

## **The Great War and the Bolsheviks**

On first glance this theme sounds insignificant. It seems like looking with a spy glass in the Russian history but I am sure that if you have more time to think about it you will find that it is of global importance.

There are several aspects of the problem that I would like to introduce to you. The first area is connected with the ideological development of the Bolsheviks in the years before and during the war. At that time were formed some of the most important views of the party and its leaders. I have in mind the concept of the imperialist character of the war, the possibility of transforming it in civil war with the goal to seize the power in the state, the whole attitude towards the conflict and the idea of making world peace without any reparations and changes of the borders. These theses later became the core of the Soviet internal and foreign policy. They formed the relations of the new state towards with the international revolutionary movement and even led to some diplomatic inventions.

The other area that I would like to discuss is the First World War and the place of the Bolsheviks as a political factor in it. How did it affect the policy of the party and its capacity of rallying supporters. The question – Were the Bolsheviks German spies who took Russia out of the war, has still no answer. Finally I would like to lighten the problem – Did the communists search on purpose for the civil war?

The First World War met the Bolshevik leaders abroad. Vladimir Lenin was in Austro-Hungarian Empire in the village of Poronin<sup>1</sup>. He was suspected as a Russian spy and arrested. The other main character of the revolution Leon Trotsky was in Vienna and ran in Zurich and Paris because was afraid not to be prosecuted by the Austrian authorities as Russian citizen<sup>2</sup>. At that time both did not have any clear position towards the war. Trotsky was leading some kind of pacifist propaganda in the newspaper “Our word”<sup>3</sup> which he edited in the French capital.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1914 Lenin was freed and immigrated to Switzerland. During that year he was getting frustrated with the socialist movement in Europe. Main reason was the support of the German socialist for the military budget of their country.

The event that changed the situation in the European left was the Zimmerwald Conference which took place from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> of September in Switzerland. 38 people from 11 countries participated in it and more than 20 leftist parties acknowledged the elaborated manifest<sup>4</sup>.

It is interesting to know that in this time Lenin had far radical positions than Trotsky. The leader of the Bolsheviks headed the left wing of the participants and proposed the idea of - “turning the World conflict in to a civil war”<sup>5</sup>. Although this statement was not included in the manifesto of the conference the group of the leftist supported the main document. It was prepared and

---

<sup>1</sup> Зазерский Е., Любарский А., Ленин. Эмиграция и Россия / Часть вторая, Москва 1975 at – [http://nounivers.narod.ru/bibl/zalb\\_24.htm](http://nounivers.narod.ru/bibl/zalb_24.htm), 15.09. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Троцкий Л., Моя жизнь,

<sup>3</sup> Наше слово – ibidem

<sup>4</sup> Zimmerwald Conference 1915: Revolutionaries against the imperialist war at – [http://en.internationalism.org/wr/290\\_zimmerwald.html](http://en.internationalism.org/wr/290_zimmerwald.html), 15.09. 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ленин, В. И., Социализм и война, в Полное Собрание Сочинения, Москва 1969, т. 26, с. 325

written by Trotsky. In it for the first time were enounced the ideas that the war is imperialistic and the statement that the socialists are for peace without any annexations and contributions<sup>6</sup>.

As we can see at that time these slogans were in fact not weapons of the Bolsheviks since their group was more radical. But if we proceed to investigate the policy of the party two years later we can see that the same statements became crucial for their internal and foreign policy.

The first document edited by the Council of the People's Commissars was the Decree on Peace<sup>7</sup>. In it we can see the same ides proposed to the world community – immediate end of the war, without any reparations, annexations and contributions<sup>8</sup>. Can we suggest that Bolshevik leaders like Lenin and Trotsky really believed that the governments of the great powers will accept this?

I am sure that this is not plausible. It is just a great populist move by the communists. After the February revolution in Russia they became the main opposition party and the idea that they used to back up the political theory were based on pacifism and the need of the Russian people and society for peace. I think that we cannot blame the leaders of the Workers party for not having a persistency on the ideological field.

In the same document Bolsheviks made another important statement – the self-determination of the nationalities. That idea also broadened the support for them. As we all know that idea was not just an empty slogan since on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1918 the Soviet Government first of all other nations recognized the independence of Finland.

---

<sup>6</sup> Trotsky, L. The Zimmerwald Conference Manifesto at – <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/zimmerwald/manifesto-1915.htm>, 15. 09. 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Декрет о мире, в Документы внешней политики СССР, Москва 1959, т.1, с. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

The emerging of the Bolsheviks and the Russian socialists and communists on the world political scene was noticed quite early by the governments of the warring nations. The decisions taken on the Zimmerwald conference were acknowledged both by the Germans and the Triple Entente as subversive actions by the enemy. The fast establishment of the communists in the Russian politics during 1917 was observed with caution by England and France and with hope by the Central Powers.

Here comes the theme of the German gold and the question if Lenin was foreign agent. As we all know and is documentary proven in early April 1917, 32 Russian immigrants traveled in a one carriage, sealed train through Germany to Sweden and later arrived in St. Petersburg<sup>9</sup>. The power of the Bolshevik propaganda in the following months made the provisional government ban the party because of suspicions for foreign interference.

As we all know making of a revolution is an expensive job and suddenly the immigrants who lived very poor in different European countries had the resources to start tens of newspapers and to spread them in the whole country. That was not the only action that the Bolsheviks started. They also formed and armed one of the most significant militia organizations in 1917 – the Red Guard.

Although there is no certain documentary proof for the German financial support, all the above shown things make me accept the interference of Berlin in the Russian policy after the February revolution.

At the same time we have to know that Lenin denied his ties with Germany. The documents that focused the attention of the world on the problem were a

---

<sup>9</sup> Мельгунов С., Золотой немецкий ключ большевиков, Москва 1990 с. 23

set of 68 papers obtained by the representative of the U.S. Committee on Public Information Edgar Sisson in 1918<sup>10</sup>.

It is important to notice that in an article in *Journal of Modern History*<sup>11</sup>, the US historian and diplomat George F. Kennan claimed they were forgeries. It is not hard to believe him since the documents showed at the right time to justify the American intervention during the Russian civil war.

The most valuable clue in this quest is the end of the Russian participation in the war. The treaty of Brest – Litovsk has shown to the world several precedents. The Entente saw this diplomatic move as treason. The governments of Great Britain and France were absolutely convinced that the Bolsheviks are German spies and that Berlin has succeeded in its plans for disruption of the alliance.

The society in Russia saw the treaty in several ways. Ordinary people were grateful for the end of the war. The communists looked in their eyes as a political group with steady ideas and program which was successfully completed. At the same time the intelligentsia, bourgeoisie, administration and the officers in the army accepted the treaty as national treason. This became one of the main motives for the Civil war.

It is very important to study closely the peace talks and the process which led to the signing of the document.

The disintegration of the state which started with the October revolution affected the whole society and structures. The army was heavily hit since April 1917 when the communists started to agitate against the officers and the

---

<sup>10</sup> New York Times: Documents prove Lenin and Trotzky hired by Germans, September 15, 1918 at – <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=980CE0DF123FE432A25756C1A96F9C946996D6CF>, 15. 09. 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Kennan G. F., "The Sisson Documents," *Journal of Modern History*, v. 28 (1956), 130–54; Axelrod, 166

supremacy of the central command over the soldier soviets. In fact in November the only armed structure which could support the Bolshevik government was the Red Guard which counted about 40 thousand people in the whole country. At the same time on the fields of the Great War Russians were fighting one of the most efficient combat machines – the German army.

At the end of 1917 the desertion from the Russian units became epidemic. All the fronts fell apart and the politicians had to decide what way out of the situation they will search.

This situation made the Bolsheviks start peace talks with the German command. They were held in three phases. The first one was from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 1917 when an agreement for armistices was reached. The German side proposed taking huge territories which were under its control and that led to serious clashes in the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party.

It is very important to note that the group led by Lenin was the smallest and lost the first two votes. During the discussions crystalized three main opinions. The first one was the one of Lenin who wanted immediate acceptance of the German proposal and end of the war. The other one was the one of Nikolay Bukharin – leader of the extreme left who wanted the continuation of the war and its transformation in revolutionary war which would conquer Europe. The third one was the position of Leon Trotsky. He proposed the Russians to stop fighting without any agreement with the enemy. According to him when the German soldiers would discover that their brothers in the opposite trenches has stopped the war they would turn against their own officers<sup>12</sup>.

As you see the only real opportunity was the Lenin's plan because the Russians did not have the forces to accomplish Bukharin's idea nor were so

---

<sup>12</sup> Троцкий Л. op. cit, p.

crazy to accept Trotsky's utopia. Never the less the only decision taken in December was to prolong the negotiations as much as possible<sup>13</sup>. The man who was assigned with that hard task was Trotsky as the foreign minister of the government.

He was successful until February 1918 when the German command started new offensive against St. Petersburg.

Several debates at the Central committee were again unfruitful until at last Lenin threatened his comrades that he will resign<sup>14</sup>. Only at the face of the risk to lose their most famous leader the Bolsheviks decided to support his position.

At that time the terms of the German side had become more severe. If Russians were to sign their country would loose 780 thousand square km. of territory and 56 million people. The richest provinces like Poland and Ukraine would be out of the Bolshevik state<sup>15</sup>.

Leon Trotsky signed the treaty on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1918. After that act he resigned as a Commissar of the foreign affairs and started a carrier in the newly formed Red Army.

The impact of these events around the world was enormous. The Entente decided to send troops in Russia. The first British soldiers arrived in Murmansk and Archangelsk in the summer of 1918<sup>16</sup>. Although they were thought to be a barrier against a German offensive eventually this forces became the core of the Northern front against the Reds in the Russian civil war.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Full text of the treaty – Мирный договор между Россией, с одной стороны, и Германией, Австро-Венгрией, Болгарией и Турцией — с другой, Документы внешней политики СССР, Москва 1959, т.1, с. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Kinvig C., Churchill's crusade : the British invasion of Russia, 1918–1920, Hambledon Continuum, New York 2006, p. 153.

So why did Lenin accept so easily the treaty, the humiliation and the breaking of the relations with the former allies.

On first hand he had in fact no other options. The only other possibility was to continue the fight against the Germans and to lose it with the whole revolution because Britain and France would never support the Bolsheviks. If we try to understand the thinking of the communist leaders we should have in mind that they were internationalists, so there was not such a thing as national treason for Lenin, despite that some of his close associates didn't show such "modern" thinking<sup>17</sup>.

The Bolsheviks were believing in the global revolution so the losing of some territories was not significant in short terms if it would lead to the success of the revolution as a whole. In this aspect Lenin even proved right because the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was denounced on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1918 when Germany broke relations with Bolshevik Russia.

France, Great Britain and the USA were convinced that the Bolsheviks are a threat so since 1917 worked hard against them. The stake that the Great powers made on the White movement in fact strengthened the positions of the communists. First they had tried to stop the war and now the foreign forces were dragging them into a new conflict.

Although the Bolsheviks were internationalists they did not hesitate to use the idea of national identity and the resistance against outside pressure. The strong anti-war movement in all Europe after the end of the global conflict made the continuing interference in the interior matters of Russia look unacceptable for the societies even in countries like France<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> Especially Trotsky who was aware how unpopular was the treaty and felt guilty that he had contributed for it.

<sup>18</sup> The riot in the French units in Odessa was one of the reasons for the command in Paris to decide the withdrawing.

There are several conclusions that I would like to enlighten.

On first place the Global conflict – The First World War made possible a marginal political group like the Bolsheviks to become factor with world significance. For this we can blame as much as the German command which obviously financed the revolution and the participants in the Entente who in the following civil war did not understand the inner circumstances in Russia and raised additional support for the communists.

If we look at the forming of the Bolsheviks ideology during the War we can see some really clear principles which were drive forward by them – the pacifism, internationalism and the right of self determination<sup>19</sup>. In the eyes of his contemporary fellow-citizens Lenin looked as a person who kept his promises and pursued his goals. Although we can blame him as a German spy it is very unclear who has taken best advantage from such a deal. The Bolshevik leader got the revolution. He gave Berlin the peace on the Eastern front but regained power and territory in just 5 years.

As we can see the time of the Great War was the most significant for the Bolsheviks because it shaped some of their main principles and in fact made possible the emerging of the whole new regime.

## **Bibliography:**

---

<sup>19</sup> Later these ideas became the base of the official Soviet diplomacy. At the same time it is clear that the principals were shifted and changed depending on the needs of the party and the State. We should always keep in mind that the Bolsheviks had unofficial, revolutionary diplomacy which was the other face of their foreign relations.

Kennan G. F., "The Sisson Documents," *Journal of Modern History*, v. 28 (1956).

Kinvig C., *Churchill's crusade : the British invasion of Russia, 1918-1920*, Hambledon Continuum, New York 2006.

New York Times: Documents prove Lenin and Trotzky hired by Germans, September 15, 1918 at - <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=980CE0DF123FE432A25756C1A96F9C946996D6CF>, 15. 09. 2013.

Trotsky, L. The Zimmerwald Conference Manifesto at - <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/zimmerwald/manifesto-1915.htm>, 15. 09. 2013.

Zimmerwald Conference 1915: Revolutionaries against the imperialist war at - [http://en.internationalism.org/wr/290\\_zimmerwald.html](http://en.internationalism.org/wr/290_zimmerwald.html), 15.09. 2013.

Декрет о мире, в Документы внешней политики СССР, Москва 1959, т.1.

Зазерский Е., Любарский А., Ленин. Эмиграция и Россия / Часть вторая, Москва 1975 at - [http://nounivers.narod.ru/bibl/zalb\\_24.htm](http://nounivers.narod.ru/bibl/zalb_24.htm), 15.09. 2013.

Ленин, В. И., Социализм и война, в Полное Собрание Сочинения, Москва 1969, т. 26.

Мельгунов С., Золотой немецкий ключ большевиков, Москва 1990.

Мирный договор между Россией, с одной стороны, и Германией, Австро-Венгрией, Болгарией и Турцией — с другой, Документы внешней политики СССР, Москва 1959.

Троцкий Л., Моя жизнь, Москва 2001.