

From the archives: Lenin on 1916

V.I. Lenin

When Enda Kenny suggested that Michael Collins had brought Lenin to Ireland it was another of Enda's 'fantasy moments' like the soldiers guarding the ATMs, but it is a matter of fact that Lenin took a keen interest in, and strongly supported, the Irish struggle against British imperialism as can be seen in this extract from his article 'The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up' written in July 1916, in which he gives his assessment of the 1916 Rising.

Particularly noteworthy is his dismissal of the idea that the Rising was a mere 'putsch', his insistence that 'to imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices... this is to repudiate social revolution', and that 'Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it.' Also significant is his comment that 'It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the European revolt of the proletariat had had time to mature'.

The Irish Rebellion of 1916¹

Our theses were written before the outbreak of this rebellion, which must be the touchstone of our theoretical views.

The views of the opponents of self-determination lead to the conclusion that the vitality of small nations oppressed by imperialism has already been sapped, that they cannot play any role against imperialism, that support of their purely national aspirations will lead to nothing, etc. The imperialist war of 1914–16 has provided *facts* which refute such conclusions.

The war proved to be an epoch of crisis for the West-European nations, and for *imperialism* as a whole. Every crisis discards

the conventionalities, tears away the outer wrappings, *sweeps* away the obsolete and reveals the underlying springs and forces. What has it revealed from the standpoint of the movement of oppressed nations! In the colonies there have been a number of *attempts* at rebellion, which the oppressor nations, naturally did all they could to hide by means of a military censorship. Nevertheless, it is known that in Singapore the British brutally suppressed a mutiny Among their Indian troops; that there were attempts at rebellion in French Annam (see *Nashe Slovo*) and in the German Cameroons (see the Junius pamphlet²); that in Europe, on the one hand, there was a rebellion in Ireland, which the 'freedom-loving' English, who did not dare to extend conscription to Ireland, suppressed by executions, and, on the other, the Austrian Government passed the death sentence on the deputies of the Czech Diet 'for treason', and shot whole Czech regiments for the same 'crime'.

This list is, of course, far from complete. Nevertheless, it proves that, *owing* to the crisis of imperialism, the flames of national revolt have flared up both in the colonies and in Europe, and that national sympathies and antipathies have manifested themselves in spite of the Draconian threats and measures of repression. All this before the crisis of imperialism hit its peak; the power of the imperialist bourgeoisie was yet to be undermined (this may be brought about by a war of 'attrition' but has not yet happened) and the proletarian movements in the imperialist countries were *still* very feeble. What will happen when the war has caused complete exhaustion, or when, in one state at least, the power of the bourgeoisie has been shaken under the blows of proletarian struggle, as that of tsarism in 1905?

On May 9, 1916, there appeared in

¹V.I. Lenin *Collected Works*, Moscow 1962, Vol 22 . Lenin also engaged in an extensive discussion of Ireland's right to independence in a debate with Rosa Luxemburg over the question of the right of nations to self determination, in which he gives a lengthy and useful exposition of Marx and Engels' views on the subject. Lenin, *Collected Works*, as above, Vol.20 marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch08.htm

²Rosa Luxemburg *The Junius Pamphlet -The Crisis of German Social Democracy* 1915 marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/

Berner Tagwacht the organ of the Zimmerwald group, including some of the Leftists, an article on the Irish rebellion entitled 'Their Song Is Over' and signed with the initials K. R. It described the Irish rebellion as being nothing more nor less than a 'putsch', for, as the author argued, 'the Irish question was an agrarian one', the peasants had been pacified by reforms, and the nationalist movement remained only a 'purely urban, petty-bourgeois movement, which, notwithstanding the sensation it caused, had not much social backing'.

It is not surprising that this monstrously doctrinaire and pedantic assessment coincided with that of a Russian national-liberal Cadet, Mr. A. Kulisher (*Rech* No. 102, April 15, 1916), who also labeled the rebellion 'the Dublin putsch'.

It is to be hoped that, in accordance with the adage, 'it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good', many comrades, who were not aware of the morass they were sinking into by repudiating 'self-determination' and by treating the national movements of small nations with disdain, will have their eyes opened by the 'accidental' coincidence of opinion held by a Social-Democrat and a representative of the imperialist bourgeoisie!!

The term 'putsch', in its scientific sense, may be employed only when the attempt at insurrection has revealed nothing but a circle of conspirators or stupid maniacs, and has aroused no sympathy among the masses. The centuries-old Irish national movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interest, manifested itself, in particular, in a mass Irish National Congress in America³ which called for Irish independence; it also manifested itself in street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petty bourgeoisie *and a section of the workers* after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of newspapers, etc. Whoever calls such a rebellion a 'putsch' is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon.

To imagine that social revolution is con-

ceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. - to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, 'We are for socialism', and another, somewhere else and says, 'We are for imperialism', and that will be a social revolution! Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view could vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a 'putsch'.

Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a bourgeois-democratic revolution. It consisted of a series of battles in which *all* the discontented classes, groups and elements of the population participated. Among these there were masses imbued with the crudest *prejudices*, with the vaguest and most fantastic aims of struggle; there were small groups which accepted Japanese money, there were speculators and adventurers, etc. But *objectively*, the mass movement was breaking the hack of tsarism and paving the way for democracy; for this reason the class-conscious workers led it.

The socialist revolution in Europe *cannot* be anything other than an outburst of mass struggle on the part of all and sundry oppressed and discontented elements. Inevitably, sections of the petty bourgeoisie and of the backward workers will participate in it—without such participation, *mass* struggle is *impossible*, without it no revolution is possible—and just as inevitably will they bring into the movement their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors. But *objectively* they will attack *capital*, and the class-conscious vanguard of the revolution, the advanced proletariat, expressing this objective truth of a variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented, mass struggle, will he

³Vorworts, March 20, 1916

able to unite and direct it, capture power, seize the banks, expropriate the trusts which all hate (though for difficult reasons!), and introduce other dictatorial measures which in their totality will amount to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the victory of socialism, which, however, will by no means immediately 'purge' itself of petty-bourgeois slag.

Social-Democracy, we read in the Polish theses (I, 4) ⁴, 'must utilise the struggle of the young colonial bourgeoisie against European imperialism *in order to sharpen the revolutionary crisis in Europe*'. [Authors' italics.]

Is it not clear that it is least of all permissible to contrast Europe to the colonies in *this* respect? The struggle of the oppressed nations *in Europe*, a struggle capable of going all the way to insurrection and street fighting, capable of breaking down the iron discipline of the army and martial law, will 'sharpen the revolutionary crisis in Europe' to an infinitely greater degree than a much more developed rebellion in a remote colony. A blow delivered against the power of the English imperialist bourgeoisie by a rebellion in Ireland is a hundred times more significant politically than a blow of equal force delivered in Asia or in Africa.

The French chauvinist press recently reported the publication in Belgium of the eightieth issue of an illegal journal, *Free Belgium*. Of course, the chauvinist press of France very often lies, but this piece of news seems to be true. Whereas chauvinist and Kautskyite German Social-Democracy has failed to establish a free press for itself during the two years of war, and has meekly borne the yoke of military censorship (only the Left Radical elements, to their credit be it said, have published pamphlets and manifestos, in spite of the censorship)—an oppressed civilised nation has reacted to a military oppression unparalleled in ferocity by establishing an organ of revolutionary protest! The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an *independent* factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a *part* as one of the ferments,

one of the bacilli, which help the *real* anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene.

The general staffs in the current war are doing their utmost to utilise any national and revolutionary movement in the enemy camp: the Germans utilise the Irish rebellion, the French - the Czech movement, etc. They are acting quite correctly from their own point of view. A serious war would not be treated seriously if advantage were not taken of the enemy's slightest weakness and if every opportunity that presented itself were not seized upon, the more so, since it is impossible to know beforehand at what moment, where, and with what force some powder magazine will 'explode'. We would be very poor revolutionaries if, in the proletariat's great war of Liberation for socialism, we did not know how to *utilise* every popular movement against *every single* disaster *imperialism* brings in order to intensify and extend the crisis. If we were, on the one hand, to repeat in a thousand keys the declaration that we are 'opposed' to all national oppression and, on the other, to describe the heroic revolt of the most mobile and enlightened section of certain classes in an oppressed nation against its oppressors as a 'putsch', we should be sinking to the same level of stupidity as the Kautskyites.

It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the European revolt of the proletariat had *had time* to mature. Capitalism is not so harmoniously built that the various sources of rebellion can immediately merge of their own accord, without reverses and defeats. On the other hand, the very fact that revolts do break out at different times, in different places, and are of different kinds, guarantees wide scope and depth to the general movement; but it is only in premature, individual, sporadic and therefore unsuccessful, revolutionary movements that the masses gain experience, acquire knowledge, gather strength, and get to know their real leaders, the socialist proletarians, and in this way prepare for the general onslaught, just as certain strikes, demonstrations, local and national, mutinies

⁴See the full article V.I. Lenin *The Discussion On Self-Determination Summed Up* marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm

in the army, outbreaks among the peasantry, etc., prepared the way for the general on-slaught in 1905.