

Reply to P. Kievsky (Y. Pyatakov)¹

Like every crisis in the life of individuals or in the history of nations, war oppresses and breaks some, steels and enlightens others.

The truth of that is making itself felt in Social-Democratic thinking on the war and in connection with the war. It is one thing to give serious thought to the causes and significance of an imperialist war that grows out of highly developed capitalism, Social-Democratic tactics in connection with such a war, the causes of the crisis within the Social-Democratic movement, and so on. But it is quite another to allow the war to *oppress* your thinking, to stop thinking and analysing *under the weight* of the terrible impressions and tormenting consequences or features of the war.

One such form of *oppression* or *repression* of human thinking caused by the war is the contemptuous attitude of imperialist Economism towards *democracy*. P. Kievsky does not notice that running like a red thread through all his arguments is this war-inspired oppression, this fear, this refusal to analyse. What point is there in discussing defence of the fatherland when we are in the midst of such a terrible holocaust? What point is there in discussing nations' rights when outright strangulation is everywhere the rule? Self-determination and "independence" of nations—but look what they have done to "independent" Greece! What is the use of talking and thinking of "rights", when rights are everywhere being trampled upon in the interests of the militarists! What sense is there in talking and thinking of a republic, when there is absolutely no difference whatsoever between the most democratic republics and the most reactionary monarchies, when the war has obliterated every trace of difference!

Kievsky is very angry when told that he has given way to fear, to the extent of rejecting democracy in general. He is angry and objects: I am not against democracy, only against *one* democratic demand, which I consider "bad". But though Kievsky is offended, and though he "*assures*" us (and himself as well, perhaps) that he is not at all "against" democracy, his *arguments*—or, more correctly, the endless *errors* in his arguments—*prove* the very opposite.

Defence of the fatherland is a lie in an imperialist war, but not in a democratic and revolutionary war. All talk of "rights" seems absurd during a war, because *every* war replaces rights by direct and outright violence. But that should not lead us to forget that history has known in the past (and very likely will know, must know, in the future) wars

(democratic and revolutionary wars) which, while replacing every kind of “right”, every kind of democracy, by violence during the war, nevertheless, in their social content and implications, *served* the cause of democracy, and *consequently* socialism. The example of Greece, it would seem, “refutes” all national self-determination. But if you stop to think, analyse and weigh matters, and do not allow yourself to be deafened by the sound of words or frightened and oppressed by the nightmarish impressions of the war, then this example is no more serious or convincing than ridiculing the republican system because the “democratic” republics, the most democratic—not only France, but also the United States, Portugal and Switzerland—have already introduced or are introducing, in the course of this war, exactly the same kind of militarist arbitrariness that exists in Russia.

That imperialist war obliterates the difference between republic and monarchy is a fact. But to therefore reject the republic, or even be contemptuous towards it, is to allow oneself to be frightened by the war, and one’s thinking to be *oppressed* by its horrors. That is the mentality of many supporters of the “disarmament” slogan (Roland-Holst, the younger element in Switzerland, the Scandinavian “Lefts”² and others). What, they imply, is the use of discussing revolutionary utilisation of the army or a militia when there is no difference in this war between a republican militia and a monarchist standing army, and when militarism is *everywhere* doing its horrible work?

That is all *one* trend of thought, *one and the same* theoretical and practical political error Kievsky unwitting, makes at every step. He *thinks* he is arguing only against self-determination, he *wants* to argue only against self-determination, but the *result*—against his will and conscience, and that is the curious thing!—is that he has adduced *not a single* argument which could not be just as well applied to democracy in general!

The real source of all his curious logical errors and confusion—and this applies not only to self-determination, but also to defence of the fatherland, divorce, “rights” in general—lies in the *oppression* of his thinking by the war, which makes him completely distort the Marxist position on democracy.

Imperialism is highly developed capitalism; imperialism is progressive; imperialism is the negation of democracy—“hence”, democracy is “unattainable” under capitalism. Imperialist war is a flagrant violation of all democracy, whether in backward monarchies or progressive republics—“hence”, there is no point in talking of

“rights” (i.e., democracy!). The “only” thing that can be “opposed” to imperialist war is socialism; socialism alone is “the way out”; “hence”, to advance democratic slogans in our minimum programme, i.e., under capitalism, is a deception or an illusion, befuddlement or postponement, etc., of the slogan of socialist revolution.

Though Kievsky does not realise it, that is the real source of all his mishaps. That is his *basic* logical error which, precisely because it is basic and is not realised by the author, “*explodes*” at every step like a punctured bicycle tire. It “bursts out” now on the question of defending the fatherland, now on the question of divorce, now in the phrase about “rights”, in this remarkable phrase (remarkable for its utter contempt for “rights” and its utter failure to understand the issue): we shall discuss *not* rights, *but* the destruction of age-old slavery!

To say that is to show a lack of understanding of the relationship between capitalism and democracy, between socialism and democracy.

Capitalism in general, and imperialism in particular, turn democracy into an illusion—though at the same time capitalism engenders democratic aspirations in the masses, creates democratic institutions, aggravates the antagonism between imperialism’s denial of democracy and the mass striving for democracy. Capitalism and imperialism can be overthrown only by economic revolution. They cannot be overthrown by democratic transformations, even the most “ideal”. But a proletariat not schooled in the struggle for democracy is incapable of performing an economic revolution. Capitalism cannot be vanquished without *taking over the banks*, without repealing *private ownership* of the means of production. These revolutionary measures, however, cannot be implemented without organising the entire people for democratic administration of the means of production captured from the bourgeoisie, without enlisting the entire mass of the working people, the proletarians, semi-proletarians and small peasants, for the democratic organisation of their ranks, their forces, their participation in state affairs. Imperialist war may be said to be a triple negation of democracy (*a.* every war replaces “rights” by violence; *b.* imperialism as such is the negation of democracy; *c.* imperialist war fully equates the republic with the monarchy), but the awakening and growth of socialist revolt against imperialism are *indissolubly* linked with the growth of democratic resistance and unrest. Socialism leads to the withering away of *every* state, consequently also of every democracy, but socialism can be implemented

only *through* the dictatorship of the proletariat, which combines violence against the bourgeoisie, i.e., the minority of the population, with *full* development of democracy, i.e., the genuinely equal and genuinely universal participation of the *entire* mass of the population in all *state* affairs and in all the complex problems of abolishing capitalism.

It is in these “contradictions” that Kievsky, having forgotten the Marxist teaching on democracy, got himself confused. Figuratively speaking, the war has so oppressed his thinking that he uses the agitational slogan “break out of imperialism” to replace all thinking, just as the cry “get out of the colonies” is used to replace analysis of what, properly speaking, is the *meaning*—economically and politically—of the civilised nations “getting out of the colonies”.

The Marxist solution of the problem of democracy is for the proletariat to *utilise all* democratic institutions and aspirations in its class struggle against the bourgeoisie in order to prepare for its overthrow and assure its own victory. Such utilisation is no easy task. To the Economists, Tolstoyans, etc., it often seems an unpardonable concession to “bourgeois” and opportunist views, just as to Kievsky defence of national self-determination “in the epoch of finance capital” seems an unpardonable concession to bourgeois views. Marxism teaches us that to “fight opportunism” by renouncing utilisation of the democratic institutions created and distorted by the bourgeoisie of the *given*, capitalist, society is to *completely surrender* to opportunism!

The slogan of *civil war* for socialism indicates the quickest way out of the imperialist war and *links* our struggle against the war with our struggle against opportunism. It is the only slogan that correctly takes into account both war-time peculiarities—the war is dragging out and threatening to grow into a whole “epoch” of war—and the general character of our activities as distinct from opportunism with its pacifism, legalism and adaptation to one’s “own” bourgeoisie. In addition, civil war against the bourgeoisie is a *democratically* organised and *democratically* conducted war of the propertyless mass against the propertied minority. But civil war, like every other, must inevitably replace rights by violence. However, violence in the name of the interests and rights of the majority is of a different nature: it tramples on the “rights” of the exploiters, the bourgeoisie, it is *unachievable* without democratic organisation of the army and the “rear”. Civil war forcibly expropriates, immediately and first of all, the banks, factories, railways, the big estates, etc. But *in order* to

expropriate all this, we shall have to introduce election of all officials and officers by the people, *completely merge* the army conducting the war against the bourgeoisie with the mass of the population, completely democratise administration of the food supply, the production and distribution of food, etc. The object of civil war is to seize the banks, factories, etc., destroy all possibility of resistance by the bourgeoisie, destroy *its* armed forces. But that aim cannot be achieved *either* in its purely military, *or* economic, *or* political aspects, unless we, during the war, simultaneously introduce and extend democracy among *our* armed forces and in *our* “rear”. We tell the masses now (and they instinctively feel that we are right): “They are deceiving you in making you fight for imperialist capitalism in a war disguised by the great slogans of democracy. You must, you shall wage a *genuinely* democratic war *against* the bourgeoisie for the achievement of genuine democracy and socialism.” The present war unites and “merges” nations into coalitions by means of violence and financial dependence. In our civil war against the bourgeoisie, *we* shall unite and merge the nations *not* by the force of the ruble, *not* by the force of the truncheon, not by violence, but by *voluntary* agreement and solidarity of the working people against the exploiters. For the bourgeoisie the proclamation of equal rights for all nations has become a deception. For us it will be the truth that will facilitate and accelerate the winning over of all nations. Without effectively organised *democratic* relations between nations—and, consequently, without freedom of secession—civil war of the workers and working people generally of all nations against the bourgeoisie is *impossible*.

Through utilisation of bourgeois democracy to socialist and consistently democratic organisation of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and against opportunism. There is no other path. There is *no* other way out. Marxism, just as life itself, knows no other way out. In this path we must include free secession and free merging of nations, we must not fight shy of them, not fear that they will “defile” the “purity” of our economic aims.

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Notes

1. This article was written in reply to one by Y. L. Pyatakov (P. Kievsky), "The Proletariat and the "Right of Nations to Self-Determination, in the Era of Finance Capital" (August 1916). The manuscript bears Lenin's marginal note: "Kievsky's article on self-determination and Lenin's reply." Both articles were meant for No. 3 of *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata*. Somewhat later, Lenin wrote another article in reply to Kievsky, "A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism". Due to financial difficulties, No. 3 was not published and the articles did not appear in print. Lenin's article, however, was widely known in manuscript to Bolsheviks living abroad and to a number of Left Social-Democrats.

2. Lenin is alluding to the article "Miliz oder Abrüstung?" ("Militia or Disarmament?") by Henriette Roland-Holst, a Left-wing Dutch Social-Democrat, in the Swiss Social-Democratic journal *Neues Leben* (New Life) No. 10-11 (October-November) and No. 12 (December) 1915. In referring to the Swiss young Social-Democrats, Lenin had in view chiefly the magazine *Jugend-Internationale* (The Youth International), organ of the International League of Socialist Youth Organisations, published in Switzerland; it spoke for the Left forces in the Swiss Social-Democratic Party. Issue No. 3 of the magazine carried an editorial "Volksheer oder Entwaffnung?" ("A People's Army or Disarmament?"). The attitude of the Scandinavian (Swedish and Norwegian) Left Social-Democrats on this issue was set out in articles by Karl Kilbom, "Swedish Social-Democracy and the World War", and Arvid Hansen, "Certain Aspects of the Present-Day Norwegian Labour Movement", both of which appeared in *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata* No. 2.

Lenin discusses the "disarmament" slogan in "The Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution" and "The 'Disarmament' Slogan".

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