

The fatal myth of the bourgeois revolution in Russia

A critique of Wagner's 'Theses on Bolshevism' ⁽¹⁾

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Helmut Wagner's 'Theses on Bolshevism' is perhaps the most influential council communist text. The theses excel in strict logic with which Wagner presents the 1917 revolution in Russia and the role of the Bolshevik party as a consequence of the socio-economic relations and geopolitical position of Tsarist Russia. The bourgeois outcome of this revolution also seems to confirm the correctness of the theses: in the Soviet Union state capitalism ruled by the terror of one party that had made the working class totally subordinate to the state.

However, Wagner's analysis is not without its problems. Wagner's logic hangs a hint of historical necessity or inevitability, borrowed from Marxist conceptions of bourgeois revolutions as they took place before the proletariat started fighting for its proper class interests. This raises questions about the not entirely passive role of the proletariat in the revolution in Russia, about the role of the organized labor movement, of which the Bolshevik party was part of, at least in appearance. Wagner's analysis has also often been used to portray the Bolsheviks as cunning bourgeois politicians who were merely out to abuse the workers' struggle for their hidden bourgeois agenda. The reasoning in these kinds of stories approaches that of conspiracy theories. They can also serve to frame disagreeable positions as 'Leninist'.

Wagner's theses about the revolution in Russia were later applied by others to what is then called the Chinese Revolution, and even to the events of 1936 in Spain (see further on Brendel and the G.I.C.). In these analyses, state capitalism and the political changes from which it emerged appeared not only as inevitable but even as historical progress. After the implosion of the Soviet Union under the pressure of insoluble economic problems, and the

¹ Helmut Wagner "[Theses on Bolshevism](#)" (1934). See also his [Biography](#) by Ph. Bourrinet and [Historical context](#) of "Theses on Bolshevism" according to Wagner's comrades in arms

following disintegration of the Eastern bloc, such a mechanical analysis that focuses on the historical necessity of the bourgeois revolution is outdated.

An analysis of the revolution in Russia should use a method that not only explains history but also shows the actuality in which we live in the light of a man-made future. To do so, this method must meet two conditions. Firstly, it must explain the results of history, which in no way suggest historical progress. Secondly, this analysis must leave room for historical possibilities that the workers can seize to carry out a revolution that puts an end to exploitation and oppression.

Wagner's retrospective analysis. But what result?

Wagner speaks in proposition 3 of successful mastery of the tasks of Bolshevism. Of course, it makes sense to judge a movement based on its results. But do the results of the revolution in Russia justify the idea of the theses that a bourgeois revolution took place there?

Politically speaking, Bolshevism not only took its place at the head of the tsarist state, but it also continued tsarism with an even further intensification of its methods of absolute power and terror over the population, especially through its secret police. In economic terms, it is striking that Bolshevism thus continued, with increased terror, the despotic policy of tsarism to enforce industrial development on backward Asian agriculture (proposition 6). And with what result?

With hindsight, it can be argued against Wagner - that industrialization by the Bolsheviks not only served Russia's imperialist interests not just as well, but even better than that of Tsarism. The Second World War yielded Russia - albeit at the cost of gigantic destruction - the conquest, and partly a recapture, of the small Eastern European states that had held Russia to its western border since the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, plus the east of Germany, which crowned Germany's provisional powerlessness with the division of Berlin. The proletariat and the peasants paid for the 'Red Terror', the 'Solution of the Kulak question', and the 'heroic demise of Mother Russia' with millions of deaths and the destruction of the lives of those who survived; historians are still fighting over the right numbers. That is the true 'result' of the revolution that began in 1917 as a struggle against the imperialist war.

Marx stressed that the bourgeois revolutions of his time, including the failed ones of 1848, represented progress in the development of productive forces. Not only in the limited sense that the Stalinists, in particular, gave to it, of technical progress, or rather, the technical tools - at the expense of the life and health of the workers, of course - but also in the sense of progress in the organization of those who operated the machines, the workers. In this context, it is important that Marx and Engels, in several forewords of the *Communist Manifesto*, emphasized the significance of the large industry established after 1848. Engels stressed in the Italian edition of 1893 that at the failure of the bourgeois revolutions of 1848 in Italy and Germany, Marx had pointed out:

"the same people who had defeated the revolution of 1848, then against their will became the executors of its will."

And Engels continued:

"With the development of large-scale industry in all countries, over the last 45 years, the bourgeois regime has created everywhere a numerous, tightly knit and strong proletariat; in this way, to use an expression of the 'Manifesto', it produced its gravediggers". (2)

The contrast with the above-mentioned 'results' of the supposed bourgeois revolution in Russia could not be greater. The revolution developed as a struggle against the consequences of Russia's participation in the First World War. When, after the fall of the Tsar the Provisional Government continued the war with the support of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, the workers were forced to strengthen their organization in the workers' councils, to such an extent that they surpassed the Paris Commune. The councils overthrew the Provisional Government and put an end to Russian war participation. From that moment, their role was over, according to the Bolshevik party, in which the workers had recognized their struggle until then. The councils were subordinated to the dictatorship of this party, the self-created organs of their emancipation were destroyed, and the working class in Russia was dealt a blow in the ensuing terror, from which it has so far been unable to overcome. With the best will in the world, in the absence of *"a numerous, contiguous and strong proletariat"* (Engels) in Russia, no bourgeois revolution, or even its failure, can be discovered.

It is indeed the question of the imperialist war that makes us understand the revolution in Russia. Already with the outbreak of World War I, it was clear to the Marxists who had remained loyal to the working class that a new period in the development of capitalism had dawned, that of imperialism, in which wars between the imperialist large and small states were destroying dead and living production forces on a massive scale. What these revolutionary communists did not immediately understand was that the new period of imperialism had not only brought us closer to the goal of the proletarian revolution as a necessity but also a change in the tactics of the workers' movement; something Anton Pannekoek insisted on. (3)

Particularly under the influence of Bolshevism which, once in power, transformed its slogan of the right to 'self-determination of nations' into support for certain national 'liberation' movements, it took a long time to realize that these movements could not be equated with the progressive bourgeois revolutions of the past, but, on the contrary, depended as much as regimes of reactionary style on joining larger imperialist powers. When the bourgeois revolution is understood here in a historical sense, not in the sense of arbitrary changes of the regime by groups adorning themselves with socialist slogans, or changes limited to the proclamation of formal civil liberties, the departure of a Tsar, or a Kaiser and his entourage, it is clear that since the beginning of the 20th century there has been no such thing anywhere in the world.

Writing in 1933, Wagner could not predict the consequences of the Second World War for Russia either. His merit is that he pointed to Russia's geopolitical position between Europe

² Translated from the Dutch edition, Marx/Engels, Het Communistisch Manifest, Pegasus, 2018, p. 36/37

³ See "[From the 2nd to the 3rd Internationale - Three articles by Anton Pannekoek](#)". The New Review, New York, 1914-1916

and Asia (propositions 4 et seq.) and the military necessity of industrialization under Tsarism (proposition 6). Wagner himself doubts the sustainability of the economic successes attributed to Bolshevism in his time when he writes in proposition 57 that the Soviet state

"... only increased the economic difficulties to the danger point of an explosion of the economic contradictions by the intolerable over-tensioning of the forces of the workers and peasants.

The experiment in bureaucratically planned state economy can by no means be denoted as a complete success.

The great international cataclysms threatening Russia are bound to increase the contradictions of its economic system till they become intolerable and may enormously hasten the collapse of the hitherto gigantic economic experiment."

In proposition 59, on the other hand, Wagner speaks of Russian state capitalism as a "more advanced type of capitalist production than even the greatest and most advanced countries have to show". Perhaps the 'higher type' was meant in a sarcastic sense.

The biggest economic problems occurred in the huge agricultural sector. During the so-called collectivization of the agricultural sector between 1928 and 1940, 7 to 14 million people died. ⁽⁴⁾ Not only do we now, decades later have to conclude that while under Tsarism, Russia was the largest grain exporter in the world, in the years before the implosion, the Soviet Union had become the largest grain importer. ⁽⁵⁾ In the meantime there is also the experience with 'real existing socialism' in China. Emperor Mao let between 20 and 43 million people die of hunger and too much hard labor in the period 1959-1961 alone. ⁽⁶⁾

During the revolution in 1917, and even in 1933 when Wagner's theses were written, it was common among Marxists to speak of the revolution in Russia as a total (or partial; more about that later) bourgeois revolution. But in the historical sense of the term in Marx and Engels, there can be no question of bourgeois revolution - given the results, which according to Wagner are decisive - even though at the time all those who called themselves Marxists did so, from Lenin to Kautsky, from Trotsky to Pannekoek, from Martov to Luxemburg and from Bordiga to Radek.

Was the schema of the bourgeois revolution applicable to Russia?

Wagner was convinced - just like the Bolsheviks - that in 1917 the historical conditions in Russia were ripe for the bourgeois revolution. In the previous chapter, we have seen that this assumption is questionable given the results of the revolution in Russia, especially when we see it within the framework of the period of imperialism.

It is remarkable that Marx, in his 1881 correspondence with Vera stated that his theory is derived from the history of Western Europe and that it cannot be automatically applied to Russia. ⁽⁷⁾ Marx was not able to incorporate his notes about the Russian *Obsushina* or the *Mir* into a coherent whole in his final letter (after many and extensive concepts). ⁽⁸⁾

⁴ Wikipedia, [Collectivization in the Soviet Union](#)

⁵ J. R. Evenhuis, [Misoogsten en misse doctrines in de Sovjet-Unie](#) (in Dutch language).

⁶ Wikipedia, [Great Chinese Famine](#)

⁷ Marx an Sassulitsch, 8. März 1881

⁸ Adrian Zimmermann, [Marx, die russische Revolution und ihre Folgen](#), p. 142/143

However, in their preface to the Russian 1882 edition of the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels did raise the question:

"Can 'the Russian obsushina', even if it is a severely undermined form of the ancient common land ownership, directly pass into the higher form of the communist common property? Or, conversely, should it first go through the same process of dissolution that determines the historical development of the West?" ⁽⁹⁾

What method of production existed in Russia at the end of the 19th century, when crafts, bourgeois cities, and even feudality were lacking? Surely there were serfs, exploited by a hereditary nobility? Yes, at first sight, this looked like European feudalism, but Marx spoke of an Asian method of production because of important differences. Agriculture was largely self-sufficient for the peasants who worked the land collectively, which was also their collective property. The Russian nobility only had the function of claiming part of the harvest for their use and remittance to the central Tsarist state. This system of exploitation in-kind originally came from the Mongols at the time they dominated Russia. The remnants of this Asian method of production in the agricultural sector proved enormously tough to abolish it in Russia under Lenin and Trotsky, and Stalin, and in China under Mao. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In 1917, under the influence of industrialization promoted by the tsarist state with the help of foreign capital, Russian society had undergone major changes when compared to 1882. There could no longer be a direct transition from the Russian self-governing peasant community to socialism, skipping the horrors that a capitalist intermediate stage would bring to the proletariat. In the meantime, the self-governing peasant community had largely disappeared. The Russian social democrats all expected a bourgeois revolution in Russia, after which the industrialization and transformation of the backward agricultural sector would take off. Strangely enough, they seemed to take little notice of the remnants of Asian production and the peculiarities of Tsarism's political system. In contrast, several of Wagner's theses highlight the peculiarities of the Russian situation. Nevertheless, like the Russian social democrats, he maintains a schematic view of the 'historical necessity' of the bourgeois revolution in Russia.

Within the social democracy of all countries, under the influence of Kautsky's 'Orthodox' Marxism, it was very common to think in terms of historical necessity. Whereas Marx emphasized the role of human activity and their ideas, especially at revolutionary times, Kautsky opted for the certainty of social and economic 'laws'. Anton Pannekoek wrote about this:

"Since social democracy did not call for action, but, conversely, urged waiting until material conditions were ripe, the theory took the form of a mechanical link between economic causes and social reversals, whereby the intermediary of human activity disappeared." ⁽¹⁰⁾

When he wrote these words, in 1919 - in the middle of the wave of revolutions which lasted from 1917 to 1923 - Pannekoek contrasted this schematic view with an approach in which

⁹ Translated from Dutch: Marx/Engels, *Het Communistisch Manifest*, Pegasus, 2018, p. 14

¹⁰ Translated from Dutch: Pannekoek, [Het historisch materialisme](#)

consciousness and ideas played an important role:

"It is well known, and not by chance, that precisely those among the theorists who belonged to the spokesmen of a new, more active tactic, also, in theory, emphasized the interconnection of the human mind and its relation, passive and active, receiving and interacting, with society". (11)

With this fresh look, we want to look at the revolution in Russia, and not with Wagner's prefabricated theses, even though the later Pannekoek proclaimed similar views. More than a hundred years after the revolution in Russia, there are ample indications that Wagner is right when he concludes that this revolution and the actions of the Bolsheviks cannot serve as an example. But the reason is not that the revolution of 1917 was a bourgeois revolution. It is because the Bolsheviks thought they were dealing with a bourgeois revolution and tried to act accordingly in a Marxist sense, with disastrous consequences. If we assume, even if only in a mind experiment, that there was no bourgeois revolution on the agenda of history in 1917, and it did not take place, it raises the question of the Bolsheviks' views on their role, and how these 'revolutionary' ideas made history. But it is precisely in this area of Bolshevik views that Wagner is extremely incomplete because he assumes that it is not important what Lenin thought, for instance, at or before founding the Comintern (proposition 56). Because thinking, theory, determines the actions of the revolutionaries, and thus their successes or failures, we will make a detour into the theory of the double or permanent revolution, in which the international dimension of the revolution in Russia comes into view, an aspect that Wagner deals with only from his assumptions, and thus only from the perspective of one country, Russia.

The 'unimportant' proletarian internationalism of the Bolsheviks

In connection with the international aspects of a revolution in Russia, it is interesting to see how Marx and Engels in their preface to the Russian edition of 1882 of the Communist Manifesto answered the above question of Sazulich:

"The only answer that is possible today is the following. If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, in such a way that both complement each other, then the current common land ownership can serve as the starting point of a communist development". (12)

Marx and Engels here seem to raise the possibility that Russia could skip the stage of the bourgeois revolution, for reasons we've already seen. They link this possibility of a transition to socialism (or communism, these terms had the same meaning) to the condition of victory of a socialist revolution in Europe. In 1850, Marx had proposed a similar international strategy for backward Germany. (13):

"Although German workers will not be able to come to power without a very protracted revolutionary development and realize their class interests, this time they

¹¹ Idem

¹² Idem, p. 14/15

¹³ It could rightly be said that the choice of the following quote is not contextually correct. Indeed, the choice is entirely determined by what we are examining here, the parallel that the Bolsheviks and Trotsky saw between their strategy and that of Marx and Engels

can be sure that the first act of the impending revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their class in France and will, therefore, be accelerated. But they themselves will have to contribute most to their eventual victory, by making themselves aware of their class interests, by adopting a politically independent position as soon as possible, by not letting themselves be taken in by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie that an independent workers' party is superfluous. Its battle cry must be: 'The Permanent Revolution!' " (14)

This double strategy failed because the bourgeois revolution in Germany was not successful and because the proletariat in France was unable to gain the upper hand over the French bourgeoisie and even initiate a socialist revolution. Because almost 70 years later the Bolsheviks took Marx's and Engels's strategy as a model for their double or permanent revolution, and the Stalinists, in particular, legitimized their party politics with a reference to the period of the *Communist Manifesto*, it is interesting to examine this parallel using an article of 1948 by the council-communist theorist Willy Huhn.

For Germany, the League of Communists, the revolutionary minority that had commissioned the writing of the Manifesto, foresaw that the German bourgeoisie could not carry out its bourgeois revolution out of weakness towards the nobility and out of fear of the already emerging working class. That is why the League had to be active in the working class in Germany to organize it as an independent party that would drive the bourgeois revolution forward, if necessary against the will of the German bourgeoisie. It should be noted that for Marx and Engels, the notion of 'party of the proletariat' at this time had the meaning of the mass organization of the working class for its independent class goals, and not that of a revolutionary minority that later represented the Bolshevik party. (15) It was the League of Communists that tried to fulfil the role of the communist minority in 1848. Huhn has also shown that according to Marx the League was forced to work, clandestinely but not in the spirit of the strict centralized secret societies of the time, and later of the Bolshevik party. And - again in contrast to the Bolshevik view - that the communists did not function as a government party, but worked on the formation of the proletariat as a class ('party') of opposition. (16) Marx's prospects went no further. The rupture with his utopian predecessors meant that he based his views only on the real movement of communism, the workers' movement within the ever-changing conditions of class society.

It cannot be emphasized enough, Marx never said that the communist minority, the League, had to seize power in the name of or as a representative of the working class. This was reserved for the class, organized for its class purposes as a party, i.e. masses actively participating in the revolution. At this point, the contrast with the strategy of the Bolsheviks (proposition 25) cannot be greater. The fact that there was no dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, but over the proletariat (proposition 37) is one of the reasons for the failure of the revolution in Russia, a reason that Wagner does not mention. Not only did the revolution in Russia not bring socialism, not even in the limited sense of the initial stage of transformation towards full communism that Lenin gave to that term in his *State and Revolution*. The elimination of the power of the workers' councils and their subordination to the state

¹⁴ Translated from the Dutch version: [Verslag van het Centrale Bestuur aan de Communistische Bond van maart 1850. Van het Centrale Bestuur aan de Bond](#). London, March 1850

¹⁵ Willy Huhn, [Zur Lehre von der revolutionären Partei](#), 1948

¹⁶ Idem, part III

(proposition 49) also meant that the workers in Russia were not able to advance the bourgeois revolution 'as a party' (organized as a mass, in the sense of Marx). Assuming, of course, that there was still a historical 'necessity' for bourgeois revolutions. But that is precisely what Wagner believed with the Bolsheviks.

After the failure of the European revolutions of 1848, Marx no longer occupied himself with the bourgeois revolution, but concentrated on the real movement of the further development of the capitalist mode of production, also in Germany under the rule of the reactionary Juncker, and what it meant for the working class, its struggle, its organization, and its consciousness.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks, whom Trotsky had in the meantime joined, saw the possibility of a victorious proletarian revolution in Western and Central Europe, following the example of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, that the struggles of the working class in Russia would not only carry out the bourgeois revolution against the will of the bourgeoisie but would transform it into a proletarian revolution with the help of the victorious European proletarian revolutions. This is - in short with the omission of all kinds of peculiarities and differences - the idea of the double revolution (bourgeois and proletarian) or permanent revolution that existed in the period 1917-1923 not only among the Bolsheviks but also among the revolutionary social democrats in Europe who later called themselves communists (Luxemburg, Radek, Gorter, Pannekoek).

The Group of International Communists (G.I.C.), even after they started calling themselves Council Communists, still had this idea, despite the influence of Otto Rühle, who in the early 1920s spoke of a single, bourgeois-only revolution in Russia, an idea that Wagner may have taken over from him, or - given Wagner's origins in the social democracy of the period between the two world wars - perhaps from ... Kautsky. ⁽¹⁷⁾

It was up to Rühle's follower Cajo Brendel to pursue the idea of the reality of mere bourgeois revolutions to the extreme in extremely schematic exercises in which the events in Spain in 1936 ⁽¹⁸⁾, the C.C.P.'s seizure of power in China in 1951 ⁽¹⁹⁾ and various national liberation movements were squeezed into the straitjacket of the bourgeois revolution. Not surprisingly, these events were not placed in the historical context of the imperialist war, which has dominated the history of world capitalism since 1900.

In contrast, parts of the G.I.C. and even within the Spartacus Union in the 1970s the idea of a double revolution in Russia persisted. In the analysis of Spain 1936, the G.I.C. - probably against Brendel - again came up with the example of the struggle of the Russian workers against the Provisional Government of Kerensky as a perspective for the working class, even while German troops were besieging the 'democratic' Russia. ⁽²⁰⁾ Wagner's theses were also interesting for those who insisted on the idea of a double revolution because they recognized how Russia continued to develop in a bourgeois direction after the road to a

¹⁷ Kautsky, [Bolshevism at a deadlock](#), London, 1931

¹⁸ Cajo Brendel, [Revolutie en contrarevolutie in Spanje](#), 1977 (in Dutch language only)

¹⁹ Cajo Brendel, [Theses on the Chinese revolution](#), 1974

²⁰ Ph. Bourrinet, [The Dutch and German Communist Left \(1900–68\)](#), Ch. 9

socialist direction was closed by subjugating workers' councils and/or the failure of the world revolution.

On the occasion of the commemoration of the October Revolution in 1967, Bordiga wrote another eulogy to the strategy of the permanent revolution, based on the idea that a minority party in Russia (obviously guided by the right "invariable" program) could exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat in anticipation of the success of the world revolution. ⁽²¹⁾ In the current period of imperialism, we no longer see any bourgeois revolutions on the international scene, which were by definition limited to transforming and even forming nation-states. For those who adhere to the article of faith of the permanent revolution, the world shows the permanent war between imperialist superpowers, either directly with each other in world wars, or through smaller powers and national 'liberation' movements, as in the Cold War and in the following proxy wars. Those who cling to the outdated idea of the bourgeois revolution, or national liberation, quickly become entangled in imperialist antagonisms and eventually participate in them. This was the case in Russia with (part of) the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who wanted to continue Russian war participation even after the February Revolution.

On the other hand, the practical attitude of the Bolsheviks in the First World War was quite different. After internal struggles, they united around Lenin's proletarian internationalist slogan "Convert the imperialist war into civil war". As Wagner points out in proposition 50, their "consistently international standpoint" was equally determined by their tactics in the struggle for the Russian revolution. In Wagner's view, this means that their internationalism was only seemingly consistent with Marxist behaviour. Wagner does not answer the question of what consistent Marxist behaviour was and who showed it. The Bolsheviks wanted to carry out the bourgeois revolution in Russia against the will of the bourgeoisie, against that of the provisional bourgeois government, against that of the bourgeois part of the Mensheviks. (Might they be 'consistent Marxists'?) and against that of the Socialist Revolutionaries, all of whom ... continued Russian participation in the First World War. The question of the 1914 war made the international aspect of the revolution in Russia an urgent and decisive issue. It was Lenin who explicitly raised this issue when he arrived in Petersburg by placing the revolution in Russia in the perspective of the world revolution:

"Dear comrades, soldiers, sailors and workers! I am happy to greet in your persons the victorious Russian revolution, and greet you as the vanguard of the worldwide proletarian army... The piratical imperialist war is the beginning of civil war throughout Europe... The hour is not far distant when the peoples will turn their arms against their own capitalist exploiters... The worldwide socialist revolution has already dawned... Germany is seething... Any day now the whole of European capitalism may crash. The Russian revolution accomplished by you has prepared the way and opened a new epoch. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!" ⁽²²⁾

In Wagner's theses, the battle of the Bolsheviks against the war and their vision that the revolution in Russia was the beginning of the world revolution is only discussed as a tactical

²¹ [Bilan d'une Révolution](#), Programme Communiste, Nrs. 40-41-42, October 1967-June 1968

²² The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record by N.N. Sukhanov. Quotation from [The Penguin Book of Historical Speeches](#).

trick, a Machiavellian move by a bourgeois party. Wagner does not place the proletarian internationalism of the Bolsheviks within the context of the war against which it was directed but within that of "a great politics of international support for the Russian revolution. The other side was the policy and propaganda of the "national self-determination" of the peoples, in which the class perspective was abandoned even more than in the concept of the " 'people's revolution' in favor of an appeal to all classes of certain peoples" (proposition 50). Wagner, like other council communists, joins Rosa Luxemburg in criticizing Lenin's defense of the right of peoples to national self-determination. At the same time, Wagner ignores that while this 'right' in the activities of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was hard of practical significance until October 1917, from the moment they were ruling parties it became an important means in their domestic politics (Stalin was the People's Commissar of Nationalities) and their foreign politics. Henceforth, depending on the policy of the Russian state, 'peoples' and 'nations' were labelled as 'oppressed by imperialism' and thus candidates for 'national liberation', or, on the contrary, as imperialists, or accomplices of imperialism. Since the Russian Communist Party lost hope of support for a proletarian revolution in the West around 1920, it tried to protect the Eastern front through a peasant international. The Communist International was henceforth used to make the affiliated parties an instrument of Russian foreign policy. Through historically outdated tactics of trade unionism, parliamentarianism and the formation of fronts with parts of the bourgeoisie, the Western communist parties had to grow into mass organizations that exerted pressure on their governments (and not only by "unrest in the capitalist states from within" the capitalist states, as Wagner, among other, believes in proposition 61) in the interest of the Soviet Union. Wagner does not mention this break in Bolshevik politics and sees only the continuity of a party that has always been bourgeois.

State and state capitalism: mistakes or truths that became fatal to the workers

If we consider Lenin's *State and Revolution* as a plan for after the revolution, then we can discover in germ form the ways the councils were eliminated from power. Unfortunately, Pannekoek did not live up to his announcement in 1919 of a critique of *State and Revolution*⁽²³⁾. Perhaps this is due to his withdrawal from any political activity. In 1927, when the G.I.C. around Jan Appel came into being, Pannekoek resumed his political participation by writing articles for the periodicals of the G.I.C., mainly through his contacts with Henk Canne Meijer. It is striking that in the same year, Jan Appel, under his pseudonym Hempel, published a critique of 'State and Revolution' in the German magazine *Proletarier: "Marxism and state communism. The withering away of the state"*, later published by the G.I.C. in translation and with additions as a Dutch pamphlet. ⁽²⁴⁾

In 'State and Revolution', just before his return to Russia, Lenin recalls the lessons Marx drew from the Paris Commune, which social democracy had completely forgotten in its reformist zeal. Marx and Engels formulated this lesson extremely concisely in various forewords to the *Communist Manifesto*:

"Given the tremendous development of the large-scale industry over the last twenty-five years and the advancing party organization of the working class, in the light of

²³ See an insert at *De Nieuwe Tijd*: [L.S.](#)

²⁴ G.I.C., [Marxism and state communism. The withering away of the state](#)

practical experience, first of the February Revolution and, to an even greater extent, of the Paris Commune, in which the proletariat held political power for the first time for two months, this program is now obsolete in certain respects. In particular, the Commune proved that 'the working class cannot simply take possession of the existing state machine and set it in motion for its purposes'." (25)

It seems that it was Bukharin who drew Lenin's attention to the changed attitude of Marx and Engels towards the (bourgeois) state. But despite his partly successful attempt to assimilate the lessons of the Commune, Lenin gets into trouble in *State and Revolution* when, after the breakdown of the bourgeois state, he assigns important economic tasks to the 'half' state, to what he sees as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which according to Marx and Lenin will 'wither away' with the disappearance of the classes. Jan Appel puts his finger on the weak point:

- *How can this state die when it is assigned important, indispensable tasks?*
- *Where is the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' if it is not the workers' councils who control production, but the 'Soviet' state?*

In proposition 49, Wagner refers to the theoretical roots of Russian state capitalism, which Jan Appel first indicated in 1927, and which is further elaborated in the *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*: Lenin's adoption of Hilferding's reformist idea that enterprises in socialism can be organized by the state as a 'General Cartel'. The G.I.C. points out in 'Fundamental Principles' that in this way Lenin has confused the capitalist form of organization of the means of production, the cartel, with socialism. (26) It is true that at the time of the introduction of the N.E.P. Lenin spoke openly of state capitalism, but this remark did not put an end to a state modelled on Hilferding's cartel, which exercised a de facto dictatorship over the working class. This was all the more the case because Lenin justified state capitalism as progress compared to private capitalist production and as a step towards socialism. In light of Wagner's theses, it is perhaps more correct to argue that Lenin did not make a 'mistake' when he preferred state capitalism to the 'association of free and equal producers'. After all, was the management of production by the state not perfect for what Lenin, waiting for the world revolution to continue, saw as the bourgeois part of the revolution in Russia? After all, in the bourgeois revolutions, the feudal state was not destroyed, but conquered and then transformed into a bourgeois state. By the way, we already noticed that Marx and Engels were against government participation in 1848.

At the end of his life, Lenin made a comment that shows how doubtful the myth is that the Russian revolution demolished the Tsarist state:

"We took over the old machinery of the state, and that was our misfortune. Very often this machinery operates against us. In 1917, after we seized power, the government officials sabotaged us. This frightened us very much and we pleaded: 'Please come back.' They all came back, but that was our misfortune." (27)

²⁵ Translated from Dutch: Het Communistisch Manifest, idem, p. 11

²⁶ G.I.C., [Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution](#), 1935/2020, p. 28

²⁷ Lenin, Fourth World Congress of the IIIrd International, Collected Works vol. 33, p. 415, quoted by the G.I.C. in Idem, p. 248.

The G.I.C. commented:

“The Bolsheviks ultimately had to bow to the backwardness of the social structure in the agrarian country of Russia. They were forced to 'smash' the proletarian elements present in the Russian Revolution and take over the old bureaucratic apparatus.” ⁽²⁸⁾

When we abandon the idea of a complete or partial bourgeois revolution in Russia, which comes to the fore in Lenin, the G.I.C. and Wagner, the image of an attempt by the Bolsheviks to carry out a bourgeois revolution, when there was no 'historical necessity' at all, emerges. Thus, they came to be at the head of a state which they had taken over from Tsarism, which they thought to govern, but which governed them:

“The machine refused to obey the hand that guided it. It was like a car that was going not in the direction the driver desired, but in the direction someone else desired; as if it were being driven by some mysterious, lawless hand, God knows whose, perhaps of a profiteer, or of a private capitalist, or of both. Be that as it may, the car is not going quite in the direction the man at the wheel imagines, and often it goes in an altogether different direction. ... who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.” ⁽²⁹⁾

Let's not argue if it's correct or wrong, Wagner's theses are read as a story about a power-hungry bourgeois party that deliberately deceived the workers of Russia and the world into carrying out its nefarious state capitalist plans. In the above, we have seen that after the October Revolution the Bolsheviks were deceived with their ideas of the 'Soviet' state. The same goes for Lenin's original idea of limited socialization. Wagner states in proposition 48 that the Bolsheviks initially did not want to bring the entire economy into state hands, but were forced to do so. Not so much because of *“the elemental force of the workers' attack, on the one hand, and the sabotage of the dethroned employers on the other”*, but mainly because of the economic chaos that the Bolsheviks themselves had caused with the super-inflation of the Ruble. ⁽³⁰⁾

How Wagner, like the Bolsheviks, is wrong about the agricultural issue

Just as Wagner adopted the social-democrat and communist conception of the revolution in Russia as an entirely or partially bourgeois revolution, following the historical example of Western European developments, he did the same in the agrarian question. It was thought that in agriculture, as in industry, processes of expansion, mechanization, and proletarianization would take place through which the agricultural workers would join the socialist industrial workers. The socialization of agriculture was understood as the nationalization of the land and state-controlled agricultural production. Peasants were seen as a conservative or even reactionary stratum of the population because they clung to petty-

²⁸ Idem, p. 248.

²⁹ Lenin, XIth Congress of the R.C.P.(B), Political Report of the Central Committee of the R.C.P.(B), March 27, March 1922, in Works, Vol. 33.P. 279 / 288, quoted by G.I.C. in idem, p. 48.

³⁰ G.I.C., [Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution](#), 1935/2020, p. 38 and 193

bourgeois land ownership, or - as in Russia - because they sought to divide large land ownership among peasants. In Russian social democracy, both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, there even prevailed a pronounced hostile attitude towards the peasants, whereas Marx had advocated the greatest possible caution.

What was special about the Bolsheviks was their alternating tactics towards the peasants, which Wagner rightly relates to their pursuit of government power in a predominantly agricultural country. In particular, the Mensheviks denounced the demand for the abolition of large-scale land ownership as an opportunistic tactic by which the Bolsheviks rallied the peasants behind their politics. As we know, Rosa Luxemburg joined this criticism and supported the demand for nationalization of the land ⁽³¹⁾, not knowing how Stalin would later realize this demand. Wagner also supports the Menshevik criticism and even declares the Bolshevik demand for land distribution to be contrary to the interests of the working class. According to Wagner, the Bolsheviks were "*ruthless champions of small-capitalist, hence not socialist-proletarian interests against feudal and capitalist landed property*" (proposition 46). This assertion is in line with the idea within the German and Dutch Communist Left that the Soviet state did not maintain the existing class relations in the interest of the working class, but in the interest of the peasant class, especially since the N.E.P. The later developments under Stalin show that this position is untenable. State capitalism is a general tendency of capitalism in all countries. In Russia, because of the unique historical circumstances of a proletariat that put an end to the Russian war effort, state capitalism took a special form independent from a specific part of the capitalist class.

Wagner points out in proposition 6 that Tsarism had initiated forced industrialization for military reasons. Through the history that followed Wagner's theses, the involvement of Russia in World War II, and the subsequent formation of an imperialist bloc, we can now emphasize the imperialist necessity of both Tsarist and Soviet industrialization. Just as Tsarism withdrew more labor from the peasants for the construction of war industry, Lenin in 1920, at the introduction of the N.E.P., wanted to extract value for accelerated state-capitalist industrialization through the supply of vodka and textiles to the peasants. ⁽³²⁾ Wagner reverses this proposal by claiming that the Bolsheviks squeezed out surplus value from the workers and passed it on to the peasants (proposition 59). Although this assertion follows the logic that the Soviet state served the interests of the peasant class, it contradicts the reality of the squeezing and oppression of both most peasants and the working class by Russian state capitalism.

Curiously, the G.I.C. has not criticized Wagner's position (in fact shared by all 'Marxists') of the desirability of socialization of agriculture through nationalization of land in Russia. After all, the G.I.C. had a different point of view than the one prevailing in social democracy. Already in 1904, Gorter had noticed that the expected scaling up of agriculture along the lines of that in the industry was not confirmed by the developments in the Netherlands. ⁽³³⁾ In 1920, in his Open letter to fellow party member Lenin, Gorter pointed out the relative importance of peasants and their different attitudes in the revolution in East and West:

³¹ Rosa Luxemburg, [The Russian Revolution](#), Ch. 2

³² Lenin, [Report On The Substitution Of A Tax In Kind For The Surplus Grain Appropriation System](#)

³³ See [Eenige opmerkingen bij de voorstellen van de agrarische commissie](#) / Ant[on]. Pannekoek [Met een antwoord van H. Gorter], in: *De Nieuwe Tijd*, 9e Jg., 1904, p. 409-420. Dutch only.

“There is an enormous difference between Russia and Western Europe. In general, the importance of the poor peasants as a revolutionary factor decreases from east to west. In some parts of Asia, China, and India, in the event of a revolution, this class would be the decisive factor; in Russia, it constitutes an indispensable and, indeed, one of the main factors; in Poland, and a few states of South-Eastern and Central Europe, it is still of importance for the revolution, but further West its attitude grows ever more antagonistic towards the revolution.” (34)

At the end of the 1920s, the G.I.C. undertook a comparative study of developments in agriculture in various European countries. This revealed that in the countries with the most productive agriculture it was not the large company that dominated, but the agricultural small company. In these countries, small farming was fully integrated into capitalist commodity production and formed part of an agro-industrial sector by specializing in a limited number of products, by its links with industrial suppliers of fertilizer, animal feed, and pesticides, by its links with purchasers such as auctions, dairies, slaughterhouses, wholesalers and large retailers, and finally by its links with agricultural universities and banks. Peasants' cooperatives often showed themselves to play an important role in these ties and alienated themselves from their members in the same way as the trade unions and parliamentary workers' parties did from the workers. This real development was at odds with the state-capitalist conception of socialism. From its study, the G.I.C. drew the following important political conclusion:

“However, the social revolution which communism sees as the introduction of a new law of movement for the circulation of products has something to offer the peasants. In addition to the relief from all leases, mortgages, and corporate debts, the even distribution of the social product brings about the direct and complete equality of the city and countryside, which, in practice, favors the peasant. However, the agrarian proletariat, these pariahs of capitalist society, makes a great leap forward, so that it has every interest in associating agriculture with communist production”. (35)

The above-mentioned complete failure of the large-scale state-capitalist Soviet agricultural policy through Sovchoses and Kolchoses not only confirms the correctness of the views of the G.I.C., but also the incorrectness of Wagner's point of view. This is an important indication that Wagner's text cannot be considered as a text of the G.I.C., even though it has taken up its dissemination because it partly agreed with it.

Conclusions

By now it will be clear to the reader that I partly agree with Wagner that Bolshevism is unsuitable as a working-class theory. Partly, because the question is what is meant by Bolshevism, or, if I may, Leninism, which Wagner himself repeatedly argues is opportunistic in tactical terms. Is it the variant of Trotsky, and if so, which Fourth International organization? Or is it that of Stalin, who baptized it Marxism-Leninism? Or that of Mao, now that Maoism has multiple currents, both within the Chinese party and beyond. Also, within

³⁴ Herman Gorter, [Open Letter to Comrade Lenin](#)

³⁵ G.I.C., [Ontwikkelingslijnen in de landbouw. Ontwikkeling van het boerenbedrijf](#), 1930. Dutch only.

the Communist Left there are tendencies that are more or less based on Lenin and Bolshevism, and also the G.I.C. during the events called Spanish Civil War referred to the attitude of the Bolsheviks between February and October 1917 in Russia.

What does emerge as a conclusion is that it was not the bourgeois character of the revolution in Russia that inevitably led to the elimination of the power of the workers' councils, but the misconception of revolution as partly bourgeois, partly proletarian. The Bolshevik Party, encouraged by these erroneous but generally shared views, wanted to follow the example of the League of Communists in Germany in 1848 but did not see (as hardly anyone did at the time) that Marx and Engels did not seek government power by the League as a minority, but that the working class would act en masse as an opposition party. The failure of the world revolution made it impossible for the revolutionary masses to correct these mistakes of the revolutionary minority. The workers in Russia alone were too weak for that. This insight into the inevitable theoretical errors that revolutionaries will continue to make in the future pleads to their humility.

No revolutionary group can avoid the question of revolution and counter-revolution in Russia. A critical study of Wagner's theses can, with a healthy mistrust of any theory invoking historical necessity, contribute to a correct understanding.

Fredo Corvo, July 2020