The Significance of Bolshevism

By Christopher Dawson

THE economic crisis of the last two years has proved a godsend to the Bolsheviks. The years of the New Economic Policy in Russia and of the post-War boom in the West were a time of disappointment and trial for the leaders of the communist party. Fortunately for them the launching of the second communist offensive in Russia—the Five-Year Plan—has coincided with the apparent collapse of the capitalist system in the West and has revived the hopes of world revolution which for a time had been abandoned. Above all, these hopes are concentrated on the approaching dissolution of the British Empire, which the Bolsheviks regard not without reason as the chief element of cohesion in the divided ranks of their enemies. To-day Trotsky writes: "Only a blind man could fail to see that Great Britain is headed for gigantic revolutionary earthquake shocks, in which the last fragments of her conservatism, her world domination, her present state machine, will go down without a trace."*

These hopes are encouraged by the mood of fatalism and despair that is so common in Western countries. Professed communists may be few enough, but everywhere we find intellectuals who are fascinated by the grandiose projects of communist state planning and who feel that the social and economic system of Western Europe neither deserves nor is able to surmount its present crisis.

What is the reason for the success—even though it be only a relative success—of Bolshevism—for the way in which it has maintained itself essentially unchanged through all the vicissitudes of the Revolution and the Civil War, the New Economic Policy and the Five-Year Plan; above all, for the attraction that it seems to

* "The History of the Russian Revolution," Vol. I, p. 117, translated by Max Eastman. (Gollancz. 18s.)

it the appearance of a religion, in comparison with which the frequent panegyrics of man's spiritual freedom and dignity which carry with them no practical obligation appear worthless and hollow. It is therefore impossible to combat Bolshevism with arguments of a purely opportunist kind."*

And, in the same way, the communist party has little resemblance to a political party in the ordinary sense of the word. It is a voluntary organization only in the same sense as is a religious order. Its members are bound by a rigid and impersonal discipline, but they are not the servants of the State, for the State itself is their instrument. It is true that they regard themselves as the representatives and trustees of the proletariat, but it would be a great mistake to suppose that they think it is their business to obey the wishes of the working class, as the democratic politician fulfils the mandate of his electors. The proletariat that they serve is a mystical entity—the Universal Church of the Marxian believer—and the actual populace is an unregenerate mass which it is their duty to guide and organize according to the principles of the true faith. The communist is not a representative of the people: he is the priest of an idea.

Consequently the triumph of Bolshevism was not a triumph of the popular will over Tsarist tyranny, or of revolutionary enthusiasm over conservative order. It was the victory of authority and discipline over democratic idealism and individualism. As we see clearly enough in the first volume of Trotsky's "History of the Russian Revolution," it was the victory of a few men who knew what they wanted and allowed nothing to stand in their way over a vast majority that was driven to and fro by the uncertainty of the politicians and the passions of the mob. It was, above all, the victory of one man—Lenin—the most remarkable personality that the age produced.

* Op. cit., p. 4.

exercise not only for the discontented and the disinherited proletarian, but also for the disinterested idealist? This is the question that a young German sociologist, Dr. Waldemar Gurian, has attempted to answer in an important book that has just been translated into English,* and he has succeeded better than any other writer that I know in getting to the root of the matter and revealing the essential nature of the Bolshevik regime. For Bolshevism is not a political movement that can be judged by its practical aims and achievements, nor is it an abstract theory that can be understood apart from its historical context. It differs from other contemporary movements above all by its organic unity, its fusion of theory and practice, and by the way in which its practical policy is bound up with its philosophy. In a world of relativity and scepticism it stands for absolute principles; for a creed that is incarnate in a social order and for an authority that demands the entire allegiance of the whole man. The Bolshevik ideology, writes Dr. Gurian, "has been transformed from a philosophy consciously learned and imposed on life from without into a concrete living force, a national outlook, which unconsciously, implicitly, and spontaneously determines and moulds all men's judgments and opinions." "These revolutionaries are not simply politicians satisfied with the possession of power. They regard themselves as bearers of a gospel which shall bring to humanity the true redemption from its sufferings, the imperfections of its earthly existence."

"It is precisely in this respect that Bolshevism is superior to the sceptical, relativist and purely opportunist political and social attitude so common in the outside world. It claims to represent immutable principles. Though it regards earthly existence, the economic and social organization, as the final end of human life, it follows this belief with a zeal and a devotion that give

* "Bolshevism: Theory and Practice," translated by E. I. Watkin. (Sheed & Ward. 10s. 6d.)

The age of the great war was an age of iron, but it gave birth to no military genius and no great statesman; its political leaders were men of paper. The one man of iron that the age produced arose from the most unlikely quarter that it is possible to conceive—from among the fanatics and revolutionary agitators who wandered about the watering places of Switzerland and Germany conspiring ineffectually and arguing with one another. To the practical politicians, even those of the Socialist party, Lenin was nothing but an ineffective visionary. Kerensky himself at first seems to have regarded him with condescending tolerance, as a man who "knew nothing, who had lived apart from the world and viewed everything through the glasses of his fanaticism."

Certainly Lenin was a fanatic, but he was a fanatic who had no illusions about himself or others and who was as ready to learn from experience as the most opportunist of practical politicians. Nothing could be more unlike the popular idea of a revolutionary leader than this simple and even common-place man who derided idealism and hated fine phrases, and who, in his own words, "always kept a stone in his pockets" in dealing with his fellow-men. He was the complete antithesis of Trotsky, the man of words, and it shows his power of self-suppression that he should have worked so long with a man whose nature was so utterly alien to his own, because he was a useful asset to the revolutionary cause.

But Lenin's cynicism and hatred of "idealism" must not lead us to suppose that he undervalued ideas. He was above all a man of theory and he differed from the average Socialist leader, both among the Bolsheviks and outside the party, in his insistence on the philosophical absolutism of the communist creed. "We must realize," he wrote in 1922, "that neither the natural sciences nor even a materialism that lacks solid philosophical foundations is capable of carrying on the struggle against the onslaught of bourgeois ideas and preventing the re-

an exaggerated form all the weaknesses of their Western counterparts. They were a source of weakness rather than of strength to the social order, which they undermined spiritually at the same time that they exploited it economically. They showed a platonic sympathy for every kind of subversive ideal, and even the Bolsheviks themselves received financial support from prominent industrialists such as Sava Morosov. Above all it is in Russia that we can study in its purest form the phenomenon of an intelligentsia—that is to say, an educated class that is entirely detached from social responsibilities and that provides a seed bed for the propagation of revolutionary ideas. It was not from the peasants or the industrial proletariat but from the ranks of the lesser nobility and the bourgeois intelligentsia that the leaders of the revolutionary and terrorist movement arose from the time of Herzen and Bakunin to that of Lenin himself.

Hence it is not surprising that the same society that has seen the most extreme development of the subversive elements in bourgeois culture should also produce the most extreme type of reaction against that culture. The disintegration of bourgeois society has worked itself out to its logical conclusion and has given place to a movement in the reverse direction. The futility and emptiness of Russian bourgeois existence as described, for instance, by Chekhov, or still earlier in Goncharov's *Oblomov,* is such that any regime which offers a positive and objective end of life becomes attractive. Man cannot live in a spiritual void; he needs some fixed social standards and some absolute intellectual principles. Bolshevism at least replaces the spiritual anarchy of bourgeois society by a rigid order and substitutes for the doubt and scepticism of an irresponsible intelligentsia the certitude of an absolute authority embodied in social institutions. It is true that the Bolshevik philosophy is a poor thing at best. It is philosophy reduced to its very lowest terms, a philosophy with a minimum of spiritual and intellectual

establishment of the bourgeois *Weltanschauung.* If this contest is to be waged victoriously, the scientist must be a materialist of our time, that is to say, a conscious adherent of the materialism represented by Marx: in other words, a dialectical materialist."* And even Marx by himself was not enough, since he held that without Hegel Marx's *Kapital* is unintelligible. Hegel and Marx are the Old and New Testaments of the Bolshevik dispensation and neither of them can stand without the other. No amount of practical success can justify the sacrifice of a jot or a tittle of this revelation, and it is better to postpone the immediate realization of communism as a working system (as Lenin actually did by the New Economic Policy), rather than to imperil the orthodoxy of the picked minority that forms the spiritual foundation of the whole system.

Thus the communist system, as planned and largely created by Lenin, was a kind of *atheocracy,* a spiritual order of the most rigid and exclusive type, rather than a political order. The State was not an end in itself, it was an instrument, or, as Lenin himself puts it, "simply the weapon with which the proletariat wages its class war—*a special sort of bludgeon, nothing more.*"†

Nothing could be more characteristic of Lenin's inhuman simplicity and directness than this sentence: for, unlike his Western admirers, Lenin was never afraid to call a bludgeon a bludgeon.

To the Western mind such an attitude may seem shocking or even inconceivable, just as does the Bolshevik conception of law and the judiciary system as a weapon to be wielded by the dictatorship for political ends. But it must be recognized that it has roots deep in Russian character and in Russian history. Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great also regarded the

* Gurian, op. cit., p. 306.

† From the notes for a memograph on the dictatorship of the proletariat drafted by Lenin in 1920 and printed in Vol. 25 of his collected works. (Gurian, p. 300.)

content. It impoverishes life instead of enriching it and confines the mind in a narrow and arid circle of ideas. Nevertheless it is enough of a philosophy to provide society with a theoretical basis and therein lies the secret of its strength. The lesson of Bolshevism is that any philosophy is better than no philosophy, and that a regime which possesses a principle of authority, however misconceived it may be, will be stronger than a system that rests on the shifting basis of private interests and private opinions.

And this is the reason why Bolshevism with all its crudity constitutes a real menace to Western society. For although our civilization is stronger and more coherent than that of pre-War Russia, it suffers from the same internal weakness. It needs some principle of social and economic order and yet it has lost all vital relation to the spiritual traditions on which the old order of European culture was based. As Dr. Gurian writes, "Marxism, and therefore Bolshevism, does but voice the secret and unavowed philosophy of the bourgeois society when it regards society and economics as the absolute. It is faithful, likewise, to its morality when it seeks to order this absolute, the economic society, in such a way that justice, equality and freedom, the original war cries of the bourgeois advance, may be the lot of all. The rise of the bourgeoisie and the evolution of the bourgeois society have made economics the centre of public life."* And thus: "Bolshevism is at once the product of the bourgeois society and the judgment upon it. It reveals the goal to which the secret philosophy of that society leads, if accepted with unflinching logic."† At first sight this criticism of the bourgeois society seems unjust, in view of the great services that it has rendered to civilization during the last two centuries. It may be plausibly argued that the faults of the bourgeois are no greater than those of the leading classes in other ages,

* Op. cit.,p 237. † Op. cit., p. 242.

State as a bludgeon and dealt with the Boyars and the Old Believers as mercilessly as Lenin dealt with the bourgeois and the Kulaks. It seems as though it were the fate of the vast slow-moving masses of the Russian people to be periodically bludgeoned into activity by the ruthless energy of their rulers. Trotsky himself fully recognizes this feature of the Russian development. "A backward culture," he writes, "is forced to make sudden leaps under the whips of external necessity;" and the whole of his first chapter is a commentary on those words of Vico: "The Tsar of Muscovy, although a Christian, rules over a lazy-minded people."

But all this does nothing to explain the attraction of the Bolshevik experiment for certain elements in the West. If it were simply a question of *catching up* with capitalist Europe, as Trotsky almost seems to suggest, Western Europe has no more reason to disturb itself than it did in the past. After all, nobody in the West thought of idealizing Ivan the Terrible or even Peter the Great. The fact is that while Bolshevism is in the concrete a Russian phenomenon, its theoretic basis and its absolute claims have given it a much wider significance than any purely national revolution could have. It reflects in the distorted and exaggerated medium of Russian society a crisis that is common to the whole of the modern world. As primitive peoples succumb more easily than white men to the diseases of civilization, so the spiritual maladies of European civilization become more deadly in a simpler social environment. The influence of revolutionary ideas, the loss of spiritual order, the substitution of private interests for public authority and of individual opinions for social beliefs are factors common to the modern world, but the Western peoples have been in some degree immunized by two centuries of experience and they have hitherto been able to preserve their social stability in spite of the prevalence of subversive ideas. In Russia, however, this was not the case. The Russian bourgeoisie possessed in

while his virtues are all his own. But the fact remains that the typical leaders of bourgeois society do not arouse the same respect as that which is felt for the corresponding figures in the old regime. We instinctively feel that there is something honourable about a king, a noble, or a knight which the banker, the stockbroker or the democratic politician does not possess. A king may be a bad king, but our very condemnation of him is a tribute to the prestige of his office. Nobody speaks of a "bad bourgeois," the socialist may indeed call him a "bloody bourgeois," but that is a set formula that has nothing to do with his personal vices or virtues.

This distrust of the bourgeois is no modern phenomenon. It has its roots in a much older tradition than that of socialism. It is equally typical of the medieval noble and peasant, the romantic Bohemian and the modern proletarian. The fact is that the bourgeoisie has always stood somewhat apart from the main structure of European society, save in Italy and the Low Countries. While the temporal power was in the hands of the kings and the nobles and the spiritual power was in the hands of the Church, the bourgeoisie, the Third Estate, occupied a position of privileged inferiority which allowed them to amass wealth and to develop considerable intellectual culture and freedom of thought without acquiring direct responsibility or power.* Consequently when the French Revolution and the fall of the old regime made the bourgeoisie the ruling class in the West, it retained its inherited characteristics, its attitude of hostile criticism towards the traditional order and its enlightened selfishness in the pursuit of its own interests. But although the bourgeois now possessed the substance of power, he never really accepted social responsibility as the old rulers had done. He remained

* The same conditions obtained in a highly accentuated form in the case of the Jews, who are, so to speak, bourgeois *par excellence*, and this explains how it is that the East European Jew can adapt himself so much more rapidly and successfully than his Christian neighbour to modern bourgeois civilization.

The bourgeois culture in spite of its temporary importance is nothing but an episode in European history. This is why the current socialist opposition of communist and bourgeois society is in reality a false dilemma. Western civilization is not merely the civilization of the bourgeois; it is the old civilization of Western Christendom that is undergoing a temporary phase of disorganization and change. It owes its strength not to its bourgeois politics and economics, but to the older and more permanent elements of its social and spiritual tradition. In no country, save perhaps in the United States, does the bourgeois culture exist in the pure state as a self subsistent whole. England, above all, which seems at first sight to be the most thoroughly bourgeois society of all, has in reality never possessed a bourgeoisie in the true sense. Its ruling class down to modern times was agrarian in character and incorporated considerable elements of the older aristocratic tradition. Ever since Tudor times it was the aim of the successful merchant to "found a family" and leave the city for the country, and even the city man remained to a great extent a countryman at heart, as we see as late as the Victorian period in Surtees Jorrocks. The English Nonconformists did indeed possess a tradition of cultural separatism analogous to that of the Continental bourgeoisie; but even they were not pure bourgeois, since their basis of social unity was a religious and not an economic one.

In the same way the government in England has never been completely transformed by the bourgeois revolution, but still preserves the monarchical principle as the centre of national solidarity and order.

And the same state of things exists in varying degrees in every Western State. Even France, which politically is an almost pure type of bourgeois culture, is sociologically far from simple and owes its strength to the delicate equilibrium that it has established between two different social types—the peasant and the bourgeois—and two

a private individual—an *idiot* in the Greek sense—with a strong sense of social conventions and personal rights, but with little sense of social solidarity and no recognition of his responsibility as the servant and representative of a super-personal order. In fact he did not realize the necessity of such an order, since it had always been provided for him by others, and he had taken it for granted.

This, I think, is the fundamental reason for the unpopularity and lack of prestige of bourgeois civilization. It lacks the vital human relationship which the older order with all its faults never denied. To the bourgeois politician the electorate is an accidental collection of voters; to the bourgeois industrialist, his employees are an accidental collection of wage earners. The king and the priest, on the other hand, were united to their people by a bond of organic solidarity. They were not individuals standing over against other individuals, but parts of a common social organism and representatives of a common spiritual order.

The bourgeoisie upset the throne and the altar, but they put in their place nothing but themselves. Hence their regime cannot appeal to any higher sanction than that of self interest. It is continually in a state of disintegration and flux. It is not a permanent form of social organization, but a transitional phase between two orders.

This does not, of course, mean that Western society is inevitably doomed to go the way of Russia, or that it can find salvation in the Bolshevik ideal of class dictatorship and economic mass civilization. The Bolshevik philosophy is simply the *reductio ad absurdum* of the principles implicit in bourgeois culture and consequently it provides no real answer to the weaknesses and deficiencies of the latter. It takes the nadir of European spiritual development for the zenith of a new order.

opposite spiritual traditions—that of the Catholic Church and that of the Liberal Enlightenment.

Consequently it is impossible to solve the problem of Western society by disregarding the social and spiritual complexity of European civilization. Bourgeois civilization is not the only European tradition, and Rousseau and Marx are not the only European thinkers. The new order must be conceived not in terms of bourgeois exploiter and exploited proletarian, but as a unity that incorporates every element in European culture and that does justice to the spiritual and social as well as to the economic needs of human nature. In Russia such a solution was impossible owing to the profound gulf that divided the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia with their imported Western culture from the governmental tradition of Byzantine autocracy and Orthodoxy and from the peasant culture of a semi-barbaric peasantry. But Western civilization is still fundamentally homogeneous. Our intelligentsia has not entirely lost its roots in a common spiritual order, and our bourgeoisie is not entirely divorced from social responsibility. It is still not too late to restore the integrity of European culture on the basis of a comprehensive and catholic order. We must go back to an older and more fundamental social tradition and to a wider and more perennial philosophy, which recognize the depth and complexity of human nature and the existence of a moral order that must govern political and economic relations no less than private behaviour. As Dr. Gurian says, Bolshevism itself is an unintentional and therefore most impressive witness to the existence of such an order, since its attempt to treat society as a closed and self sufficient order has led not to Utopia but to tyranny. Man is first mutilated by being deprived of some of its most essential activities, and this maimed and crippled human nature is made the standard by which civilization and life itself are judged.