

V I Lenin

Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism

A popular outline^[1]

Preface

The pamphlet here presented to the reader was written in the spring of 1916, in Zurich.^[1] In the conditions in which I was obliged to work there I naturally suffered somewhat from a shortage of French and English literature and from a serious dearth of Russian literature. However, I made use of the principal English work on imperialism, the book by J. A. Hobson, with all the care that, in my opinion, that work deserves.

This pamphlet was written with an eye to the tsarist censorship. Hence, I was not only forced to confine myself strictly to an exclusively theoretical, specifically economic analysis of facts, but to formulate the few necessary observations on politics with extreme caution, by hints, in an allegorical language – in that accursed Aesopian language – to which tsarism compelled all revolutionaries to have recourse whenever they took up the pen to write a “legal” work.

It is painful, in these days of liberty, to re-read the passages of the pamphlet which have been distorted, cramped, compressed in an iron vice on account of the censor. That the period of imperialism is the eve of the socialist revolution; that social-chauvinism (socialism in words, chauvinism in deeds) is the utter betrayal of socialism, complete desertion to the side of the

bourgeoisie; that this split in the working-class movement is bound up with the objective conditions of imperialism, etc – on these matters I had to speak in a “slavish” tongue, and I must refer the reader who is interested in the subject to the articles I wrote abroad in 1914-17, a new edition of which is soon to appear. In order to show the reader, in a guise acceptable to the censors, how shamelessly untruthful the capitalists and the social-chauvinists who have deserted to their side (and whom Kautsky opposes so inconsistently) are on the question of annexations; in order to show how shamelessly they *screen* the annexations of *their* capitalists, I was forced to quote as an example – Japan! The careful reader will easily substitute Russia for Japan, and Finland, Poland, Courland, the Ukraine, Khiva, Bokhara, Estonia or other regions peopled by non-Great Russians, for Korea.

I trust that this pamphlet will help the reader to understand the fundamental economic question, that of the economic essence of imperialism, for unless this is studied, it will be impossible to understand and appraise modern war and modern politics.

Author

Petrograd, 26 April 1917

Preface to the French and German editions

I

As was indicated in the preface to the Russian edition, this pamphlet was written in 1916, with an eye to the tsarist censorship. I am unable to revise the whole text at the present time, nor, perhaps, would this be advisable, since the main purpose of the book was,

and remains, to present, on the basis of the summarised returns of irrefutable bourgeois statistics, and the admissions of bourgeois scholars of all countries, *a composite picture* of the world capitalist system in its international relationships at the beginning of the twentieth century – on the eve of the first world imperialist war.

To a certain extent it will even be useful for many Communists in advanced capitalist countries to convince themselves by the example of this pamphlet, legal from the standpoint of the tsarist censor, of the possibility, and necessity, of making use of even the slight remnants of legality which still remain at the disposal of the Communists, say, in contemporary America or France, after the recent almost wholesale arrests of Communists, in order to explain the utter falsity of social-pacifist views and hopes for “world democracy”. The most essential of what should be added to this censored pamphlet I shall try to present in this preface.

II

It is proved in the pamphlet that the war of 1914-18 was imperialist (that is, an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder) on the part of both sides; it was a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital, etc.

Proof of what was the true social, or rather, the true class character of the war is naturally to be found, not in the diplomatic history of the war, but in an analysis of the *objective* position of the ruling *classes* in *all* the belligerent countries. In order to depict this objective position one must not take examples or isolated data (in view of the extreme complexity of the phenomena of social life it is always possible to select any number of examples or separate data to prove any proposition), but *all* the data on the *basis* of economic life in *all* the belligerent countries and the whole world.

It is precisely irrefutable summarised data of this kind that I quoted in describing the *partition of the world* in 1876 and 1914 (in Chapter VI) and the division of the world's *railways* in 1890 and 1913 (in Chapter VII). Railways are a summation of the basic capitalist industries, coal, iron and steel; a summation and the most striking index of the development of world trade and bourgeois-democratic civilisation. How the railways are linked up with large-scale industry, with monopolies, syndicates, cartels, trusts, banks and the financial oligarchy is shown in the preceding chapters of the book. The uneven distribution of the railways, their uneven development – sums up, as it were, modern monopolist capitalism on a world-wide scale. And this summary proves that imperialist wars are

absolutely inevitable under *such* an economic system, as *long* as private property in the means of production exists.

The building of railways seems to be a simple, natural, democratic, cultural and civilising enterprise; that is what it is in the opinion of the bourgeois professors who are paid to depict capitalist slavery in bright colours, and in the opinion of petty-bourgeois philistines. But as a matter of fact the capitalist threads, which in thousands of different intercrossings bind these enterprises with private property in the means of production in general, have converted this railway construction into an instrument for oppressing *a thousand million* people (in the colonies and semicolonies), that is, more than half the population of the globe that inhabits the dependent countries, as well as the wage-slaves of capital in the “civilised” countries.

Private property based on the labour of the small proprietor, free competition, democracy, all the catchwords with which the capitalists and their press deceive the workers and the peasants are things of the distant past. Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of “advanced” countries. And this “booty” is shared between two or three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth (America, Great Britain, Japan), who are drawing the whole world into *their* war over the division of *their* booty.

III

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk dictated by monarchist Germany, and the subsequent much more brutal and despicable Treaty of Versailles dictated by the “democratic” republics of America and France and also by “free” Britain, have rendered a most useful service to humanity by exposing both imperialism's hired coolies of the pen and petty-bourgeois reactionaries who, although they call themselves pacifists and socialists, sang praises to “Wilsonism”, and insisted that peace and reforms were possible under imperialism.

The tens of millions of dead and maimed left by the war – a war to decide whether the British or German

group of financial plunderers is to receive the most booty – and those two “peace treaties”, are with unprecedented rapidity opening the eyes of the millions and tens of millions of people who are downtrodden, oppressed, deceived and duped by the bourgeoisie. Thus, out of the universal ruin caused by the war a world-wide revolutionary crisis is arising which, however prolonged and arduous its stages may be, cannot end otherwise than in a proletarian revolution and in its victory.

The Basle Manifesto of the Second International, which in 1912 gave an appraisal of the very war that broke out in 1914 and not of war in general (there are different kinds of wars, including revolutionary wars) – this Manifesto is now a monument exposing to the full the shameful bankruptcy and treachery of the heroes of the Second International.

That is why I reproduce this Manifesto^[3] as a supplement to the present edition, and again and again I urge the reader to note that the heroes of the Second International are as assiduously avoiding the passages of this Manifesto which speak precisely, clearly and definitely of the connection between that impending war and the proletarian revolution, as a thief avoids the scene of his crime.

IV

Special attention has been devoted in this pamphlet to a criticism of Kautskyism, the international ideological trend represented in all countries of the world by the “most prominent theoreticians”, the leaders of the Second International (Otto Bauer and Co. in Austria, Ramsay MacDonald and others in Britain, Albert Thomas in France, etc, etc) and a multitude of socialists, reformists, pacifists, bourgeois democrats and parsons.

This ideological trend is, on the one hand, a product of the disintegration and decay of the Second International, and, on the other hand, the inevitable fruit of the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie, whose entire way of life holds them captive to bourgeois and democratic prejudices.

The views held by Kautsky and his like are a complete renunciation of those same revolutionary principles of Marxism that writer has championed for decades,

especially, by the way, in his struggle against socialist opportunism (of Bernstein, Millerand, Hyndman, Gompers, etc). It is not a mere accident, therefore, that Kautsky’s followers all over the world have now united in practical politics with the extreme opportunists (through the Second, or Yellow International) and with the bourgeois governments (through bourgeois coalition governments in which socialists take part).

The growing world proletarian revolutionary movement in general, and the communist movement in particular, cannot dispense with an analysis and exposure of the theoretical errors of Kautskyism. The more so since pacifism and “democracy” in general, which lay no claim to Marxism whatever, but which, like Kautsky and Co., are obscuring the profundity of the contradictions of imperialism and the inevitable revolutionary crisis to which it gives rise, are still very widespread all over the world. To combat these tendencies is the bounden duty of the party of the proletariat, which must win away from the bourgeoisie the small proprietors who are duped by them, and the millions of working people who enjoy more or less petty-bourgeois conditions of life.

V

A few words must be said about Chapter VIII, “Parasitism and Decay of Capitalism”. As already pointed out in the text, Hilferding, ex-“Marxist”, and now a comrade-in-arms of Kautsky and one of the chief exponents of bourgeois, reformist policy in the Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany,^[4] has taken a step backward on this question compared with the *frankly* pacifist and reformist Englishman, Hobson. The international split of the entire working-class movement is now quite evident (the Second and the Third Internationals). The fact that armed struggle and civil war is now raging between the two trends is also evident – the support given to Kolchak and Denikin in Russia by the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries against the Bolsheviks; the fight the Scheidemanns and Noskes have conducted in conjunction with the bourgeoisie against the Spartacists^[5] in Germany; the same thing in Finland, Poland, Hungary, etc. What is the economic basis of this world-historical phenomenon?

It is precisely the parasitism and decay of capitalism, characteristic of its highest historical stage of development, ie, imperialism. As this pamphlet shows,

capitalism has now singled out a *handful* (less than one-tenth of the inhabitants of the globe; less than one-fifth at a most “generous” and liberal calculation) of exceptionally rich and powerful states which plunder the whole world simply by “clipping coupons”. Capital exports yield an income of eight to ten thousand million francs per annum, at pre-war prices and according to pre-war bourgeois statistics. Now, of course, they yield much more.

Obviously, out of such enormous *superprofits* (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their “own” country) it is *possible to bribe* the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the “advanced” countries are doing: they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.

This stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook, is the principal prop of the Second International, and in our days, the principal *social* (not

military) *prop of the bourgeoisie*. For they are the *real agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement*, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism. In the civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie they inevitably, and in no small numbers, take the side of the bourgeoisie, the “Versaillese” against the “Communards”.

Unless the economic roots of this phenomenon are understood and its political and social significance is appreciated, not a step can be taken toward the solution of the practical problem of the communist movement and of the impending social revolution.

Imperialism is the eve of the social revolution of the proletariat. This has been confirmed since 1917 on a world-wide scale.

N. Lenin
6 July 1920

Notes

[1] *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* was written in the first half of 1916. While Lenin was in Berne during 1915 he began to study various works on imperialism that had been published in many countries. He started work on this book in January 1916 and at the end of the month he moved to Zurich, where he continued his work at the Zurich Cantonal Library. From hundreds of books, periodicals, newspapers and statistical abstracts published in different languages he made numerous extracts, summaries, notes and tables, which make up more than 40 printing sheets. These materials were published as a separate pamphlet in 1939 under the title of *Notebooks on Imperialism*.

On 2 July 1916 Lenin sent his completed manuscript on imperialism to the *Parus* Publishers. Menshevik elements among the management deleted from the book parts sharply criticising the opportunist theories

of Kautsky and the Russian Mensheviks (Martov and Co.). Lenin’s term *pererastaniye* (capitalism *growing into* capitalist imperialism) was altered to *prevrashcheniye* (*transformation*); *reaksionny kharakter* (*reactionary nature* of the theory of Ultraimperialism) to *otstaly kharakter* (*backward character*), etc. In early 1917 the book was printed under the title *Imperialism, the Latest Stage of Capitalism*, by the *Parus* Printers in Petrograd.

After returning to Russia, Lenin wrote a preface to the book, which finally saw the light of day in September 1917.

[2] This preface was first published under the title “Imperialism and Capitalism” in *Communist International*, No. 18, dated October 1921.

[3] The manifesto is omitted in the present edition.

[4] A Centrist party set up in April 1917. The bulk of the party consisted of the Kautskyite Labour Commonwealth. The Independents preached “unity” with the open social-chauvinists, justified and defended them and demanded the rejection of the class struggle.

In October 1920, a split took place at the congress of the I.S.D.P.G. in Halle. In December a considerable part of the party merged with the Communist Party of Germany. The Right-wing elements formed a separate party and took the old name of the I.S.D.P.G., which existed until 1922.

[5] *The Spartacists* – members of the Spartacus League, a revolutionary organisation of German Left-Wing Social-Democrats, formed in the early period of World War I under the leadership of Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin and others. It was also known as the *Internationale* group. The Spartacists conducted revolutionary propaganda

among the masses against imperialist war and exposed the predatory policy of German imperialism and the treachery of the opportunist Social-Democratic leaders. But the Spartacists failed to free themselves from semi-Menshevik fallacies on cardinal questions of theory and policy. They propagated a semi-Menshevik theory of imperialism, rejected the Marxist interpretation of the principle of self-determination of nations (ie, up to and including secession and the formation of independent states), denied the possibility of national liberation wars in the era of imperialism, underestimated the role of the revolutionary party and bowed to the spontaneity of the working-class movement. A criticism of the mistakes of the German Left is given in Lenin’s “The Junius Pamphlet”, “A Caricature of Marxism and ‘Imperialist Economism’”, and other works, and in Stalin’s letter “Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism”. In 1917 the Spartacists joined the Centrist Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany, but remained organisationally independent. After the revolution in Germany in November 1918, they broke with the Independents and in December of the same year founded the Communist Party of Germany.