towards socialism in other parts of Europe - Germany 1918-23, Austria 1918-19, Hungary 1919, Italy 1919-20 (the 'two red years').

It is a pity that there is no mention of Alexandra Kollontai's comments on why the Left Opposition lost the political battle with Stalin.<sup>5</sup> Kollontai says:

Now we are in a period of construction and we need not only unity in our actions, but unity in our thinking. The masses instinctively understand this. That is why they are so opposed to the Opposition. The Opposition destroys the cohesion of the collective; a cohesion that has been built up with such difficulty (p313).

Lastly, Trotsky is usefully quoted on 1905, to the effect that: "Without the direct state support of the European proletariat, the working class of Russia cannot remain in power and convert its temporary domination into a lasting socialistic dictatorship" (pp29-30).

This judgement has been proven correct, although not in the way many observers expected - the rule of the workers was undermined from within. Trotsky reiterated his concern with the European revolution many times after: eg, in *War and the International* (1915) through to *The revolution betrayed* (1936), where, explaining that Europe suffers because it is split up into numerous national states, he declared: "The task of the European proletariat is not the perpetuation of boundaries, but, on the contrary, their revolutionary abolition; not the status quo, but the Socialist United States of Europe."<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, I would recommend a reading, in conjunction with the book's epilogue, of an article by Al Richardson which appeared in *What Next?* (No6, 1997, pp26-28), which argues that the Bolshevik revolution may be thought of as premature, with its anomalous state form, but that the question can only ultimately be decided by the ongoing class struggle.

A measure of the worth of China Miéville's book is that, given a basic knowledge of the events, which can easily be got from John Reed's *Ten days that shook the world*, everyone can gain by reading it ●

Chris Gray

## Notes

1. A good deal of information on the soviets is given in the index, p359 (Petrograd) and on pp365-66 (general).
2. The term 'White Hundreds' was used in mediaeval Russia to designate the privileged nobility and wealthy merchants; by contrast, active supporters of such organisations as the Union of Russian People (of 1905 provenance) were definitely not usually nobles or merchants: hence they became known as 'Black Hundreds'. This information is from O Figes *A people's tragedy* London 1997, p195. See also DC Rawson *Russian rightists and the revolution of 1905* Cambridge 1995, and W Laqueur *Black Hundred: the rise of the extreme right in Russia* London 1994.
3. Strictly speaking, the slogan, 'All power to the soviets!', which expresses this is illogical, since power simply means the ability to do something or get something done, and cannot therefore be concentrated in one institution or set of institutions. The slogan really means that the soviets should have *sovereign power*, and echoes the historical sovereignty of the tsar.
4. In one sense this famous sentence was ill-phrased, since it gave the impression that socialism could simply be instituted as a series of steps by the Russian people, regardless of outside events (Stalin's gloss in 1924). But, as comrade Miéville notes, "Lenin was clear that it was not our *immediate* task to 'introduce socialism, prior to a European socialist revolution, but to place power in the hands of working people, rather than to pursue political class collaboration, as advocated by the Mensheviks'" (p113).
5. See A Kollontai *Selected writings* London 1977, pp312-14.
6. L Trotsky *The revolution betrayed* Detroit 1998, p198.



**China Miéville: history, politics, people**

■ Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question—ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism—a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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# weekly worker

**We need to  
be able to  
think**

## Not a religious approach

Our aim is to have serious debate, Peter Manson reports, and this year's CU certainly came up to the mark in terms of the quality of the speakers

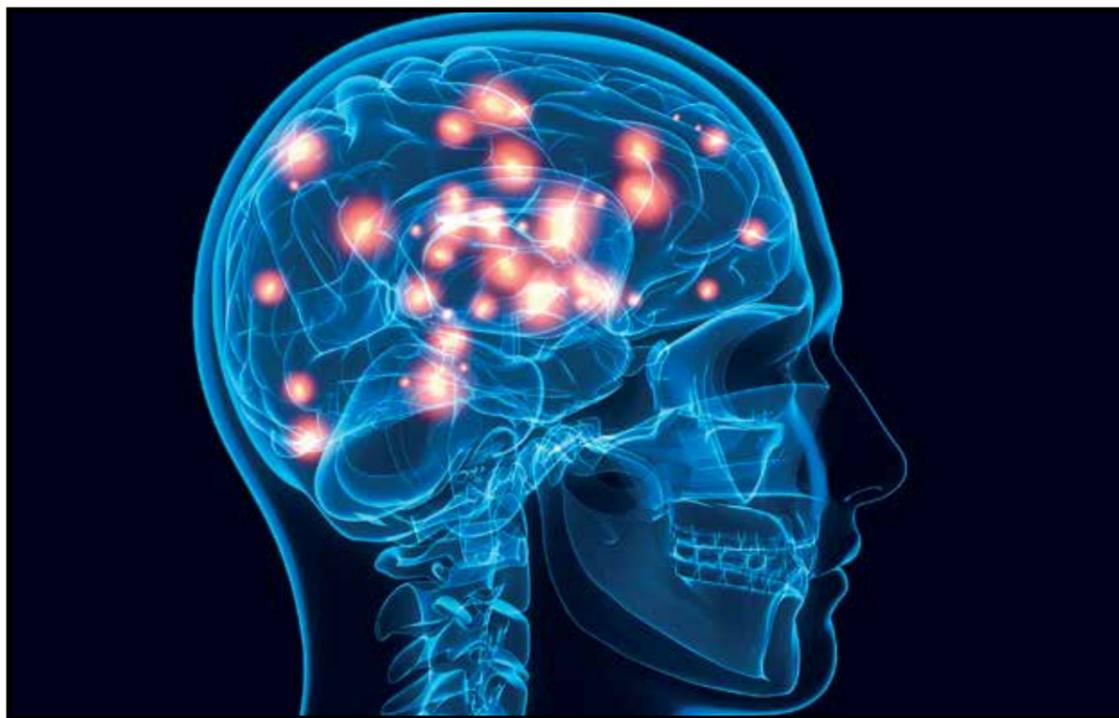
This year our annual summer school, Communist University, took place from August 12-19 and attracted around 80-90 participants over the eight days. As well as comrades from the CPGB and Labour Party Marxists, the two sponsors of this year's event, members and supporters of the Labour Party, Left Unity, Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century, the International Bolshevik Tendency, Platypus Affiliated Society, Economic and Philosophic Science Review, Socialist Party of Great Britain, the US Red Party and Socialist Fight also took part.

The purpose of CU is to clarify our ideas and attempt to resolve our differences through open debate - a feature that was noted by several of our guest speakers. For example, Chris Knight of the Radical Anthropology Group stressed that Marxism is not a "religious ideology" - "we need to be able to think" and be "open to new ideas", which was why he thought CU had such a useful role to play. His RAG comrade, Camilla Power, in introducing her session on 'The revolutionary sex', remarked that "this forum is very productive" for those who are "trying to think". And Michael Roberts, speaking on the 'Challenges ahead for global capitalism', reported that when he puts forward his ideas in articles and on his blog, people often respond: "That's all very well, but what's he going to do about it?" Well, "that's part of the reason we're sitting here", he said.

Unsurprisingly one of the school's main themes was the Russian Revolution, as well as the historical background to it. For example, Neil Davidson of RS21 gave a talk entitled 'How revolutionary were the bourgeois revolutions?', while August Nimtz's three sessions were: 'Marx and Engels and the democratic breakthrough'; 'Lenin, Bolshevism and the tsar's duma'; and 'Bolshevism, soviet elections and the Constituent Assembly'. US author and political activist comrade Nimtz featured for the first time at CU and proved to be a very welcome addition to our list of speakers. In the coming weeks we hope to feature articles based on his talks, as well as those of several other speakers.

A recurring area of contention - in comrade Knight's 'Lessons of the October revolution', Neil Davidson's 'How revolutionary were the bourgeois revolutions?' and Marc Mulholland's 'The Bolshevik problem of breaking with capitalism' - was the significance of April 1917. Did Lenin's return to Russia signify a fundamental break with old Bolshevism or was it a question of "continuity and adaptation", as the CPGB's Jack Conrad asserted in the final CU session, fittingly entitled 'Bolshevism vindicated'?

While comrade Davidson had commented that "the Bolsheviks thought Lenin was crazy in April", it was clear from the openings of comrades Nimtz and Mulholland that they did not see things quite that way. It was a question of applying the Bolshevik programme to the



**Marxism requires constant enquiry, not shibboleths**

new situation - a position that the Bolsheviks overwhelmingly shared. For some comrades, including Gerry Downing of Socialist Fight, the call for the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" was - thanks to Lenin, in opposition to the majority of the Bolshevik leadership - completely ditched.

But for others the Soviets of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies was the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry given flesh and bone, and, as comrade Conrad pointed out, there was a unique form of dual power because the 'socialist' majority in the soviets were determined to hand power to the bourgeois Provisional government. Comrade Mulholland stated in his talk that Lenin and the Bolsheviks had always believed in a "bourgeois revolution led by the working class", in a country where "the peasantry will hold back the proletariat from socialism".

Comrade Conrad referred to this as a "bourgeois revolution without the bourgeoisie". After October there was a working class-led government which relied above all on triggering the European revolution. He also pointed

out that, when Trotsky began writing in detail about the so-called 'fundamental break' triggered by Lenin's April theses, it was in circumstances of both a factional battle against Stalin and the cult of Lenin, so his writing cannot be seen as historical works pure and simple. The main lesson, however, was the need for unity around a principled programme, bringing together the many shades of opinion in the revolutionary Marxist movement, he concluded.

Other sessions relating to 1917 were Anne McShane's 'Women and the Russian Revolution', Bob Arnott's 'The birth of Soviet healthcare' and the two talks introduced by Hillel Ticktin. The second of these, titled 'The real alternative when socialism in one country seemed inevitable', involved some 'what if' history - if, for example, Trotsky had used his military position to seize power after Lenin's death. This led to an interesting discussion about the relationship between the objective situation and the role of individuals.

### Challenges

But Communist University was about far more than 1917. For instance, the opening session, also presented by comrade Conrad, was about the political

situation in Britain 'After the June 8 general election'. But one aspect of his talk was misunderstood by IBT supporter Alan Gibson, who seemed to think that the CPGB believed the Labour Party could be transformed into the modern equivalent of soviet power or even a revolutionary Marxist party. But comrade Conrad was in fact comparing the Labour Party we aim to win with soviets in the sense of them being a united front of a permanent kind.

Comrade Gibson also took issue with CPGB comrades over the call for the organisation of rank-and-file soldiers in trade unions - he seemed to oppose this in principle, as the armed forces are state agencies pure and simple, and should not be touched by Marxists ... unless there is a revolutionary situation. For his part, comrade Knight reported the reaction of soldiers when in the early 1970s he had handed out leaflets calling for union organisation: "About fucking time!" they responded.

In his talk on the 'Challenges ahead for global capitalism' comrade Roberts identified these as the "huge rise in inequality", the "inability to grow" and the apparent impotence of the bourgeoisie in the face of climate change. Other challenges - this time

faced by our own movement - were explored in the session entitled 'Anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism', whose two platform speakers were regular *Weekly Worker* writers Moshé Machover and Tony Greenstein. They stressed the need to remain firm in our opposition to Zionism despite the onslaught of a good section of the establishment, which absurdly equates this with anti-Jewish racism.

Then there were the sessions introduced by other *Weekly Worker* regulars and CPGB comrades. Mike Macnair gave two talks - '1967 and all that' dealt with the Sexual Offences Act, while 'The "rule of law" delusion' emphasised that bourgeois legality in fact reflects current ideas in the "political class" and, although it is a question of the balance of forces, is "fundamentally a guarantee of property rights". Which is why we "don't trust judges", concluded comrade Macnair.

Enigmatically entitled 'Computer says no', Paul Demarty's talk came up with another challenge: how do we make use of the fruits of automation when "computers are rendering large parts of the workforce superfluous"? For her part, Yasmine Mather's talk entitled 'Trump and the Middle East' covered a large number of questions relating to both US politics and those of several Middle Eastern countries - expect more from this comrade very soon in these pages! As for Kevin Bean's 'Populism, nationalism and the new/old politics in Europe', the first article based on it appears elsewhere in this paper, so I will not say any more here.

Lawrence Parker gave the type of interesting analysis we have come to expect in his talk on 'The *Sunday Worker* and the National Left Wing Movement'. He described the NLWM, set up by the CPGB in 1926, as a "generally healthy organisation", which "doesn't fit into any 'right opportunist' template" despite the efforts of some on the left.

All in all, even though the attendance at Communist University was disappointing compared to recent years, there were very many stimulating sessions. As usual, the discussion continued well into the evening - both informally over a drink and in the three fringe meetings. These were organised by Platypus, the Socialist Party of Great Britain and comrade Peter Moody of the US Red Party ●

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