Two Years of Soviet Russia

By Ludwig Lore

Not even the most optimistic among us believed that it was possible. That Russia, dark, ignorant, barbarous, illiterate, Tsar-ridden Russia had, not quite a year before, shaken the curse of the Tsar's despotism off its back had seemed marvellous enough. That, for years to come, this great nation, made up of countless heterogeneous elements, exhausted by years of warfare and incredible exploitation would change from ruler to ruler, was so obvious that the abdication of the first imperialistic government in favor of that of Kerensky caused little surprise. But the coming of a real socialist revolution, a revolution that would not only place complete political control into the hands of the socialist movement, but that would by and by actually carry out in medieval Russia the Marxian program of expropriation exceeded even the wildest of our hopes.

When the incredible did occur, there was a sharp difference of opinion among the socialist and labor movements, everywhere. On the one side were the conservative, doctrinaire elements who had accustomed themselves to the thought that the first social revolution must and would come in one or the other of the most highly developed capitalistic nations. They had always expected that Russia, once it had rid itself of the domination of the Romanoff despots, would develop its industrial resources under democratic conditions somewhat similar to those that obtained in the United States, and they vehemently resented this unexpected development for which their program had made no provision. On the other side were those who had realized that the war and the situations it had brought about had decidedly shaken up our old conceptions of social development. Above all they realized that Russia, bled to the limits of its endurance was unable to endure the torture of further warfare. It had become more and more plain that no government could long remain in power which did not take definite steps toward the securing of a speedy peace with the Central Powers. While the formal political control lay in the hands of the duly recognized cabinets, these bodies were able to hold themselves in power only so long as they were tolerated there by the revolutionary elements in the Workmen's and Soldiers' and Peasants' Councils. But none, neither the upholders nor the opponents of the action that definitely established the political domination of the socialist movement in Russia expected that its ascendency would be permanent. Friend and foe alike prophecied that the working-class government of Russia would not, could not last; that Russia was not ripe for a proletarian revolution; that, even if the incredible should happen, and the new government under Lenin and Trotzky should succeed in bringing about a peace between Germany and Russia, that the return of normal conditions in the country would, of course, put to an end Bolshevist supremacy. And yet it persisted, through weeks, through months, and has now reached its second year, more firmly established, more invincible than at any time during the entire period of its existence.

Today we realize, what only a few could see at the time, that the very element which made a proletarian revolution such a monstrous thing in the eyes of its socialist opponents, that is, the non-existence of a strongly developed capitalist class was in fact one of the most valuable assets of the Bolshevist revolution. In the words of one of the most embittered opponents of Soviet Russia, "The power lay on the streets, and no one dared to pick it up." Russia was on the verge of bankruptcy.

The Tsarist government had assumed obligations particularly to the Allied nations that it seemed impossible to meet. Under such conditions, an open break with the Allies was unthinkable, and, at the same time conditions in the country and at the front made further warfare impossible. The fact that there was no strong capitalist class in Russia which could have steered it safely through this critical situation doomed every government that would attempt to meet these obligations to failure at the outset. Moreover, after once the Soviet government had been established, the counter-revolutionary elements had so little unity of purpose, were so hopelessly divided on personal issues that it was possible, even with the depleted resources that remained, to successfully meet and overthrow them all.

As a matter of fact the greatest danger that threatens the Russian revolutionary government is not the opposition of its own exploiting class but that of the great capitalist nations of western Europe and America. At first it seemed as if the liberal elements in these nations would be sufficiently strong to force, if not actual recognition, at least a policy of tolerance and aloofness on the part of their respective governments. Indeed President Wilson, who in those days still fancied himself in the role of liberator to a despot ridden world, at first showed a marked sympathy for the aims and aspirations of the Russian people. Lloyd George, so long as he hoped to rule in England with the sole support of the Liberal Party was inclined to pursue similar tactics. France alone was openly hostile from the start—its capitalists having engaged more heavily in Russian bonds. When Lloyd George found, however, that his only hope for the re-election of a workable parliamentary majority lay in the support of the Unionists, the most reactionary political group in England, he abandoned his position and allowed himself to be driven, by Churchill and others into alliance with counter-revolutionary Russian reactionaries, who aimed to re-establish Russian autocracy, in some form or other in place of the hated Bolshevist regime of the working-class. Wilson, too, underwent a similar metamorphosis. His avowed sympathy and understanding went overboard as soon as he realized liberalism, as a world issue is dead, that the man who hoped to dominate the peace negotiations, and through them the future of the world, must forget all liberal purposes and progressive aims, must be ready to do the bidding of the imperialists of all nations whom the war has made masters of the earth.

Nothing could illustrate this more clearly than the Bullitt affair that recently filled the newspapers. Bullitt,

the promising scion of an old American family, a young man who had already established for himself an enviable reputation as a liberal literat, was sent by the Administration, together with the well-known Lincoln Steffens, to Russia to investigate conditions there with a view to finding a basis upon which a peace between the Allies and the Bolshevist government could be arranged. The commission, after an absence of a number of months, returned from Russia while the peace negotiations in Paris were going on. Bullitt at once attempted to lay his report, which offered concrete and acceptable proposals from the Soviet government, before the President, but was unable to get even a hearing, in spite of his most persistent efforts. By Colonel House he was told that the President has a "one-track mind," which, being occupied with the peace treaty, could not be distracted by outside considerations. When Bullitt finally realized that Wilson, the Liberal, who had sent Steffens and himself to Russia to arrange peace terms, had succumbed to the openly imperialistic demands of the other parties to the peace that was in the process of creation at that time, considering himself released from further obligations, published his report, to the joy of every friend of the Russian revolution and the indignant consternation of the capitalist press.

The history of the various counter-revolutionary uprisings that have advanced from all points of the compass upon the proletarian government of Russia with the open assistance of the allied nations is too recent and too well known to need repetition. Korniloff, Kaledine and Alexieff, Admiral Kolchak and Denikin, each in their turn occupied the front pages of the newspapers of the allied nations; each in turn were reported as winning victory after victory, each in turn were supported liberally with Allied money and Allied forces. And in the end, each one of them was gently but definitely dropped, not, to be sure, before he had been whipped so decisively by the Red Army of the Bolsheviki that it was throwing good money after bad to continue to support him. It mattered not that these men were obviously self-seeking in their motives; that they established, in the territory they succeeded in subduing, a reign of terror that beggared the best efforts of the deposed Tsar. No methods were too shameful, no accomplice too perfidious to accomplish the defeat of Soviet Russia. The very men who, a year ago, claimored for intervention in Russia in order to drive out the Germans, the very men who accused the Bolshevist leaders, in forged documents, of being in the pay of the German imperialists, in the armstice terms expressly provided

for the continued occupation of the Baltic provinces by German forces under Von der Goltz, the murderer of the Finnish revolution. In spite of the continued protests of the Communists and the Independent Social Democrats of Germany large military divisions under the control of frankly counter-revolutionary imperialist elements in Germany, the very elements who were chiefly responsible for the outbreak of the war and for the methods employed by the German forces, were continually crossing the border between Germany and the Baltic provinces. While the people are being gulled with promises of trials that are to bring the guilty imperialists of Germany to justice, our ruling class is making common cause with these same imperialists for the suppression of Russian freedom in the interests of international capitalism.

Why this vehement hatred of Bolshevist Russia? The reason is fourfold. The first, which has already been mentioned, the fear that the Soviet government will adhere to its refusal to pay the debts contracted by the Tsarist government in the Allied nations. Second, the publication of the secret treaties, which made it exceedingly awkward for the "defenders of world-democracy" to keep up the fiction of disinterestedness with which they had until then piously covered their imperialistic aims. Thirdly, the socialization of the lands, the forest, the mines, the banks and the industries in Russia. For great, rich undeveloped Russia is to the capitalist countries in Europe what Mexico is to the United States, a field for unlimited investment affording under a capitalistic regime opportunities for enormous profits. As a matter of fact, British, French and German capitalists who have been for years heavily interested in Russian investments have suffered great losses through the socialization of Russian industries and the refusal of Russian peasants and workmen to submit to the exploitation that before the revolution was a matter of course. The London "Financial News" puts the matter in a nutshell when it tersely remarks "in the City it is realized that events are shaping more and more toward an international suzerainty over Russia, modelled upon the British surveillance of Egypt. Such an event would transform Russian bonds into the cream of the international market."

The last weeks have again brought a new savior for Russia into public notice. According to the newspaper reports Soviet Russia is surrounded by enemies on all sides. In screaming headlines Petrograd has fallen again and again. General Yudenitch, the newest "white hope" of west-European capital, after advancing upon Bolshevist Russia in an onslaught that seemed

to be carrying everything before it, today seems as far from having accomplished his purpose as when he began. Already he too is being discreetly retired into more unostentatious corners of our metropolitan press. Even the "Times" is constrained to admit that he will probably not capture Petrograd before winter.

There is something heroic in the struggle of this newly-awakened people for the preservation of an ideal. Material conditions in Russia are, of that there can be no reasonable doubt, in a desperate state. Cut off on all sides from its sources of supply by allied blockades and reactionary uprising, facing the stupendous task of building up a new social state upon an industrially undeveloped, materially depleted, bankrupt nation, placed before the almost impossible task of assimilating a huge contingent of uneducated, politically ignorant peasants into a socialist system of society, the proletarian government has been able not only to gradually win the support of its own people, but has met attack after attack with a dogged resistance that is almost incredible. It must not be overlooked that to the people of Russia submission to the will of the Allies will mean, for the present at least, the lifting of the blockade, the bringing in of food, the end of starvation, and the resumption of relations and trade with the outer world. And yet, in Russia itself there is practically no dissatisfaction. The following, taken from an article by John Rickman in the British "Labor Leader" indicates some of the reasons for this remarkable and admirable solidarity within the Russian nation:

"The Bolsheviks came into power largely because the other candidates, perhaps through no fault of their own, did not appear to be giving the people what they wanted, because the Constituent Assembly seemed likely to repeat the faults of the previous Governments and to embarrass the movement towards freedom by compromises with a class which had always held power. Having gained power the Bolsheviks more slowly gained popularity.

The Social Revolutionary *right* party had on its programme the nationalizing of the land, but it held the idea that the Socialist programme must come slowly; it was in favor of disposing of the estates only when the peasants were ready for them. Lenin incorporated the land question into the revolutionary movement by his order: "Peasants, seize the land." This did not, however, make Bolshevism popular, the peasants remarking, "Lenin did not give us the land; we took it." The movement of the workmen to take possession of the factories was more

properly attributed to the Bolsheviks, but it did not in my opinion make that party popular.

It was, I think, the general social programme of the Moscow Revolutionaries which commended itself to the people, which slowly took shape and may be judged in the Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, adopted July 10, 1918. The Bolsheviks have attempted to deal with the

> fundamental problem, the abolition of exploitation of men by men, the entire abolition of the division of the people into classes, the suppression of exploiters, the establishment of a "Socialist Society." (Constitution, Article 1, chapter 2, paragraph 3.)

Great masses of the people, of course, remained in ignorance of the real meaning of "the establishment of a Socialist society." It was interpreted to them as being the organization of a State on principles very similar to their village communes, and the peasants thinking that as good or better than any alternative they had met yet did not give their allegiance to it, but showed a readiness to see whether it would work. They knew that no Government in Russia had thus far been satisfactory so they said they would give the Bolsheviks ten years before they would judge if it was really good or not. Such patience was not found in Moscow, nor apparently in foreign countries.

Under the Federal System great liberty was given to each province and county for the development of its own ideas and government, and in this way the difficult problems connected with mixed racial populations were partly solved.

The breaking up of the Empire into small units and their re-union into the Socialist Federated Republic gave support to one of the chief causes of Bolshevik popularity; that the war which was begun by the Tsar should be ended by the people; their avowed intention of "breaking secret treaties, or organizing on a wide scale the fraternalization of the workers and peasants of the belligerent armies, and of all efforts to conclude a general democratic peace without annexations or indemnities, upon a basis of the free determination of the peoples." Constitution—article 1, chapter 3, paragraph 4 coincided with the Russian sentiments on war. Accordingly the treaty of Brest-Litovsk came as no surprise, and I heard in all the time I was in Russia no workman or peasant disparage it.

The educational programme of the Bolsheviks commended itself to the people as being the most generous that had been placed before the public, and the zeal with which it was car-

ried out seemed to the people to indicate that the energies of the Government were turning principally to internal reforms. The wishes of the people were studied, not only in broad principles, but in details. "For the purpose of enabling the workers to hold free meetings the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic offers to the working class and the poorest peasantry furnished halls, and takes care of their heating and lighting appliances." (Constitution—article 2, chapter 5, paragraph 15.) Libraries were opened in the villages and theatres in all the towns and were maintained at the public expense.

The popularity which the Bolsheviki Government earned by its measures was not seriously tested till the spring of 1918, because it had no serious rivals who could call for the allegiance of the people on the strength of their programme for internal reforms. In the early summer, when civil war was financed from abroad and supported at home by large sections of the upper classes, the first real test came. Districts which had tried both the Bolshevik regime and that set up under the Czechs when free to do so reverted to Bolshevism. The Czechs were forced to retire from the Volga to the Urals because of uprisings among the people. The Soviet of Vladivostok was returned at the July election though the "Reds" were in prison. From the Urals to the eastern coast the people were discontented with the directorate and the dictatorship and preferred a return to the Soviets.

No body of people I met feared the Bolshevik Government except the rich merchant and landowning classes, and among them I noticed a phenomenon not uncommonly seen in the last few years, that supreme sacrifices are easier to ask for and easier to make in many cases than smaller ones. When all rich people were losing their property it was not in accordance with the temperament of the better Russian to display great grief at an irreparable loss. I think there was hardly more grumbling than occurred in England over the Budgets and the Insurance Act of a recent Government. Through their losses some perceived, often with mixed feelings, the increasing sense of equality, and many contrasted the smallness of their loss with the great sacrifice of the war.

The Bolsheviks, in the opinion of the writer, used the repudiation of the foreign debts as a measure of internal politics, when the country was loath to assume any obligations contracted by the Tsar, but would in time have persuaded the people willingly to pay interest on the foreign loans because they realized that no further money would be lent to them unless they did.

Bearing in mind the exhausted condition of Russia due to the war, the lack of commodities due to the isolation caused by Allied blockade after November, 1917, and the disturbance in industry which accompanies civil war (especially if financed from abroad), I believe that the condition of finances under the Bolsheviks may compare favorably with that of any administration in the last sixty years in Russia except under Ministers of Finance Kankrin and Reitern, or with the present administration in Siberia before it re-introduced vodka distilling as a source of revenue. It is possible that new criteria may have to be formed before it is wise to come to definite and final judgments regarding the financial condition of a community that hopes "to establish a Socialist society" and eliminate the use as far as possible of currency."

Russian peasants and Russian workmen are accustomed to starvation. That is perhaps the best heritage the revolution received from the regime of the Tsar. For it has enabled them to endure, with the stolid patience and the hopefulness that is part of the Russian nature, the misery that the Allied blockade has caused. But even hunger and want under Communism assume a different aspect. There are no shop-windows, resplendent with luxuries that only the more fortunate can buy. The flimsy rags of the working woman are not made still shabbier by the flaunting of silks and satins on the back of a wealthier neighbor. Herein lies an object lesson that even the simplest can understand. Its appeal has not a little to do with the firmness with which the new government has established its influence among the poor and the downtrodden in Russia.

Although Russia is the most illiterate among the large nations of the world, its people are characterized by an intense craving for education. This natural tendency was fed and nurtured during the days of the darkest counter-revolution that followed the first revolutionary movement in 1905. During those years thousands of young, enthusiastic students traveled across the country, disguised as common laborers, living in the poverty-stricken farmhouses in the dreariest villages, and in the lonesome huts of the woodcutters, deep in the forests, teaching the men, the women and the children to read and to write, instilling in their minds at the same time the message of a better life when the workingman should become his own master. To this side of the Russian people the Bolshevist government has directed its chief appeal. In the short two years of its existence, in spite of almost insur-

mountable difficulties, it has established a system of schools that reaches out to the most forsaken village in the land. Threatened by foes on every hand, on the verge of annihilation from day to day, face to face with the stupendous task of socializing its industries, the largest of which are in the hands and under the direct control of German and Allied capitalists, the proletarian government has yet found time to establish a system of schools that is based upon the most modern principles of pedagogy. John Rickman, the English writer, says:

"The educational programme of the Bolsheviks was ambitious, but it was this ambitiousness which commended it to the people. The Bolsheviks aimed at starting a school in every village and increasing the number of gymnasia in the district and founding a university, but in this project they were stopped by lack of teachers. To overcome this difficulty they started training colleges for teachers, which were financed by the Soviet. Scholarships were given to promising pupils, which would carry them through the gymnasia and on to the universities already founded.

The enthusiasm of teachers for their work, which had been depressed by the restrictions of the old régime, revived. They gave up their holidays to attend university extension lectures and evening classes, in order to improve their teaching capacity for the coming terms. Technical classes were started, and the agricultural schools and colleges, some of which were already in operation under the old régime, were revived, additional instructors obtained, and new institutions begun. In every village the Soviets have turned the largest buildings into schools, libraries and public meeting halls. Expenses for outfitting, lighting and heating are met by the government. The passion of the Russian for long and exhaustive discussion on all questions of public interest has been satisfied to the utmost."

Industrial difficulties that were bound to arise were met, wherever this was possible by the workmen themselves. They were given the opportunity of solving difficult situations that arose by majority decisions. Very often, it is true, this resulted in costly mistakes, mistakes that sometimes resulted in the complete breakdown of the plant or railway involved. But it had the great advantage of building up a stable system of production and distribution that depended not so much upon orders from Moscow which had to be obeyed as on

motives for good work and co-operation which carried their own inducement.

Internally, therefore, the Soviet government is founded firmly on the broadest possible foundation, the confidence and the co-operation of the producing classes. That is the secret of its power, the reason why it has been able to throw back attack after attack of the trained men at arms who have been sent out against them.

But the future of the Russian proletarian revolution is by no means assured. No people can starve indefinitely. Ultimately the continued cutting off of Russia from the world market is bound to have its effect, while the support of a strong military force adequate for its protection against foreign attack will sooner or later deplete the resources, both material and human, at its command. In the last analysis, therefore, the life of the Russian proletarian government lies in the hands of the working classes of the West-European nations. The Russian revolution will stand and fall with the revolutionary world-proletariat. Of this the leaders of the Russian revolution are only too well aware. Their intensive propaganda, therefore, that they are carrying on in every country of the civilized world, is in a sense a campaign for their own preservation.

The great strikes that are following one upon the other in Great Britain, the ceaseless unrest that is agitating France, the chronic state of disquiet that has taken hold of Italy, the utter political and industrial collapse of Germany, broken down beyond hope of recovery, the increasing radicalization of the working-class movement the world over—even here in America—these give us the assurance that the two years of Soviet control in Russia are but the forerunner of the final world revolution of the proletariat that will bring liberation to the Russian and to the International working-classes.