

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*

Lessons from the Socialist Betrayal of Internationalism during WWI

LENIN ON THE DIALECTICS OF CATASTROPHE AND REVOLUTION

In our last column we discussed some of the shortcomings in Lenin’s dialectical thinking about knowledge. Events in the summer of 1914 prompted Lenin to study dialectics more thoroughly and make important advances in communist philosophy.

In July 1914 the European imperialists began World War I, a battle over capitalist plunder that would slaughter millions. The European socialists (the “Second International”) had seen this coming, and the socialist parties of most countries had pledged to oppose imperialist wars and organize mass political strikes if one was started.

What actually happened is that almost all the leaders of the socialist parties supported “their own” governments and tried to stop communist workers who wanted to turn the war into a revolution. The international socialist movement that had seemed to be fighting to overthrow capitalism turned into its opposite, supporting imperialism and helping to oppress the working class.

Although he was fighting to build up a new communist movement that would use the war as an opportunity for revolution, Lenin started to study the dialectical philosophy of Hegel immediately after the war began. Some of Lenin’s conclusions from this study showed up in his articles and speeches, but Lenin recorded much more in notebooks that were only published after his death. We summarize his most important ideas in this column and the next one.

The Dialectics of Development

The catastrophes of 1914 completely contradicted the idea of historical development that was common in the Second International, that the workers’ movement would gradually evolve, increasing in size and power until it overthrew capitalism. This outlook corresponded to one of two

basic viewpoints about historical change identified by Lenin. One sees change as “decrease or increase, as repetition,” usually without being able to give a general explanation of what causes such changes.

The opposite viewpoint is the dialectical one. It recognizes that in addition to increase or decrease, development “often proceeds by leaps, and via catastrophes and revolutions in nature and society.” The reason for these “breaks in continuity” is that processes are driven by the “contradiction and conflict” of the forces and tendencies inside things, events, and societies. Contradictions tend to become more intense and break out into sudden changes like an explosion or economic crisis. Thus dialectics sees sudden outbreaks (like the “Arab Spring”) or sudden collapses (like the Iraqi army in the last few weeks) as normal events that should be expected. Lenin said that it is only the unity of opposites, aspects of processes that are connected but exclude each other, that can explain the processes in the real world.

Turning into the Opposite

One of the things that happens in a real process is turning into its opposite, that is, taking on characteristics that are the opposite of those it used to have, like the pre-war socialist movement that turned into an arm of imperialism. The Second International allowed reformers and self-promoters to become leaders, especially trade union bureaucrats, who allied themselves with the capitalists to keep their cushy jobs. These opportunists were tolerated as legitimate members of the movement, alongside revolutionaries. At the beginning of the war pro-capitalist leaders won the class struggle inside the Second International and led it to support imperialism, the opposite of



its supposed goal.

After the Second International collapsed, revolutionaries in Russia were able to build up the communist party—the Bolsheviks—out of the crisis of the war. They turned collapse into its opposite, the successful revolution in October 1917, three years later.

The Struggle of Opposites

Lenin emphasized that the unity of opposites is temporary and limited, but “the struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolutes.” The unity of the reformers and revolutionaries in the workers’ movement ended when the war started, but the struggle of these two sides will continue as long as capitalism exists. The trend in the history of processes is for their internal contradictions to become stronger and break up any previous unity of opposites. Lenin said that wholes dividing into contradictory sides is actually the “essence of dialectics.”

In the next column, we will discuss Lenin’s ideas on one-sidedness and his new understanding of idealism.