

The Russian Revolution and the Soviet Government: Letter to the Workers of Western Europe

Pëtr Kropotkin

1919

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Dmitrov, Russia,

April 28, 1919

I have been asked if I did not have a message for the workers of the western world. Certainly there is plenty to say and learn of the actual events in Russia. As the message would have to be long to cover all, I will indicate only the principal points.

First, the workers of the civilized world and their friend in other classes ought to prevail on their governments to abandon entirely the idea of armed intervention in Russia whether openly or secretly. Russia is undergoing now a revolution of the same extent and importance as England underwent in 1639 to '48, and France in 1789 to '94. Every nation should refuse to play the shameful role played by England, Prussia, Austria and Russia during the French Revolution.

Further, it must be borne in mind that the Russian Revolution — which is trying to build a society in which all productive work, technical ability and scientific knowledge will be entirely communal — is not a mere accident in the struggle of contending parties. It was prepared by almost a century of socialist and communist propaganda, since the days of Robert Owen, Saint Simon and Fourier. And although the effort to introduce the new social system by means of a party dictatorship is apparently condemned to failure, it must be recognized that already the revolution has introduced into our daily lives new conceptions of the rights of labor, its rightful place in society and the duties of each citizen, — and that they will endure.

Not only the workers, but all the progressive forces in the civilized world should put an end to the support given until now to the enemies of the revolution. Not that there is nothing to oppose in the methods of the Bolshevik government. Far from it! But all foreign armed intervention necessarily strengthens the dictatorial tendencies of the government, and paralyzes the efforts of those Russians who are ready to aid Russia, independently of the government, in the restoration of its life.

The evils inherent in a party dictatorship have been accentuated by the conditions of war in which this party maintains its power. This state of war has been the pretext for strengthening dictatorial methods which centralize the control of every detail of life in the hands of the government, with the effect of stopping an immense part of the ordinary activities of the country. The evils natural to state communism have been increased ten-fold under the pretext that all our misery is due to foreign intervention.

I should also point out that if Allied military intervention continues, it will certainly develop in Russia a bitter feeling toward the western nations, a feeling which will be used some day in future conflicts. That bitterness is always developing.

In short, it is high time that the nations of Europe enter into direct relations with the Russian nation. And from this point of view, you — the working class and the progressive elements of all nations — should have your word to say.

A word more on the general question. The re-establishment of relations between the European and American nations and Russia does not mean the supremacy of the Russian nation over the nationalities that composed the Czarist Empire. Imperialist Russia is dead and will not be revived. The future of these different provinces lies in a great federation. The natural territories of the various parts of this federation are quite distinct, as those of us familiar with Russian history and ethnography well know. All efforts to reunite under a central control the naturally separate parts of the Russian Empire are predestined to failure. It is therefore fitting that the western nations should recognize the right of independence of each part of the old Russian Empire.

My opinion is that this development will continue. I see the time coming when each part of this federation will be itself a federation of rural communes and free cities. And I believe also that certain parts of western Europe will soon follow the same course.

As to our present economic and political situation, the Russian revolution, being a continuation of the great revolutions of England and France, is trying to reach the point where the French revolution stopped before it succeeded in creating what they called “equality in fact,” that is, economic equality.

Unhappily, this effort has been made in Russia under a strongly centralized party dictatorship. This effort was made in the same way as the extremely centralized and Jacobin endeavor of Baboeuf. I owe it to you to say frankly that, according to my view, this effort to build a communist republic on the basis of a strongly centralized state communism under the iron law of party dictatorship is bound to end in failure. We are learning to know in Russia how not to introduce communism, even with a people tired of the old regime and opposing no active resistance to the experiments of the new rulers.

The idea of soviets, that is to say, of councils of workers and peasants, conceived first at the time of the revolutionary attempt in 1905, and immediately realized by the revolution of February, 1917, as soon as Czarism was overthrown, — the idea of such councils controlling the economic and political life of the country is a great idea. All the more so, since it necessarily follows that these councils should be composed of all who take a real part in the production of national wealth by their own efforts.

But as long as the country is governed by a party dictatorship, the workers’ and peasants’ councils evidently lose their entire significance. They are reduced to the passive role formerly played by the “States General,” when they were convoked by the king and had to combat an all-powerful royal council.

A council of workers ceases to be free and of any use when liberty of the press no longer exists, and we have been in that condition for two years, — under a pretext that we are in a state of war. But more still. The workers' and peasants' councils lose their significance when the elections are not preceded by a free electoral campaign, and when the elections are conducted under pressure by a party dictatorship. Naturally, the usual excuse is that a dictatorship is inevitable in order to combat the old regime. But such a state of affairs is evidently a step backwards, since the revolution is committed to the construction of a new society on a new economic base. It means the death-knell of the new system.

The methods of overthrowing an already enfeebled government are well known to ancient and modern history. But when it is necessary to create new forms of life, especially new forms of production and exchange, without having examples to imitate; when everything must be constructed anew; when a government which undertakes to furnish every citizen with a lamp and even the match to light it, and then cannot do it even with a limitless number of officials, — that government becomes a nuisance. It develops a bureaucracy so formidable that the French bureaucracy, which requires the help of forty officials to sell a tree broken down by a storm on the national highway, is a mere bagatelle in comparison. That is what we are learning in Russia. And that is what you workers of the west should avoid by every means, since you have at heart the success of a real social reconstruction. Send your delegates here to see how a social revolution is working in real life.

The immense constructive work demanded by a social revolution cannot be accomplished by a central government, even if it had to guide it something more substantial than a few socialist and anarchist hand-books. It has need of knowledge, of brains and of the voluntary collaboration of a host of local and specialized forces which alone can attack the diversity of economic problems in their local aspects. To reject this collaboration and to turn everything over to the genius of party dictators is to destroy the independent center of our life, the trade unions and the local cooperative organizations, by changing them into bureaucratic organs of the party, as is the case at this time. That is the way not to accomplish the revolution, to make its realization impossible. And that is why I consider it my duty to put you on guard against borrowing any such methods ...

The late war has brought about new conditions of life for the whole civilized world. Socialism will certainly make considerable progress, and new forms of more independent life will be created based on local autonomy and free initiative. They will be created either peacefully, or by revolutionary means.

But the success of this reconstruction will depend in great part on the possibility of direct cooperation between the different peoples. To achieve that, it is necessary that the working classes of all nations should be directly united and that the idea of a great international of all the workers of the world should be taken up again,

but not in the form of a union directed by a single political party, as in the case of the Second and Third Internationals. Such unions have of course plenty of reason to exist, but outside of them, and uniting all, there should be a union of all the workers' organizations of the world, federated to deliver world production from its present subjection to capitalism.

What to do?

The revolution we have gone through is the sum total, not of the efforts of separate individuals, but a *natural phenomenon, independent of the human will*, a natural phenomenon similar to a typhoon such as rises suddenly on the coasts of Eastern Asia.

Thousands of causes, in which the work of separate individuals and even of parties has been only a grain of sand, one of the minute local whirlwinds, have contributed to form the great natural phenomenon, the great catastrophe which shall either renew, or destroy; or perhaps both destroy and renew.

All of us prepared this great inevitable change. But it was also prepared by all the previous revolutions of 1793, 1848- 1871; by all the writings of the Jacobins, socialists; by all the achievements of science, industry, art and so on. In a word, millions of natural causes have contributed just in the same way as millions of movements of particles of air or water cause the sudden storm which sinks hundreds of ships or destroys thousands of houses — as the trembling of the earth in an earthquake is caused by thousands of small tremors and by the preparatory movements of separate particles.

In general, people do not see events concretely, solidly. They think more in words than in clearly-imagined pictures, and they have absolutely no idea what a revolution is, — of those many millions of causes which have gone to give it its present form, — and they are therefore inclined to exaggerate the importance in the progress of the revolution of their personality and of that attitude which they, their friends and co-thinkers will take up in this enormous upheaval. And of course they are absolutely incapable of understanding how powerless is any individual, whatever his intelligence and experience, in this whirlpool of hundreds of thousands of forces which have been put into motion by the upheaval.

They do not understand that once such a great natural phenomenon has begun, such as an earthquake, or, rather, such as a typhoon, separate individuals are powerless to exercise any kind of influence on the course of events. A party perhaps can do something, — far less than is usually thought, — and on the surface of the oncoming waves, its influence may, perhaps, be very slightly noticeable. But sepa-

rate small aggregations not forming a fairly large mass are undoubtedly powerless — their Powers are certainly *nil*

It is in this position that I, an anarchist, find myself. But even parties of far greater numbers in Russia at the present moment are in a very similar position.

I will even go farther; the governing party itself is in the same position. It no longer governs, it is being carried along by the current which it helped to create but which is now already a thousand times stronger than the party itself...

What is then to be done?

We are experiencing a revolution which has advanced not at all along those ways which we had prepared for it, but which we had no time to prepare sufficiently. What is to be done now?

To prevent the revolution? Absurd!

Too late. The revolution will advance in its own way, in the direction of the least resistance, without paying the least attention to our efforts.

At the present moment the Russian revolution is in the following position. It is perpetrating horrors. It is ruining the whole country. In its mad fury it is annihilating human lives. That is why it is a revolution and not a peaceful progress, because it is destroying without regarding what it destroys and whither it goes.

And we are powerless for the present to direct it into another channel, until such time as it will have played itself out. It must wear itself out.

And then? *Then — inevitably will come a reaction.* Such is the law of history, and it is easy to understand why this cannot be otherwise. People imagine that we can change the form of development of a revolution. That is a childish illusion. A revolution is such a force that its growth cannot be changed. *And a reaction is absolutely inevitable,* just as a hollow in the water is inevitable after every wave, as weakness is inevitable in a human being after a period of feverish activity.

Therefore the only thing we can do is to use our energy to lessen the fury and force of the oncoming reaction.

But of what can our efforts consist?

To modify the passions — on one as on the other side? Who is likely to listen to us? Even if there exist such diplomats as can do anything in this role, the time for their debut has not yet come; neither the one nor the other side is as yet disposed to listen to them. I see one thing; we must gather together people *who will be capable of undertaking constructive work in each and every party after the revolution has worn itself out.*

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