

1925

THE COMMUNIST MISTAKE.

EXTRACTS FROM
THE DIARY OF A DISILLUSIONED
REVOLUTIONIST.



Price - - 3d.

THE FREEDOM ASSOCIATION,
Amberley House,
Norfolk Street,
Strand,
W.C.2.

Box 1

F

THE COMMUNIST MISTAKE.

EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF A DISILLUSIONED REVOLUTIONIST.

No one who does not bury his head in the sand like an ostrich can be blind to the fact that there is a strong and growing movement towards the "left." Big changes have already taken place since the war period, and bigger ones are likely to take place in the near future. They are in the direction of a new political, economic and social order.

That is the meaning of the growing influence of the Communist Party, and that is why it exerts influence out of all proportion to its numbers. The people want change to a better social order, and the Communists put forward proposals for a complete revolution with a force which the official Labour Party now lacks; and so, amongst those who desire change, it is becoming daily a more accepted proposition that they must throw in their lot more or less with the Communist Party—the choice, it seems to them, is between the acceptance of that party and the continuance of the existing conditions of life. It is time, therefore, to consider whether the Communist Party is the one which the people should accept.

That the spokesmen of this party should say much that is attractive, should promise much of the things which people, sick of the existing order, are longing for, goes without saying. But that is not enough. Politicians and propagandists cannot be taken at their face value. By their works you should know them; and in regard to the Communist Party there are works by which we may know them. That Party has established itself in Russia. The revolution of February, 1917, and the attendant and ensuing circumstances had brought that vast country into a chaotic

condition. This condition and the revolution the Communist Party, few though its members were—much less than half a million out of a population of something like 137 millions—exploited to the full. It seized the reins of government, and has held them ever since. We may well go to Russia, therefore, in order to find whether the Communist Party is worthy of support. And let us go in the company of a Revolutionist—a man who, deported from the United States, landed in Russia full of hope and joy, more than ready to see the best side of the revolution, ardently hoping to work for it. Such a man was Alexander Berkman, and the result of two years spent by him in Russia has been published in America in a book called “The Bolshevik Myth.” It is a sort of diary relating his experiences. We will give some extracts from it, premising, of course, that there may be inaccuracies and exaggeration in the record: that we do not know; but, allowing for these possible defects, the record, nevertheless, bears the stamp of substantial truthfulness.

INEQUALITY.

The first principle of real Communism is equal enjoyment of the good things of life. Mr. Berkman had been a very short time on Soviet soil when he learned that the rulers of Russia who were governing under the name of Communism were not giving a very clear exhibition of the communist principle of equality. Under the date of 21st January, 1920, he records a visit to the Smolny in Petrograd, where Zinoviev was installed in “a large chamber sumptuously furnished.” He dined at the Smolny and writes:—

“The dinner was much superior to the meals served in the public *stolovaya*. ‘Only the responsible workers, Communists holding important positions, dine here,’ Zorin remarked. There are several gradations of *pyock* (rations), he explained. Soldiers and sailors receive one and a half pounds of bread per day; also sugar, salt, tobacco, and meat when possible. The factory workers get one pound; while the non-producers—most of them intelligentsia—receive half a pound and even less. There is no discrimination about this system, Zorin believes; it is just division, according to the value of one’s work.

“I believe Vera’s remark. ‘Russia is very poor,’ she said; ‘but whatever there is, all should share alike. That would be justice, and no one could complain.’” (pp. 26-37).

Some of the most pathetic pages of this book illustrate the inequality prevailing under the Soviet rule. Here is a rather long extract, but it is worth giving in full:—

“We entered a large, beautiful apartment containing fine furniture, china, and paintings. One person occupied the five rooms, the smallest of which, of comfortable size, my friend had secured by recommendation. ‘A big speculator with powerful connections,’ he remarked.

“An appetizing odor of things frying and baking pervaded the house. From the adjoining room the sound of voices reached us, loud and hilarious. I heard the clatter of dishes and clinking of wine glasses.

“‘*Na vashe zdorovie* (your health), Piotr Ivanovitch.’

“‘*Na zdorovie! Na zdorovie!*’ half a dozen voices shouted.

“‘Did you hear?’ my friend whispered, as there came the popping of a cork. ‘Champagne.’

“There was another pop, and then another. The talking grew louder, the laughter more boisterous, and then some one began reciting in a hoarse, hiccoughy voice.

“‘Demian Bedni,’ K—— exclaimed. ‘I know his voice well.’

“Demian Bedni, the popular poet the Communist papers eulogize?’

“‘The same’

“We went out into the street.

“Fresh snow had fallen. On the slippery sidewalk people were jostling and pushing about, walking hunched up to keep out the bitter cold. At the Theatralnaia Square, near the railway ticket office, dark shadows stood in a long queue, some leaning against the wall, as if asleep. The office was closed, but they would remain on the street all night to guard their place in line, on the chance of securing a ticket.

“On the corner stood a little boy. ‘Who’ll buy, who’ll buy?’ he mumbled mechanically, offering cigarettes for sale. An old man of lean, ascetic face, was heavily pulling a small log tied to his arm with a string. The wood slid from side to side on the uneven ground, now striking against the sidewalk, now getting caught in a hole. Presently the cord broke. With numbed fingers the man tried to tie the pieces, but the string kept falling from his hands. People hurried by with rarely a glance at the old figure in the frayed summer coat bending over his treasure. ‘May I help you?’ I asked. He gave me a suspicious, frightened look, putting his foot on the wood. ‘Have no fear,’ I reassured him, as I knotted the string and stepped back.

"How can I thank you, dear man; how can I thank you!" he murmured.

"The girl was waiting for me, and I accompanied her home, on the other side of the Moskva River. Up a dark, crooked stairway that creaked piteously under our feet, she led me to her room. She lit a sputtering candle, and I gradually began to discern things. The place was entirely bare, save for two small cots, the space between them and the opposite wall just big enough for a person to pass through. Seeing no chair about, I sat down on the bed. Something moved under the rags that covered it, and I quickly jumped up. 'Don't mind,' the girl said, 'it's mother and baby brother.' From the other bed rose a curly head. 'Lena, did you bring me something?' a boyish voice asked.

"The girl took a chunk of black bread from her coat pocket, broke off a small piece and gave it to the boy. 'Mother is paralyzed,' she turned to me, 'and Masha is now also sick.' She pointed to the cot where the curly-headed boy lay. I saw that two were there.

"Does he go to school?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

"No, Yasha can't go. He has no shoes. They're all in tatters."

"I told her of the fine schools I had visited in the morning, and of the chicken dinner served to the children. 'Oh yes,' she said bitterly, 'They are *pokazatelniya* (show schools). What chance has Yasha to go there? There are several like that in the city, and they are warm, and the children well fed. But the others are different. Yasha has frozen his fingers in his school. It's better at home for him. It's not heated here either; we've had no wood all winter. But he can stay in bed; it's warmer so.'

"I thought of the big apartment I had left an hour before—of the appetizing odors, the popping of champagne corks

"Why so silent?" Lena asked. 'Tell me something about America. I have a brother there, and maybe you know some way I could get to him. We've been living like this two years now. I can't stand it any longer.'

"She sat by me, the picture of despair. 'I can't go on like this,' she repeated. 'I can't steal. Must I sell my body to live?'" (pp. 84-86).

Here is another extract, taken from the diary of fifteen months later:—

"In the Hotel Luxe, palatial hostelry of the capital, are quartered the influential representatives of the foreign Communist parties. The street in front is lined with automobiles; I recognize the Royce of Karakhan and Zinoviev's machine from the garages of the Kremlin. Frequent tours are arranged to places of historic interest and Bolshevik meccas, always under the guidance of attendants and interpreters

selected by the Tcheka. Within there is an atmosphere of feverish activity. The brilliant banquet hall is crowded. The velvety cushions and bright foliage of the smoking room are restful to the delegates of the Western proletariat.

"On the sidewalk opposite the Hotel women and children lurk in the hallways. Furtively they watch the soldiers unloading huge loaves of bread from a truck. A few chunks have fallen to the ground—the urchins dart under the wagon in a mad scramble

"The more reflective among the delegates are disturbed. Life in revolutionary Russia is too reminiscent of home; some are well-fed and well-clad, others hungry and in rags; the wage system continues, and all things can be bought and sold." (pp. 310-311).

FRATERNITY.

With Equality, in Communism, should be Fraternity; but the official Russian exhibition of fraternity seems to leave something to be desired. True, the conditions of the time were difficult—one must always make allowance for the Communists' difficulties—but after more than two years of official Communism one would think that greater fraternity than is exhibited in the following extract might have been developed. Mr. Berkman was asked to go from Petrograd to Moscow as interpreter with Messrs. Lansbury and Barry, of the London *Daily Herald*. He writes thus of the journey:—

"The cars were crowded with soldiers and Soviet officials. During the night many travellers boarded our train. There was much shouting and cursing, and the plaintive cries of children. Then sudden silence, and an imperious command: 'Get off, you devils. You don't belong here . . .' We were in the special coach reserved for high Bolshevik officials and foreign guests. It was lit by candles, had upholstered couches, and was comparatively clean. The rest of the train consisted of third-class cars, containing double tiers of wooden benches, and of some *teplushki* (freight cars) used for passenger traffic, without light or heat, incredibly crowded and filthy." (pp. 42 and 43).

PERSECUTION OF NON-COMMUNISTS.

But this rough treatment of the unprivileged comrades is a minor matter compared with the cold-shouldering, the persecution, the imprisonment, even the killing of men and women, equally revolutionists

with the Communists, but happening to belong to some other school of thought, or just independent of any party; and of this negation of brotherhood the book is full. Mr. Berkman, himself an Anarchist, was soon made acquainted with this aspect of Communist rule. The Anarchist headquarters, he learned, had been—

“attacked without warning by Bolshevik artillery and machine guns, and the Club dissolved. Since then persecution of the Left parties has continued intermittently, in spite of the fact that many of their members are at the front, while others are co-operating with the Communists in various Government institutions.” (pp. 69).

LIBERTY AND LENIN.

Very interesting is Mr. Berkman's record of a conversation with Lenin under date of 9th March, 1920. Here is a short extract:—

“Liberty,” he [Lenin] said, “is a luxury not to be permitted at the present stage of development. When the revolution is out of danger, external and domestic, then free speech might be indulged in. The current conception of liberty is a bourgeois prejudice, to say the least. Petty middle-class ideology confuses revolution with liberty.” (pp. 90 and 91).

The book is full of this trampling upon the liberty of the Russians.

DICTATORSHIP.

Here is an extract from an account of a visit made by Mr. Berkman to the Latvian border, to a place called Sebez:—

“The red-bearded Jew sat in silence, with gentle motion lulling one of the children to sleep in his lap. The young peasant complained of the *razsvyorstka*, which had taken everything from his village; his last horse was gone. Spring was at the door, and how should he plough or sow with no cattle in the whole place? His three brothers were drafted, and he remained alone, a widower, with two small children to feed. But for the kindness of his neighbour's wife the little ones would have perished long ago. ‘There's much injustice in the world,’ he sighed, ‘and peasants are treated badly. What can they do? They have no control of the village Soviet; the *kombed* (Committee of Poverty organized by the Bolsheviks) carries on with a merciless hand, and the common *muzhik* is afraid to speak his mind, for he'd be reported by some Communist and dragged off to prison.’

“‘Seeing you are not a Communist I can tell you how we suffer,’ he continued. ‘The peasants are worse off now than before; they live in constant dread lest a Communist come and take away their last loaf. Tchekists of the *Ossobyi Otdel* enter a house and order the women to put everything on the table, and then they ride away with it. They don't care if the children go hungry. Who would plant under such masters? But the peasant has learned something; he must bury in the ground what he wants to save from the robbers . . .’” (p. 106).

“‘We were treated like cattle before,’ said a flaxen-haired peasant with blue eyes, ‘and it was in the name of the Little Father. Now they speak to us in the name of the Party and the proletariat, but we are treated like cattle, the same as before.’” (p. 107.)

DELUDING BRITISH LABOUR REPRESENTATIVES.

In May, 1920, Mr. Ben Turner's Labour Mission arrived in Petrograd, and Mr. Berkman was attached to it as an interpreter. In this position he had to interpret a speech made by Antselovitch, the Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet of Labour Unions, at a banquet. In the course of this speech, Antselovitch, we read—

“rose even to the height of asserting that full individual liberty is established in Russia—at least, for the workers, he added, as if suddenly become aware of the recklessness of his statement.

“Perhaps I did Antselovitch an injustice by omitting that falsehood in my translation of his speech. But I could not stand up before the delegates and repeat what I knew, as well as they, to be a deliberate lie, as stupid as it was unnecessary. The delegates are aware that dictatorship is the reverse of liberty. They know there is no freedom of speech or press for anyone in Soviet Russia, not even for Communists, and that sanctity of home or person is unknown.” (p. 136).

But things occurred to open the eyes of the British Mission, as for example:—

“I listened to some of the British delegates discussing the printers' meeting from which they had just returned. Melnitchansky and other Bolsheviks had addressed the gathering, eulogizing the Soviet regime and the Communist dictatorship. Suddenly a man wearing a long black beard appeared on the platform. Before anyone realized his identity he launched an attack on the Bolsheviks. He branded

them as the corrupters of the Revolution and denounced their tyranny as worse than the Tsar's. His fiery oratory kept the audience spellbound. Then someone shouted: 'Who are you? Your name!'

" 'I am Tchernov, Victor Tchernov,' the man replied in bold, defiant voice.

"The Bolsheviks on the platform jumped to their feet in rage.

" 'Hurrah! Long live Tchernov, brave Tchernov!' the audience shouted, and a wild ovation was tendered the Social Revolutionary leader and former President of the Constituent Assembly.

" 'Arrest him! Hold the Traitor!' came from the Communists. There was a rush to the platform, but Tchernov had disappeared.

"Some of the Britishers expressed admiration for the daring of the man whom the Tcheka has been so assiduously searching for a long time. 'It was rather exciting,' someone remarked.

" 'I shudder to think what will happen to him if he's caught,' said another.

" 'Deucedly clever, his escape.'

" 'The Printers will pay for it.'

" 'I hear the leaders of the Third Soviet bakery are under arrest, and the men locked out for demanding more bread.'

" 'It's different at home,' a delegate sighed. 'But I believe we all agree that the blockade must be raised.'" (pp. 150-151).

And so with the Italian Socialist Mission. With regard to these Mr. Berkman writes:—

"The occasion is celebrated with the usual military parades, demonstrations and meetings. But the show has lost interest for me. I have looked back of the curtain. The performances lack sincerity; political intrigue is the mainspring of the spectacles. The workers have no part in them except for mechanical obedience to orders; hypocrisy conducts the delegates through the factories; false information deceives them regarding the actual state of affairs; surveillance prevents their getting in touch with the people and learning the truth of the situation. The delegates are dined, fêted, and influenced to bring their organizations into the fold of the Third International, under the leadership of Moscow." (p. 156.)

THE TYRANNY IN PRACTICE.

Not only is there an absence of liberty, equality and fraternity, but common decency of treatment is often absent. Read this story from the diary for June, 1920:—

"On the corner two militiamen are directing a group of street cleaners, oldish men and boys from the concentration camp, and women arrested without documents on trains. Some have high felt boots on, the loose soles flapping noisily in the liquid dung. Others are barefoot. They work apathetically, carrying the filth from the yards to the street and loading it upon carts. The stench is nauseating.

"A husky *militционер* leisurely saunters up to one of the women. She is young and good-looking, though extremely pale and gaunt.

" 'What's your dreaming? Work, you wench,' he says, playfully poking her in the ribs.

" 'Have a heart,' she pleads. 'I'm so weak; just out of hospital when they nabbed me.'

" 'Serves you right for riding without a pass.'

" 'Couldn't help it, little pigeon,' she says good humoredly. 'They told me my husband is in Peter, back from the front, and he away from me five years. So I go to the office; three days in line and then they refuse me a pass. I thought I'd come some way, but they took me off the train, and I'm so weak and sick and they give me no *pyock*. How am I to find my man now?'

" 'Get yourself another,' the militiaman laughs. 'You won't see him again.'" (pp. 153-154).

Here is another story illustrating the same thing:—

" 'You can't protest against Bolshevik "Revolutionary Orders," as they call it,' said a young woman teacher. 'I have tried it. It happened like this. One day, returning to my room, I found a stranger occupying it. On my demanding what he was doing there, he informed me that he had been assigned to it, showing me his document from the Housing Bureau. "And what shall I do?" I asked. 'You can sleep on the floor,' he replied, stretching himself on my bed. I protested to the higher authorities, but they refused to consider the matter. "The room is big enough for two," they insisted, though that was not the case at all. 'But you put a strange man in my room,' I pleaded. 'You'll soon get acquainted,' they sneered; "we make no distinction of sex.'" (p. 231).

DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT.

As everybody knows, this is a phrase by which the Communist Party indicates its policy; and everybody should know, as they may know from this book, that the dictatorship is not of, but over the proletariat.

Mr. Berkman gives the views of a Left-Social Revolutionist whom he met in Kharkov :—

“N— voices the sentiments of the Left Social Revolutionary group, his views fully shared by his comrades. The rule of a minority, they agree, is necessarily a despotism based on oppression and violence. Thus 10,000 Spartans governed 300,000 Helots, while in the French Revolution 300,000 Jacobins sought to control the 7,000,000 citizens of France. Now 500,000 Communists have by the same methods enslaved the whole of Russia, with its population of more than 100,000,000. Such a régime must become the negation of its original source. Though born of the Revolution, the offspring of the movement for liberation, it must deny and pervert the very ideals and aims that gave it birth. In consequence there is crying inequality of the new social groups, instead of the proclaimed equality; the stifling of every popular opinion, instead of the promised freedom; violence and terror, instead of the expected reign of brotherhood and love.” (pp. 168-169).

No wonder another Ukrainian declared :—

“Russia has never before lived under such absolute despotism. Socialism, Communism indeed! Never had we less liberty and equality than to-day.” (p. 185.)

Or, as another revolutionary who, though an Anarchist, held a high position in a Soviet institution, put it :—

“The Communist Party is only a political body, attempting—successfully indeed—to create a new master class over the producers.” (p. 194).

SAVAGE JUSTICE.

The democrat in England rightly protests against excessive sentences for offences, especially when committed by poor men against property. But read this story of a visit paid by Mr. Berkman to a prison at Kharkov :—

“The guard accompanying us lifts the lid of the observation ‘eye’ out into the door, and I look into the death-cell. A tall man stands motionless in the corner. His face, framed in a thick black beard, is ashen grey. His eyes are fastened on the circular opening, the expression of terror in them so overwhelming that I involuntarily step back. ‘Have mercy, *tovarishtch*,’ his voice comes as from a grave. ‘Oh, let me live!’”

“‘He appropriated Soviet funds,’ the woman guide comments unemotionally.

“‘It was only a small sum,’ the man pleads. ‘I’ll make it good—I swear it. I am young; let me live!’”

“The guide shuts the opening.

“For days his face haunts me. Never had I seen such a look in a human before. Primitive fear stamped upon it in such relief, it communicated itself lingeringly to

me. Terror so absolute, it turned the big, powerful man into a single, all-absorbing emotion—the mortal dread of the sudden call to face his executioner.

“As I note down these experiences in my diary, there come to me the words of Zorin: ‘The death penalty is abolished, our prisons empty,’ he had said to me soon after my arrival in Russia.” (pp. 202, 203).

HOW THEY TREAT STRIKERS.

Workers in this country who cherish the right to strike may usefully bear in mind how the Russian Communist Government treats strikers. Here are some extracts from a chapter describing the Kronstadt tragedy in February, 1921 :—

“The Trubotchny millworkers have gone on strike. In the distribution of winter clothing, they complain, the Communists received undue advantage over the non-partisans. The Government refuses to consider the grievances till the men return to work.

“Crowds of strikers gathered in the street near the mills, and soldiers were sent to disperse them. They were *kursanti*, Communist youths of the military academy. There was no violence. . . . (p. 291).

“February 27.—The authorities have ordered the strikers to resume work. . . . The Soviet passed a resolution *locking out* the men of the Trubotchny mill. It means deprivation of rations—actual starvation. . . .

“February 28.—Late in the afternoon a proclamation was posted containing larger demands. ‘A complete change is necessary in the policies of the Government,’ it reads. ‘First of all, the workers and peasants need freedom. They don’t want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks; they want to control their own destinies. We demand the liberation of all arrested Socialists and non-partisan working men; abolition of martial law; freedom of speech, press, and assembly for all who labour; free election of shop and factory committees, of labour union and Soviet representatives.’”

And the result of this demand for freedom and justice :—

“March 1.—Many arrests are taking place. Groups of strikers, surrounded by *Tehekists* on their way to prison, are a common sight.” (pp. 292, 293).

Then comes an account of the attack on the Kronstadt strikers :—

“March 7.—Distant rumbling reaches my ears as I cross the Nevsky. It sounds again, stronger and nearer, as if rolling toward me. All at once I realize that artillery is being fired. It is 6 p.m.: Kronstadt has been attacked.

"Days of anguish and cannonading. My heart is numb with despair; something has died within me. The people on the streets look bowed with grief, bewildered. No one trusts himself to speak. The thunder of heavy guns rends the air.

"March 17.—Kronstadt has fallen to-day.

"Thousands of sailors and workers lie dead in its streets. Summary execution of prisoners and hostages continues."

And here is a stroke of irony :—

"March 18.—The victors are celebrating the anniversary of the Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounce Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels. . . ."

FINAL DISILLUSIONMENT.

The last entry in this diary is under date of September 30th, 1921 :—

"With bowed head I seek a familiar bench in the park. Here little Fanya sat at my side. Her face was turned to the sun, her whole being radiant with idealism. Her silvery laughter rang with the joy of youth and life, but I trembled for her safety at every approaching step. 'Do not fear,' she kept reassuring me, 'no one will know me in my peasant disguise.'

"Now she is dead. Executed yesterday by the Tcheka as a 'bandit.'

"Gray are the passing days. One by one the embers of hope have died out. Terror and despotism have crushed the life born in October. The slogans of the Revolution are foresworn, its ideals stifled in the blood of the people. The breath of yesterday is dooming millions to death; the shadow of to-day hangs like a black pall over the country. Dictatorship is trampling the masses under foot. The Revolution is dead; its spirit cries in the wilderness." (pp. 318, 319).

CONCLUSION.

And what is the conclusion? It is best told in the words of the Grand Old Man of Revolution, Peter Kropotkin, whom Mr. Berkman visited in Russia. "The Bolsheviks have shown how the revolution is *not* to be made." The way out to a saner social order will be found through freedom, not bloody oppression; through equality, not a development of a new privileged class; through fraternity, not by hatred and cruelty.



HARRISON AND
PRINTERS IN ORDINAR
44-47, ST. MARTIN