The Background of the German Revolution

By Louis C. Fraina

IV

The First Stage of the Revolution

LENIN was right—Russia's separate peace did not end the war or give German Imperialism the victory. The war flared up more intense and violent than ever, and more intense became mass agony and starvation, more intense became the economic and political crisis, more intense became the awakening of the masses and the revolutionary struggle for peace.

In May, 1918, German Imperialism staked all on one desperate offensive, and lost. Instead of peace, the unparalleled butchery brought more misery to the German proletariat. The revolutionary unrest developed more acutely. Great industrial strikes broke loose, in spite of the union bureaucrats' appeal to the strikers to "be calm"—particularly in the Essen regions. The Kaiser made a speech to the Krupp workers, warning them of the horrible results of revolution in Russia. The soldiers were uneasy, and mutiny spread. On August 5, German soldiers at Reval, "corrupted" by Bolshevik propaganda, disarmed themselves to show they were tired of war. The telephone wires were cut, and at meetings held the same day speakers denounced war. The cry was: "Enough of bloodshed! We do not want to fight any longer!" Two hundred soldiers were arrested. At Felline, in Livonia, at the end of July, trouble started in the garrison, which thereupon received orders to place itself in readiness for the western front—an order never executed. Detachments sent to enforce the order joined the rebels and, singing revolutionary songs, they all marched to the railway station, divesting themselves of military insignia. Upon their arrival at Meisekull depot, they met detachments coming from Perman and Weissenstein on their way to the western front. After a meeting, the new soldiers divested themselves of military insignia and dispersed with cries: "Enough of war! Peace and bread!" Revolutionary Socialists in Bremen issued a pamphlet declaring that not only the Scheidemann majority Socialism, but also the Independent Socialists of the Haase type, were simply adepts in radical phrases while avoiding deeds; the international Socialists and Communists insisted upon revolutionary action.

All this, spread all over Germany, arousing the consciousness of the masses to their misery and the necessity for revolution. . . .

The German offensive collapsed, and the Allies assumed the offensive; the war became still more hopeless. Then came the break in Bulgaria, where, according to all reports, Bolshevism was rampant; then came the break in Austria, where again Bolshevism was rampant. The revolutionary masses in Bulgaria compelled Czar Ferdinand to make a counter-revolutionary peace to save the dynasty: but the dynasty is no more. A new government asked for and secured an armistice. Germany was isolated. . . .

But still Germany might have waged war for months and years to come, according to experts, if Revolution had not broken the power of the government and of the imperialistic machine. During October, the revolutionary crisis in Germany emerged definitely into action. The Socialists of the Spartacus Group, representing revolutionary Socialism, Bolshevism, issued the following appeal:

"Workers, awake! The dreams of world domination of German Imperialism have vanished into smoke. On heaps of corpses, in seas of blood, they wanted to establish that domination. Vain are their efforts! The sword cannot forever rule the world. In one night everything has collapsed. The shameless traffic with the destiny of the peoples of the East has brought its fruits: it forced the peoples of the West to unite for defense.

"Everything is falling. On the field of battle—defeat after defeat: in Flanders, the Balkans, in Palestine. The alliance of the Central Powers, that was to serve as the means to world domination by Germany, has failed completely. Hardly had the robbers ended their quarrels over the spoils—Germany and Austria for Poland, Austria, Turkey and Bulgaria for Rumania, Germany and Austria and Bulgaria for the Dobrudja—then Bulgaria leaves the coalition, and concludes a separate peace with France and England. The German people do not want world domination, they do not want war, they want peace. But already German soldiers are being driven from the western front in order to force Bulgaria to continue the war. The German proletariat, which has nothing to eat, whose wives and children suffer and languish—this proletariat must now take the Bulgarian proletariat by the throat and force it to fight!

"Thus the ruling clique in Germany tries to retain power. It feels the ground slipping. It is bankrupt: bankrupt on the field of battle, bankrupt in external and internal policy. The hairs of the masters are standing up in fright at the consequences of their criminal military adventures. A shiver runs through their body at the very thought of the awakening of the tortured and deceived proletariat, at the thought of the people's judgment."

The old government, apprehensive of events, feeling the surge of proletarian awakening, snatched at the prestige of Socialism to bolster up its power; and invited Scheidemann and two other majority Socialists into the Cabinet—again to deceive the masses. Scheidemann & Co. accepted with alacrity this counter-revolutionary task. The Spartacus appeal continues:

"At this very moment the government Socialists, the Scheidemanns, offer their services to sustain the tottering power of the German bourgeoisie. At this hour of potential world revolution, they are busy with petty bargaining attempting to secure a few ministerial seats—they stand ready to save the situation for the imperialistic bourgeoisie, force the people to wait longer for the war's end, to prolong the slaughter of the peoples. Tney want to patch up things, to blur the class character of capitalist rule and Prussian reaction, in order to make these acceptable to the people.

"What were the conditions under which the government Socialists consented to do lackey's service? The solemn repudiation by the German government of annexations and indemnities! Yes, at this moment, when the English and French field guns are making efforts not to allow the German Government to secure annexations and indemnities! There is still more: suffrage reform in Prussia! Yes, at this moment, when universal suffrage, because of the shameless role of the Reichstag during the war, has become an empty husk. And these lackeys of the bourgeoisie did not even dare demand the repeal of martial law, did not even demand that the Reichstag should sit continuously. Thus they express their readiness, in return for a few contemptible ministerial portfolios, to act in the comedy of a "reformed" Germany in order to defend the rule of the capitalists against the action of the people. This is all that "reforms" mean.

"Our task consists precisely in this, that we must destroy this agreement against the proletariat and the future of Socialism. Everything is now at stake. Down with Prussian reaction and the rule of Capitalism! The problem now is to secure an immediate and permanent peace! But to secure permanent peace this is necessary: the destruction of militarism, the rule of the people, and a republic. The German proletariat must become the master of the situation. Onward, under the flag of Socialism! Long live the Revolution of the international proletariat!

"We must not look forward to the victory of Anglo-French Imperialism. If military might should dictate terms of peace, then lost will be the cause of freedom and Socialism. No matter which guns are victorious, whether German or English, the working class everywhere would have to pay. International reaction and militarism, if they are victorious, will fasten upon the working class chains ten times heavier than the old.

"The proletariat of all countries must end the slaughter by means of revolt. The revolutionary proletariat alone can dictate terms of peace in the interests of freedom and Socialism.

The hour to act has come. The English and the French workers may follow the German workers. Onward, German workers and soldiers, male and female! Forward to the battle for freedom, for an immediate peace and Socialism! Onward to the brotherhood of all peoples under the flag of free labor! Down with the class rule of the bourgeoisie! All power to the proletariat! Long live the international Revolution of the proletariat."

The entrance of Scheidemann & Co. into the capitalist government did not abate the revolutionary crisis: it developed more acutely. Everywhere the proletariat turned to revolutionary mass action. The government—"Socialist" farce of a "reformed" Germany did not deceive the masses. Freedom for Karl Liebknecht was demanded, and granted by the frightened government, by a brutal government trying to prove itself "good." A great demonstration was arranged for Liebknecht in Berlin, huge masses welcoming him and his revolutionary utterances, while they acclaimed the Socialist Republic and sent their fraternal greetings to the Russian Soviets.

Upon the development of the revolutionary crisis in Germany, the Soviet Government issued a proclamation to the German proletariat offering them help in making their revolution, and an army to co-operate, if necessary, in a revolutionary war against Anglo-French Imperialism and for the world revolution. Lenin took the initiative, and said to the Soviet Executive Committee: "The revolutionary crisis in Germany shows either a revolution begun or a revolution inevitable in the near future. Placing Scheidemann & Co. in the government will simply hasten the revolutionary explosion. We had decided to have an army of one million men by spring, but we shall now need an army of three million."

The spirit of revolutionary action during October was spreading rapidly all through Germany, among the proletariat and in the army. But the Social-Democratic Party, the majority Socialism of Scheidemann, Ebert & Co., did all in its power to prevent a revolution—in accord with its counter-revolutionary policy and traditions. On October 17 the Executive Committee of the Social Democratic Party issued a declaration *against* revolution: "All this agitation by confused, irresponsible persons, using Bolshevik revolutionary phrases, *who are trying to rouse the workers to strikes and demonstrations against the Government that would have no sense nor object at present*, makes it more difficult to bring about peace and democratize Germany. . . . As the authorized representatives of the Social Democratic Party have always declared, we wish to transform our political structures into a democracy and our economic life into Socialism by means of a peaceful change. We are on the road to peace and democracy. *All agitation for an attempted revolt runs counter to this road and serves the cause of the counter-revolution.*" (My italics.) And this, just at the moment when the proletariat was on the verge of bursting forth in that elemental revolutionary action that shattered the autocracy, and made a breach in the old order through which the proletariat could break through for action and the conquest of power! The language of this counter-revolutionary declaration was used in Russia against the Bolsheviki by moderate Socialism: it is characteristic and universal. This hesitation, this utter lack of audacity and revolutionary initiative, this horror of proletarian mass action characterterized the Social Democratic Party before the war, characterized its majority during the war, and characterizes its policy during the Revolution, when the German proletariat is accomplishing great things, and Frederick Engels' prophecy of thirty years ago might come true—that out of the next general European war would emerge Socialism. Their theory becomes life, and they contemptuously reject life itself. . . .

But the masses were in motion, the class struggle had flared up implacably, the agitation of the Spartacus Socialists and many of the Independents accelerated the march of events. On November 4, the government of Prince Max and Scheidemann issued a proclamation, boasting of the deeds of the army, of universal suffrage, of democracy in Germany—with the Kaiser still in power. But on November 7, 8 and 9, the first anniversary of the proletarian revolution in Russia, the German Revolution became an accomplished fact. The German fleet was seized by mutinous sailors; sailors at Kiel acted in favor of the revolution, organized Councils of Workmen, Soldiers and Sailors; and when a Government "Socialist" delegation arrived at Kiel to give orders, the delegation itself was given orders to bring back to Berlin. The revolution marched into action at Hamburg, where artillery was used in street battles. Everywhere the proletariat turned to its own revolutionary activity, strikes developing into demonstrations, and demonstrations into revolutionary mass action, Councils of Workmen and Soldiers being organized as the instruments of the Revolution.

The government was ignored, the existing Socialists and union organizations were ignored: the proletariat turned to mass action and the characteristic instruments of the proletarian revolution, the Councils of Workmen and Soldiers. In spite of all and everything, the German proletariat, by means of characteristic Bolshevik methods, accomplished the first stage of the German Revolution.

From Kiel and Hamburg the revolutionary movement spread rapidly. In Berlin, enormous demonstrations broke loose, soldier deserters being particularly active. The Council of Workmen and Soldiers in the industrial district of Chemnitz on November 9, at 2 A. M., issued the following proclamation in *The Volkstimme*:

"On with the struggle for freedom, bread and peace! Workers and Soldiers in the industrial district of Chemnitz:

"The undersigned Council of the workers and soldiers of Chemnitz has this night taken into its hands the military and political power, as has already been done in the strategic, decisive districts of Germany

The Council of Workmen and Soldiers guarantees the maintenance of order and public safety.

"The stopping of work may take place only at the order of the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council.

"Everyone, therefore, go to his place of work until further directions are received. The means of communication and all official business must be continued until orders to the contrary from the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council.

"He who leaves his post without permission will without consideration be called to account, also each official who attempts sabotage or who through negligence in service harms the public welfare.

"The military power of command is in the hands of the Council of Workmen and Soldiers. All orders from other sources are to be ignored. The Council will take the necessary measures for the provisioning of the people, and that no stoppage in the distribution of food shall occur.

"Therefore, each be unafraid. To-day, at 12 noon, in the Central Theatre, in the Kaumannischen Vereinshaus and in the Neuen Stadt-Theater, meetings of workers and soldiers will be held at which the situation will be discussed.

"The provisional Workers' and Soldiers' Council will be elected and will be given authority to direct all necessary action.

"The taking over of affairs will follow through a definite Workers-Council after its election. This election will take place in the course of the coming week. These have the right to vote, all citizens of both sexes, who have reached their 18th year or have done army service.

"The aim of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Germany is the establishment of the German Socialist Republic.

"Long live the fraternal union of soldiers and workers!

"Long live revolutionary discipline!

"Long live the World Revolution!

"Long live the people's emancipation, Socialism!

"Long live peace!

"The Council of Workmen and Soldiers in the industrial district of Chemnitz: Fritz Heckert, Max Muller, Corporal Max Stein—Executive Council in power."

The Revolution conquered; the Kaiser fled to Holland: a new "democratic" government was organized—Imperial Chancellor Prince Max appointing the "Socialist" Ebert as chancellor. But the first stage of the Revolution was simply the rst, and not the last: the accomplishment of the first stage of the Revolution indicated the fundamental problems, but did not solve them. The first victory was comparatively easy; but the second, the real victory, the definite accomplish-

Continued on page seven

The Background of the German Revolution

Continued from page four

ment of a proletarian, Socialist Revolution, still to be accomplished was indicated in a speech by Karl Liebknecht delivered on November 20: "Did the bourgeoisie while in power permit you to have a voice in the government? No! Then the workers must not permit it to have any say now. We need a Government of soldiers and workmen, a government of the proletariat, which will not have to bow down before the Entente. There must be no dickering with Entente Imperialism. We will dispose of that just as we did with German autocracy. The Revolution is also bound to reach the Entente countries, but we, who made the Russians waste a whole year, are insisting that the Revolution break out in England and France within twenty-four hours." A dictatorship of the proletariat, the definite initiation of Socialism, an alliance with proletarian Soviet Russia, a revolutionary war if necessary and the struggle for the international revolution—these are aspects of the second revolution, indicated by Liebknecht and by life itself.