

IS IT POSSIBLE TO FIX A DEFINITE TIME FOR A COUNTER- REVOLUTION OR A REVOLUTION ?

By L. TROTZKY

“ **O**F course it is not possible. It is only trains which start at certain times, and even they don't always . . . ”

Exactitude of thought is necessary everywhere, and in questions of revolutionary strategy more than anywhere else. But as revolutions do not occur so very often, revolutionary conceptions and thought processes become slipshod, their outlines become vague, the questions are raised anyhow and solved anyhow.

Mussolini brought off his “revolution” (that is, his counter-revolution) at a definitely fixed time made known publicly beforehand. He was able to do this successfully because the Socialists had not accomplished the revolution at the right time. The Bulgarian Fascists achieved their “revolution” by means of a military conspiracy, the date being fixed and the rôles assigned. The same was the case with the Spanish officers' *coup*. Counter-revolutionary *coups* are almost always carried out along these lines. They are usually attempted at a moment when the disappointment of the masses in revolution or democracy has taken the form of indifference, and a favourable political *milieu* is thus created for an organised and technically prepared *coup*, the date of which is definitely fixed beforehand. One thing is clear: it is not possible to create a political situation favourable for a reactionary upheaval by any artificial means, much less to fix a certain point of time for it. But when the basic elements of this situation already exist, then the leading party seizes the most favourable moment, as we have seen, adapts its political, organisational, and technical forces, and—if it has not miscalculated—deals the final and victorious blow.

The bourgeoisie has not always made counter-revolutions. In the past it also made revolutions. Did it fix any definite time for these revolutions? It would be interesting, and in many respects instructive, to investigate from this standpoint the development of the classic and of the decadent bourgeois revolutions (a subject for our young Marxist *savants!*), but even without such a detailed analysis it is possible to establish the following fundamentals of the question. The propertied and educated bourgeoisie, that is, that section of the "people" which gained power, did not make the revolution, but waited until it was made. When the movement among the lower strata brought the cup to overflowing, and the old social order or political regime was overthrown, then power fell almost automatically into the hands of the Liberal bourgeoisie. The Liberal *savants* designated such a revolution as a "natural," an inevitable revolution. They gathered together a mighty collection of platitudes under the name of historical laws: revolution and counter-revolution (according to M. Karajev of blessed memory—action and reaction) are declared to be natural products of historical evolution and therefore incapable of being arranged according to the calendar, and so forth. These laws have never prevented well prepared counter-revolutionary coups from being carried out. But the nebulousness of the bourgeois-liberal mode of thought sometimes finds its way into the heads of revolutionists, when it plays havoc and causes much material damage. . . .

But even bourgeois revolutions have not by any means invariably developed at every stage along the lines of the "natural" laws laid down by the Liberal professors; when petty bourgeois-plebeian democracy has overthrown Liberalism, it has done so by means of conspiracy and prepared insurrections, fixed beforehand for definite dates. This was done by the Jacobins—the extreme left wing of the French Revolution. This is perfectly comprehensible. The Liberal bourgeoisie (the French in the year 1789, the Russian in February, 1917) contents itself with waiting for the results of a mighty and elemental movement, in order to throw its wealth, its culture, and its connections with the State apparatus into the scale at the last moment and thus to seize the helm. Petty bourgeois democracy, under similar circumstances, has to

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proceed differently: it has neither wealth nor social influence and connections at its disposal. It finds itself obliged to replace these by a well thought out and carefully prepared plan of revolutionary overthrowal. A plan, however, implies a definite organisation in respect of time, and therefore also the fixing of a definite time.

This applies all the more to proletarian revolution. The Communist Party cannot adopt a waiting attitude in face of the growing revolutionary movement of the proletariat. Strictly speaking, this is the attitude taken by Menshevism: to hinder revolution so long as it is in process of development; to utilise its successes as soon as it is in any degree victorious; and to exert every effort to retard it. The Communist Party cannot seize power by utilising the revolutionary movement and yet standing aside, but by means of a direct and immediate political, organisational, and military-technical leadership of the revolutionary masses, both in the period of slow preparation and at the moment of decisive insurrection itself. For this reason the Communist Party has absolutely no use whatever for a Liberal law according to which revolutions happen but are not made, and therefore cannot be fixed for a definite point of time. From the standpoint of the spectator this law is correct; from the standpoint of the leader it is, however, a platitude and a banality.

Let us imagine a country in which the political conditions necessary for proletarian revolution are either already mature, or are obviously and distinctly maturing day by day. What attitude is to be taken under such circumstances by the Communist Party to the question of insurrection and the definite date on which it is to take place?

When the country is passing through an extraordinarily acute social crisis, when the antagonisms are aggravated to the highest degree, when feeling among the working masses is constantly at boiling point, when the Party is obviously supported by a certain majority of the working people, and consequently by all the most active, class-conscious, and devoted elements of the proletariat, then the task confronting the Party—its only possible task under these circumstances—is to fix a definite time in the immediate future, that is, a time prior to which the favourable revolutionary situation cannot react against us, and then to concentrate every

effort on the preparations for the final struggle, to place the whole current policy and organisation at the service of the military object in view, that the concentration of forces may justify the striking of the final blow.

To consider not merely an abstract country, let us take the Russian October revolution as an example. The country was in the throes of a great crisis, national and international. The State apparatus was paralysed. The workers streamed in ever-increasing numbers into our Party. From the moment when the Bolsheviki were in the majority in the Petrograd Soviet, and afterwards in the Moscow Soviet, the Party was faced with the question—not of the struggle for power in general, but of preparing for the seizure of power according to a definite plan and at a definite time. The date fixed was the day upon which the All-Russian Soviet Congress was to take place. One section of the members of the Central Committee was of the opinion that the moment of the insurrection should coincide with the political moment of the Soviet Congress. Other members of the Central Committee feared that the bourgeoisie would have made its preparations by then, and would be able to disperse the congress; these wanted to have the congress held at an earlier date. The decision of the Central Committee fixed the date of the armed insurrection for October 15 at latest. This decision was carried out with a certain delay of ten days, as the course of agitational and organisational preparations showed that an insurrection independent of the Soviet Congress would have sown misunderstanding among important sections of the working class, as these connected the idea of the seizure of power with the Soviets and not with the Party and its secret organisations. On the other hand, it was perfectly clear that the bourgeoisie was already too much demoralised to be able to organise any serious resistance for two or three weeks.

Thus, after the Party had gained the majority in the leading Soviets, and had in this way secured the basic political condition for the seizure of power, we were faced by the necessity of fixing a definite calendar date for the decision of the military question. Before we had won the majority, the organisational technical plan was bound to be more or less qualified and elastic. For us the gauge of our revolutionary influence was the Soviets which had

been called into existence by the Mensheviki and the Social Revolutionists at the beginning of the revolution. The Soviets furnished the cloak for our conspiratorial work; they were also able to serve as governmental organs after the actual seizure of power.

Where would our strategy have been if there had been no Soviets? It is obvious that we should have had to turn to other gauges of our revolutionary influence: the trade unions, strikes, street demonstrations, every description of democratic electioneering, &c. Although the Soviets represent the most accurate gauge of the actual activity of the masses during a revolutionary epoch, still even without the existence of the Soviets we should have been fully able to ascertain the precise moment at which the actual majority of the working class was on our side. Naturally, at this moment we should have had to issue the slogan of the formation of Soviets to the masses. But in doing this we should have already transferred the whole question to the plane of military conflicts; therefore before we issued the slogan on the formation of Soviets, we should have had to have a properly worked out plan for an armed insurrection at a certain fixed time.

If we had then had the majority of the working people on our side, or at least the majority in the decisive centres and districts, the formation of Soviets would have been secured by our appeal. The backward towns and provinces would have followed the leading centres with more or less delay. We should have then had the political task of establishing a Soviet Congress, and of securing for this congress by military measures the possibility of assuming power. It is clear that these are only two aspects of one and the same task.

Let us now imagine that our Central Committee, in the above described situation—that is, there being no Soviets in existence—had met for a decisive session in the period when the masses had already begun to move, but had not yet ensured us a clear and overwhelming majority. How should we then have developed our further plan of action? Should we have fixed a definite point of time for the insurrection?

The reply may be adduced from the above. We should have said to ourselves: At the present moment we have no certain and

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unqualified majority. But the trend of feeling among the masses is such that the decisive and militant majority necessary for us is merely a matter of the next few weeks. Let us assume that it will take a month to win over the majority of the workers in Petrograd, in Moscow, in the Donetz basin; let us set ourselves this task, and concentrate the necessary forces in these centres. As soon as the majority has been gained—and we shall ascertain if this be the case after a month has elapsed—we shall summon the workers to form Soviets. This will require one to two weeks at most for Petrograd, Moscow, and the Donetz basin; it may be calculated with certainty that the remaining towns and provinces will follow the example of the chief centres within the next two or three weeks. Thus, the construction of a network of Soviets will require about a month. After Soviets exist in the important districts, in which we have of course the majority, we shall convene an All-Russian Soviet Congress. We shall require fourteen days to assemble the congress. We have, therefore, two and a-half months at our disposal before the congress. In the course of this time the seizure of power must not only be prepared, but actually accomplished.

We should accordingly have placed before our military organisation a programme allowing two months, at most two and a-half, for the preparation of the insurrection in Petrograd, in Moscow, on the railways, &c. I am speaking in the conditional tense (we should have decided, we should have done this and that), for in reality, although our operations were by no means unskilful, still they were by no means so systematic, not because we were in any way disturbed by “historical laws,” but because we were carrying out a proletarian insurrection for the first time.

But are not miscalculations likely to occur by such methods? Seizure of power signifies war, and in war there can be victories and defeats. But the systematic method here described is the best and most direct road to the goal, that is, it most enhances the prospects of victory. Thus, for instance, should it have turned out, a month after the Central Committee session of our above adduced example, that we had not yet the majority of the workers on our side, then we should, of course, not have issued the slogan

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calling for the formation of Soviets, for in this case the slogan would have miscarried (in our example we assume that the Social Revolutionists and Mensheviki are against the Soviets). And had the reverse been the case, and we had found a decisive and militant majority behind us in the course of fourteen days, this would have abridged our plan and accelerated the decisive moment of insurrection. The same applies to the second and third stages of our plan: the formation of Soviets and the summoning of the Soviet Congress. We should not have issued the slogan of the Soviet Congress, as stated above, until we had secured the actual establishment of Soviets at the most important points. In this manner the realisation of every step in our plan is prepared and secured by the realisation of the preceding steps. The work of military preparation proceeds parallel with that of the most definitely dated performance. In this way the Party has its military apparatus under complete control. To be sure, a revolution always brings much that is entirely unexpected, unforeseen, elemental; we have, of course, to allow for the occurrence of all these "accidents" and adapt ourselves to them; but we can do this with the greater success and certainty if our conspiracy is thoroughly worked out.

Revolution possesses a mighty power of improvisation, but it never improvises anything good for fatalists, idlers, and fools. Victory demands correct political orientation, organisation, and the will to deal the decisive blow.

THE FRENCH PRESS AND TSARIST RUSSIA

By T. L.

WHEN the present Russian Government came into power in 1917, one of its first acts was to search the offices of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for the secret treaties concluded during the war, which were duly published and have been brought to the notice of readers of the British Labour Press.

A second task, immediately undertaken but delayed by the conditions of civil war which supervened, was that of searching the State archives for documents showing the origin of the war of 1914. This task was interrupted by the enforced removal, during 1918, of many of the archives which were in Petrograd to the present capital, Moscow. The Russian historians who were engaged in this research were helped by M. René Marchand, at one time Russian correspondent of the *Figaro* and the *Petit Parisien*, a journalist of undoubted honesty.

M. René Marchand printed some of the documents discovered in these archives in the *Livre Noir*, the second volume of which was published in Paris this last autumn. The most important documents given were the letters of Isvolsky, at one time Russian Ambassador in Paris, to the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs. Among the facts proved by this detailed correspondence was the expenditure of considerable sums of money (particularly during the Balkan wars) by the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs in order to influence the policy of the French Press.

The effect of these revelations in Paris was very considerable. The light they threw on the origin of the war secured for them a certain publicity in Labour and pacifist papers in this country, but the payments to the French Press were not widely noticed. Meanwhile the Russian archives were still being searched by students of history, and the Ministry of Finances was being investigated. From these *dossiers* new material on the French Press has been taken, which shows that the majority of the papers not only