Issues at the Congress of the Communist Party of Russia

By Will Herberg.

THE roots of the issues under discussion at the recent Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Russia can and must be traced to the economic-political situation internationally and within the Soviet Union in the last period of time.

What are the main features of the present period on an international scale? A certain stabilization of capitalism—relative and very partial it is true, but a stabilization nevertheless. That this stabilization is limited to a degree that it is the source of many new contradictions which, together with the old contradictions reproduced on a broader scale, threaten the existence of capitalism itself cannot, of course, be denied. But it is equally undeniable that with the October, 1923, defeat of the German proletariat, with the Dawes plan, with the security pacts and Locarno, the period of immediate revolutionary situations in Europe has passed for a time. The situation remains of a general revolutionary nature, but it is no longer, for the next short period of time, pregnant with situations that can immediately lead to the outbreak of the world revolution on another front.

The Question of the World Revolution.

WHAT naturally would be the reflection of such a situation within the Soviet Union? First of all, the question of the world revolution and its relation to the activities of the Soviet Union would naturally arise. Can our perspective, after all, take in the world revolution? Should we, in this stabilization period, base our work within the Soviet Union upon development of the world revolution, or shall we resign ourselves to the fact that the world revolution is "indefinitely" postponed and leave it out of our aims and calculations? Any such views the Fourteenth Congress of the party liquidated unanimously. The congress as a whole outlined the truly Leninist view of the role of the Soviet Union in the world revolution is the very basis of our international perspective and that it is the task and duty of the first proletarian state to serve as a basis of operations and a source of support for the world proletariat in its struggle and revolution. The political resolution of the central committee accepted by the congress was very positive on this point.

The Question of Building Socialism.

THE next question was a reflection of the same general perspective upon the economic situation within the Soviet Union. It was a question of "building socialism." Of course, there was no disagreement over the fact that socialism could and must be built in the Soviet Union; the question was not whether socialism could be built in a country like the Soviet Union without the world revolution; it was whether socialism can be finally built, can be completed and a purely socialist system constructed in the Soviet Union before and without the proletarian revolution on a world scale. To this the Leningrad delegation and some others under the leadership of Zinoviev answered in the negative while the rest of the party congress, the overwhelming majority, were of the opposite opinion.

The NEP and Socialist Industry.

CLOSELY bound up with this fundamental question of the possibility of the completion of socialist construction were some other very important questions, among them the questions of the estimation of the new economic policy, the question as to the socialist character of the nationalized state industry, and so on. The resolution of the party congress entirely cleared the atmosphere on these matters. It rejected the errors of certain elements (some of the "Red professors," etc.), that had the tendency to confuse the "NEP" with socialism. On the other hand, however, it firmly laid down the fact that the nationalized industries were of a "consistently socialist" character (Lenin's words) in spite of the fact that the existence of these socialist industries in the medium of "free trade" had undeniable effects upon them. The congress issued a warning against the attempts to consider these industries as state capitalistic undertakings (thus making them resemble the mixed or "concession" enterprises), and laid down instructions for "an extended educational work for liquidating these deviations from Leninism."

ON the main question—the "possibility" of completing socialist construction—the congress spoke in no uncertain terms. The "doubts" and "questions" as to this main point indicated the possibility for the development of serious deviations and therefore the congress was quite firm and clear in its statement:

> **"In the sphere of economic construction the party congress adopts the Leninist standpoint that 'the Soviet land, as the country of the proletarian dictatorship, possesses everything necessary in order to build up a complete socialist society.' The party congress considers the fight for the victory of socialist construction in the Soviet Union to be the chief task of the party. The period since the Thirteenth Party Congress completely confirms the correctness of this principle."**

The Question of the Middle Peasantry.

THE fundamental question that faced the congress, and the question upon which there had been the deepest and most extensive discussion, was the peasant question—specifically the question of the middle peasantry. It is not necessary to emphasize the supreme importance of this question—not only for the Soviet Union for the whole world since the very question of the colonial peoples is essentially the peasant question reproduced on a world scale.

The Leninist Line Among the Peasantry.

THE main lines of strategy in the peasant question—one of the most difficult facing the revolutionary proletariat—are well-known and were largely laid down by Lenin in the famous agrarian theses of the second congress of the Comintern (in 1920) on the basis, largely, of the experiences of the party in all the phases of its struggle. In countries where there are bourgeois nationalist revolutionary movements and where the dominant system still has within it many elements of feudal land relations (as Russia before March, 1917), the main line of strategy must be: Union of the proletariat and the whole of the peasantry under the hegemony of the proletariat. In capitalist countries, however, where bourgeois relations have become entirely reactionary and where the feudal land relations have been largely eliminated, the slogan is: The union of the proletariat and the poor peasantry, the neutralization of the middle peasantry, the struggle against the rich peasantry and the bourgeoisie. Such were the tactics of the Russian proletariat in the period of March to November, 1917.

All this is of course elementary. There was no controversy as to this. The controversy arose on the question as to the attitude towards the peasantry, specifically towards the middle peasantry, after the proletarian revolution, under the proletarian dictatorship, and in the period of the building up of socialism. The correct Leninist line, maintained and defended by this Fourteenth Congress, was: The poor peasantry is the support, the middle peasantry is the ally of the proletariat. Or in the words of the political resolution itself:

> **"If the village poor and above all the agricultural proletarians are the support of the proletariat in the village, then the middle peasantry is and must be the firm ally of the proletariat. It must not be forgotten that. . . . the middle peasantry have become exceedingly strong and that they now form the main mass of the peasantry. Without having these masses as our firm allies, merely by maintaining them neutral, now, after the consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship, it will be impossible to build up socialism."**

The Wrong Line of the Opposition.

THE opposition at the congress, the tendency represented by the Leningraders, while it did not openly defend it at the congress, stood for the view that the main task was rather to neutralize the middle peasantry. This question was also associated with the attitude towards the "kulak"—or rich peasant. The opposition maintained that there had been a serious underestimation of the "kulak" danger, especially in view of the undeniable growth in number and economic and, to an extent also in political power, of the "kulak" elements. The dangerous access of strength to the "kulaks" could not be denied, said the majority of the congress in the political resolution, but this very fact shows how exceedingly dangerous was the mistaken policy of the opposition, the policy of neutralization, for only thru a firm alliance with the bulk of the village, the middle peasantry, can the "kulak" danger be met and the socilist elements in the Soviet economy find their support in the village. Moreover, in the present situation within the Soviet Union and internationally the danger coming from the tendency to underestimate the role of the middle peasantry is far greater in its implications than the danger of the other trend that does not properly estimate the "kulak" danger. In its resolution the congress says:

> **"The party congress emphatically condemns the deviation which consists in underestimating the village (the "kulak" danger.—W. H.). . . But the party congress at the same time likewise emphatically condemns the attempt to obscure the fundamental question of Communist policy in the village, the question of the struggle for the middle peasants as the central figure of agriculture. . . . The party congress especially emphasizes the necessity of a struggle against this last named deviation."**

The Peasantry and Socialist Construction—Co-operation.

THE whole question of the peasantry is intimately connected with the previous problem of building socialism in Russia and this proves the inner unity of the multiple issues in the controversy. For in a country like Russia the building of socialism can only be possible if the large masses of the toilers are drawn into this constructive work along roads and thru methods dictated by their class position and their resulting traditions, beliefs, and prejudices. It is here that the question of the role of co-operation arises and is closely linked up with the questions of the peasantry and socialist construction.

> **"For the chief means of the construction of socialism in the village consists in the growing economic leadership on the part of the socialist state industry in the state credit institutions and in other dominating positions which are in the hands of the proletariat, in drawing the main masses of the peasantry into co-operative organization and in securing the socialist development of this organization by making use of, overcoming, and removing its capitalist elements."**

It is hard to leave the question of the peasantry with so few words, but space is limited. We can only say that this—the central question at the congress—is a question of the greatest importance, a question of tremendous implications in every field of Soviet life, a question even of international significance, and the action of the party congress in scotching any deviations from the straight line of Leninism the moment they showed themselves prove that the leadership of the Russian party—the opposition included—considers it their highest task to steer close to the line laid down by Lenin and embodied in Leninism.

The Question of Party Composition.

THE next great question that occupied the attention of the congress upon which there was a controversy was the question of the composition of the party. The 13th Party Congress (1924) had laid down the line that at least fifty per cent of the membership of the party must be composed of industrial workers actually at work in the shop. The opposition charged that this had not yet been accomplished. Upon the basis of its charge the opposition proposed that the congress take measures for the greater absorption of large masses of proletarians by the party and the greater accessibility of the party to the proletariat. They pointed out that all strata of Soviet society were undergoing an elevation in their level of political life and initiative, the industrial proletariat above all, and it was the duty of the party to respond to this fact. The party, they said, was weak in its industrial proletarian core and there was danger of its losing its strictly proletarian nature.

The majority of the congress was of the opinion that these arguments were not correct. Bukharin very correctly pointed out the situation had changed in Soviet society—the "declassing" of the proletariat is at an end; in fact the trend is now definitely the other way; the tendency is for the peasants to leave the village for the town. This, of course, means that a large section of the town proletariat was really semi-proletariat (and semi-peasant) in composition, so that opening the doors to them would dilute the party. As for the increase in political life and initiative of the proletariat, this is a very true and welcome fact. But must this tendency find its outlet in the party? Are not the many non-partisan organizations sufficient to absorb this political energy—such organizations as the Soviets, the various Soviet organs, non-partisan conferences, etc.? In the demands of the opposition the party congress quite rightly saw a tendency towards the underestimation of the vanguard role of the party.

> **"The consolidation of the party and the strengthening of its leading role in all spheres of constructive work is a prerequisite for a correct regulation of the composition of the party. The party congress considers it necessary to conduct a policy of raising the qualitative composition of the party organizations, of striving to attract ever greater numbers of workers to the party and constantly to raise the preponderance of its proletarian core. The party congress at the same time affirms the necessity of a strict carrying out of the measures to restrict the admittance into the party and to its being swamped with semi-proletarian elements which have never passed thru any school of the trade unions or proletarian organizations. The party congress condemns such attempts which have nothing in common with Leninism, which deny the correct relations between the party (advance guard of the class) and the class which render possible Communist leadership."**

IT is impossible here to examine the international significance and implications of the controversy in the Russian Party. We have limited ourselves to a brief exposition of the major issues that arose and to some indications as to the policy of the Leninist central committee of the Russian Party for the next period of time.