

# Was Lenin a German Agent?

Z.A.B. Zeman, Ed.:  
*Germany and the Revolution in Russia, 1915-1918*,  
Oxford University Press, London and N. Y., 1958.

Alan Moorehead:  
*The Russian Revolution*,  
Collins, London; Harper & Bros., N. Y., 1958.

Reviewed by F. L. Carsten

THE QUESTION WHETHER the Bolsheviks were German agents has been discussed ever since Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917 in a sealed train put at his disposal by the Kaiser's government. The motives which made such strange bed-fellows were simple: the German government, and especially the High Command, were eager to bring about a separate peace with Russia at the earliest possible moment, so as to free German divisions for the planned offensive in the west; the Russian provisional government refused to conclude such a separate peace and was determined to remain loyal to its allies. Among the Russian revolutionary groups in Switzerland only the Bolsheviks were in favor of an immediate peace, "without annexations and indemnities," and were willing to cross Germany on their return to Russia because they feared that they would be detained by the Entente if they travelled through allied territory.

Did this journey and the policy advocated by Lenin after his return to Russia make him a German agent? Were German funds made available to him, either in Switzerland, or after his return to Russia? These questions have been debated ever since the "Sisson documents", published by the United States government in October 1918, attempted to prove that Lenin acted on German orders and was a mere tool of the Imperial government.<sup>1</sup> A few years ago, however, Dr. George

<sup>1</sup> *The German-Bolshevik Conspiracy*, War Information Series, No. 20, 1918.

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Kennan conclusively proved that these documents were a forgery.<sup>2</sup> Yet even his conclusions were tentative with regard to letters among the documents relating to the period *before* the October revolution (published in Appendix i of the 1918 pamphlet). Dr. Kennan wrote:

The question as to what sources of clandestine external support the Bolsheviks had during the spring and summer of 1917 is a complicated one. . . . That there was extensive communication between the Bolshevik leaders and persons in Scandinavia in these months; that this communication involved persons whose names occur in these letters; and that the communication very probably involved the transfer of funds to the Bolsheviks from *some* external sources—all this seems fairly well established. Further inquiry will have to establish whether the German government itself was behind this, or whether the moneys came only from friendly foreign socialist sources and other well-wishers abroad. In either case, there might well have been some substance behind these letters. . . .<sup>3</sup>

THUS THE RECENT publication from the German archives of documents relating to Germany's attitude towards the revolution in Russia is of the greatest importance: from these documents, edited by Mr. Z. A. B. Zeman, it emerges how much money the German government spent on supporting the Russian revolutionary movement, and what its relations were with the Bolsheviks and other opposition groups.

Yet the evidence is still inconclusive. For example, very large sums were paid out by the Kaiser's government during World War I to various agents for the fostering of subversive propaganda in Russia. What we do not learn is how much of this money ever reached Russia, who received it, and how it was used. Naturally, no accounts were kept by these agents nor by the revolutionary groups. Surprisingly enough, the Imperial government was willing to spend large amounts on these projects, without any guarantee that the money reached

<sup>2</sup> George F. Kennan, "The Sisson Documents," *Journal of Modern History*, xxviii, 1956, pp. 130 ff.; *Russia leaves the war*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N. J., and Faber, London, 1956, pp. 413-20, 442-56.

<sup>3</sup> "The Sisson Documents," *loc. cit.*, p. 154.

its destined ends and, if so, that it was spent in the interests of the donor. As early as March 1915 two million marks was allocated to the support of Russian revolutionary propaganda, most of which was paid out to Dr. Alexander Helphand, alias Parvus, who was in fact a German agent and at one time had been a close associate of Trotsky. Another million rubles was paid to him at the end of the year.<sup>4</sup> In a memorandum to the German government of March 1915 Parvus pointed out that a political mass strike in Russia could only be organized "under the leadership of the Russian Social Democrats. The radical wing of this party [*i.e.*, the Bolsheviks] has already gone into action, but it is essential that they be joined by the moderate minority group. . . ." He went on to list the Bolsheviks under Lenin as the first among the groups which he proposed should be invited to attend a congress of Russian revolutionaries to organize immediate action against Tsarism.<sup>5</sup>

PARVUS HAD contacts with Radek and others; but the fact that he worked for Germany was so well known that Lenin, in passing through Stockholm in April 1917 on his famed return journey to Russia, refused to see Parvus and had this refusal recorded by several witnesses. Lenin, always extremely suspicious, was well aware of the fact that his journey in the German sealed train would be exploited by his political enemies, and for that reason and as the leader of his party shunned any contact with Parvus. But some less prominent Bolsheviks had no such scruples. Those at Stockholm—Radek, Hanecki and Vorovsky—continued to see Parvus regularly; Hanecki was in effect employed by him. When Philip Scheidemann, the German Social Democratic leader, went there at the end of 1917 he noted that "Parvus saw Vorovsky every day," although by that time the latter had become the Soviet envoy in Stockholm.<sup>6</sup> It is quite inconceivable that Lenin was unaware of these contacts, nor would they have continued if he had opposed them. Lenin must have known, or at least suspected, what was going on, but preferred to let other people do the dubious work for his party. It cannot be proved that Parvus handed over any German money to the Bolsheviks, but it is more than likely. This was also the general opinion at the time, according to a report of

<sup>4</sup> Zeman, pp. 3, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140: "Preparations for a Political Mass Strike in Russia."

<sup>6</sup> P. Scheidemann, *Memoirs of a Social Democrat*, Hodder, London, 1929, ii. 435.

the German legation in Stockholm to Berlin; in its view, Parvus was quite unsuitable to be sent to Petrograd as an emissary because it "would present Bolsheviks' opponents with a powerful weapon by 'electing' a man like him as courier, while the other side says that hardly are the Bolsheviks at the helm before Parvus pays them their allowance. . . ." <sup>7</sup>

If Lenin was extremely careful in his personal contacts with Parvus, he could nevertheless accept money from that source, provided its provenance was sufficiently camouflaged. How easily this was done emerges from the report of another German agent about a meeting in Switzerland with "leading representatives of different groups within the pacifist Socialist party," among which it is very likely that there were some Bolsheviks:

After they had shown clear and, I might almost say, joyful willingness to accept financial support for the specific purpose of work for peace, I said that I, for my part, would be happy to grant considerable sums for such a noble, humanitarian and internationalist aim. Moreover, the Russian revolution had made such a magnificent moral impression and had aroused such generous impulses that other persons of my acquaintance would be only too pleased to sacrifice large sums to support the Russian revolution by helping to achieve an immediate peace. These offers were all accepted with great pleasure. . . . It would therefore be all the more pleasing if large sums could be put at the disposal of those in favor of peace by wealthy comrades and friends. . . . The personality of the donor would guarantee that the money came from an unobjectionable source. . . . Coming from me, the offer silenced all their doubts and objections. . . .<sup>8</sup>

AFTER THE OUTBREAK of the revolution further large sums were allocated by the German government to political propaganda inside Russia: five million marks in April, and fifteen million in November 1917.<sup>9</sup> These payments continued even after the conclusion of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, a fact hitherto unknown. In June 1918 the German Minister in Moscow, Count Mirbach, wired that "due to strong Entente competition, 3,000,000 marks per months [is] necessary. . . .," and the sum of forty million marks was approved.<sup>10</sup> It was only the assassination of Count Mirbach, by left Social Revolutionaries in July 1918 and the subsequent withdrawal of the German diplomatic mission which put an end to this policy. As on previous occa-

<sup>7</sup> Zeman, p. 87: telegram to the German Foreign Ministry of November 22, 1917.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6: the Military Attaché of the German Legation in Bern, incorporating a report from a Herr Baier of May 4, 1917.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 75.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 133, 137, and n. 2.

sions, there is no indication of the specific recipients to whom these vast sums were paid. But there is some other evidence of its utilization. In the autumn of 1917 the German Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Richard von Kühlmann, in telegrams to General Headquarters claimed that it was German financial support which had facilitated the success of the Bolsheviks:

Our work together has shown tangible results. The Bolshevik movement could never have attained the scale or the influence which it has today without our continual support. . . .

And two months later (in an exposé to be submitted to Wilhelm II):

It was not until the Bolsheviks had received from us a steady flow of funds through various channels and under different labels that they were in a position to be able to build up their main organ, *Pravda*, to conduct energetic propaganda and appreciably to extend the originally narrow basis of their party. The Bolsheviks have now come to power. . . .<sup>11</sup>

On May 18, 1918, von Kühlmann sent a telegram to Count Mirbach in Moscow showing why he followed this course so consistently:

Please use larger sums, as it is greatly in our interests that Bolsheviks should survive. . . . As a party, Kadets are anti-German; Monarchists would also work for revision of Brest peace treaty. We have no interest in supporting Monarchists' ideas, which would reunite Russia. On the contrary, we must try and prevent Russian consolidation as far as possible and, from this point of view, we must therefore support the parties furthest to the left.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, neither the October (November) revolution nor the conclusion of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk caused a change of German policy: to bring about a separate peace with Russia, to support the party which was in favor of such a peace, and to maintain it in power after the conclusion of the peace treaty. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, and Lenin in particular, were determined to come into power by any means at their disposal: being desperately short of money, there was clearly a great temptation to accept sums offered to them and not to enquire too closely into their provenance. During the earlier history of the Bolshevik party its funds had been replenished by "expropriation" raids on Russian banks and other methods closely akin to robbery,

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 94: telegrams of September 29 and December 3, 1917.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29. Cf. the view of Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War*, p. 456: "There is, however, no reason to believe that any German money passed to the Bolsheviks after the November Revolution. . . ."

tactics which were spurned by other revolutionary groups.<sup>13</sup>

From Lenin's point of view there was nothing contemptible or dangerous in this as long as he did not have to modify his policy to suit the German book, as long as he did not act on German instructions, as long as he did not become their agent and informer. That he *was* under such obligation is the allegation which the 1918 "Sisson documents" tried to substantiate. But there is no evidence whatever in the documents now published to support this allegation, a conclusion which is also reached by Mr. Zeman, their editor.<sup>14</sup>

ON THE OTHER HAND, the collection of documents has raised a number of controversial questions, especially the extent to which German money contributed to the Bolsheviks' success. The latter question has led to a somewhat heated discussion in English journals,<sup>15</sup> particularly after a review of the collection, published anonymously in *The Times Literary Supplement*, maintained:

Whatever volume of funds Germany may have pumped into Russia through secret channels in the years of the war, it appears to have had no significant influence on the course of events. . . .

The review tried further to minimize the importance of the von Kühlmann telegrams by asserting that Kühlmann was notoriously a vain man and an unreliable witness.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to this viewpoint, Mr. George Katkov has asserted:

. . . a few million rubles for propaganda and party work might well have been decisive in helping Lenin to usurp the power held by his weak and bewildered opponents. . . .

And Mr. Leonard Schapiro has concurred:

Possession of ample funds for subversive propaganda between March and November, 1917, was a most significant factor in the Bolshevik victory. Hitherto the source of this money was a matter for conjecture and suspicion. Now we know that the German Foreign Minister admitted that he provided it.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For details see Bertram D. Wolfe, *Three who made a Revolution*, Dial Press, New York, 1948, pp. 379-96.

<sup>14</sup> Zeman, p. x.

<sup>15</sup> George Katkov, "German Foreign Office Documents on Financial Support to the Bolsheviks," *International Affairs*, xxxii, 1956, pp. 181 ff.; *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 8, 22, 29, September 12, and October 3, 1958.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 8, 1958, p. 442.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 513, 561.

Von Kühlmann's estimate of the importance of German money in helping the Bolsheviks may have been "self-flattering and exaggerated," but it cannot, in the present writer's view, be entirely disregarded; nor can his later silence on this point be adduced to prove that his original claim was untrue. Whatever his unreliability, it seems very unlikely that he would have made entirely unfounded statements in communications addressed to persons who must have been aware of the facts. Moreover, we know from the diaries of Goebbels and from other sources how severe a handicap the shortage of funds was to the Nazis in December 1932, and how important their renewed flow was to their success in January 1933. It is possible that the Bolsheviks would have come to power in any event, but German support clearly facilitated their task.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the factor which above all played into the hands of the Bolsheviks was the policy of the provisional government. In 1917 the Russian masses had two primary demands: "land and peace." The people turned against the provisional government because it did not fulfill these demands, and supported its opponents who promised that they would. Money could—and did—help the Bolsheviks, but money could not create the revolutionary situation which they were able to exploit. This point seems to have been neglected by the contributors to the discussion.

THAT THE SAME DOCUMENTS can be interpreted in an entirely different sense has been shown by a curious coincidence: the almost simultaneous publication of Alan Moorehead's history of the Russian revolution, which is based on the researches of Professor S. T. Possony of Georgetown University (Washington, D. C.) and many collaborators, and was financed by the University of Pennsylvania and *Life* magazine. We are told by Mr. Moorehead that in the course of these researches "all available diplomatic records, not only in Germany, but throughout Europe, and even in countries as far afield as Turkey and Japan," were examined and that "100,000 odd documents were perused" (p. 13).<sup>18</sup>

The result of these vast labors pursued over many years is a work which seems to aim at blackening Lenin's character by various insinuations and tries to prove in particular that he was unscrupulous about money throughout his life. We are informed, for example, that in 1904 the Japanese financed revolutionary propaganda in Russia and that all kinds of people were hoodwinked into supporting them. Then the book continues:

<sup>18</sup> Page references are to Collins' British edition of Mr. Moorehead's book.

"Lenin's part is obscure. It is known, however, that he obtained money at this time . . ." (p. 64-5). The reader is left to draw the obvious inference. Somewhat later (pp. 94-5) we are told that Lenin converted the money obtained by the expropriation raids in Russia "directly to his own use", that he "found ways of steering this money into his own pocket," as if the funds of his party and his private fortune were identical. In narrating how the Okhrana (Tsarist secret police) succeeded in planting informers in the revolutionary organizations and mentioning the successful spies, Azev and Malinovsky, we are treated to this comment (p. 105):

In a wager as to whether the Tsar or the Bolsheviks fostered the greater scoundrels in their entourage, no detached observer would confidently risk a penny. . . .

In reality, however, Azev was not a Bolshevik, but a Social Revolutionary, and (as Mr. Moorehead himself mentions) Malinovsky was later executed by the Bolsheviks.

The mind of the reader having thus been well preconditioned, there follows the heart of the story: the use of German funds for revolutionary propaganda in Russia during World War I, the story also told by the documents published by Mr. Zeman. But how different this story looks as seen by Mr. Moorehead! His comment on a somewhat inconclusive meeting between Lenin and a German agent, the Estonian Kesküla, is (p. 139):

Yet some sort of an understanding was reached between the two men, and almost certainly money was involved . . . Lenin was in funds again. . . .

If this still contains an element of doubt, four pages later (p. 143) we read:

Having at first regarded Kesküla as, possibly, an *agent-provocateur*, Lenin accepted him as his go-between with the Germans, took money from him, and confided his peace-plans to him. . . .

Kesküla did indeed report to the Germans that Lenin's program contained demands for a renunciation of Russian claims to Constantinople and the Dardanelles, and for the moving of Russian troops into India. But in Mr. Moorehead's opinion this revealed something much more sinister—namely, proof of "how far Lenin was prepared to go at this time in making a deal with Germany." To Mr. Moorehead, the information imparted by Lenin (supposedly in the form of "proposals for making peace with Germany in the event of the Bolsheviks obtaining power in Russia,") meant "in effect . . . that Bolshevik Russia would be prepared to give Germany a free hand in the Middle East, and would

become an ally of Germany in an attack on the British Empire." (p. 141).<sup>19</sup>

After all this, we need not be surprised to find the author ascribing an inordinate amount of significance to the work of German agents following the February (March) revolution (they "were instructed to work for the overthrow of Milyukov and his replacement by a government that was more amenable to the Germans, if possible a government of Bolsheviks"); describing (without offering any evidence) sundry "secret dealings" between the Bolsheviks and German agents; and naming—again without any basis in fact—the venerable Swiss Social Democratic leader, Robert Grimm, as one of these agents (p. 216).<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Lenin's attitude during the peace negotiations of Brest-Litovsk is described thus (p. 297):

**Lenin had his understanding with the Germans; they had sent him back to Russia in order to seize power and make peace, and they had financed him. . . .**

Clearly, Lenin not only took German money, but was put into power by the Germans and carried out their instructions: we are back at the charge made by the "Sisson documents". The October revolution, seen in this way, was a conspiracy instigated by the Kaiser's government: we are not too far removed from the views of the Wise Men of Zion. Even the February revolution, Mr. Moorehead seems to imply, was instigated by someone. On the one hand he says (p.155):

**You could not call it spontaneous [because] for weeks and months, even for years, an outburst had been expected, and many different revolutionary groups were ready to take advantage of it once it had happened.**

On the other hand, he concedes:

**At the start, it was a boiling over of mass discontent. The workers were fed up with the war. They had no bread, they were cold, and they were furious with the bureaucrats who were supposed to control their lives.**

<sup>19</sup> See also Zeman, *op. cit.*, p. 6: the German Minister in Bern to the German Chancellor on September 30, 1915.

<sup>20</sup> How ludicrous the assertions about Grimm are can be seen from the documents published by Werner Hahlweg, *Lenins Rückkehr nach Russland 1917*, (Lenin's Return to Russia, 1917) Leiden, 1957, no. 10, pp. 51-4, no. 13, p. 56, no. 36, p. 80, no. 86, pp. 119-20, of April 4 to May 6, 1917.

Yet, as if perturbed by the extent of this "concession," he adds this comment (pp. 156-7):

**There remains one other point of importance. The workers and the soldiers by themselves could never have made the revolution succeed. They needed money, leaders and political organization; and these they got from the many underground organizations that were interested in bringing down the Tsar.**

Perhaps one day Mr. Moorehead will make it clear what in his opinion constitutes a spontaneous revolution. This interpretation of history, however, has one enormous advantage: all events can be reduced to simple versions of black and white, and the leading actors become little chessmen moved about at the master's command.

ALL THE EVIDENCE at our disposal clearly shows that Lenin was as unscrupulous about using German aid as he was about the use of money obtained through expropriation raids or other doubtful means. To Lenin it was essential to come into power, and the means by which he did so were a matter of secondary importance. If he did not say "the end justifies the means" in so many words, this nevertheless suggests a motto for his actions. He was not, however, a German agent, and he did not take any orders from the German government. If the policies of the two coincided for a time, this was bound to be a phase only: Lenin, once in power, was to work as strenuously for the overthrow of the Imperial government as he had worked for that of the Russian provisional government. This was as essential in the interests of Russia and the Bolshevik government, on which the shackles of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk had been imposed by the Imperial government, as it was in the interests of world revolution; for Lenin firmly believed that the Russian revolution needed the helping hand of the workers of Germany and other advanced capitalist countries.

It might be noted in closing that the close contacts between German official quarters and leading Bolsheviks established during World War I had important sequels. They were to reappear in Radek's connections with German military circles in 1918-19, and later in those between the Red Army and the Reichswehr. They were to figure equally in the accusations against Radek and others during the Moscow trials some twenty years later. It seems that the records of the OGPU were kept as carefully as those of the German Foreign Ministry.

# A Mirror of Soviet Reality

Merle Fainsod:  
*Smolensk under Soviet Rule*,  
Harvard University Press,  
Cambridge, Mass., 1958.

Reviewed by Wanda Bronska-Pampuch

AT THE TIME OF my release from the Soviet forced labor camp at Kolyma in 1945, I asked the young criminal prisoner who was attending to the necessary clerical formalities connected with my discharge if I might have a look at my dossier (*delo*). After all, I thought, eight years of imprisonment as a political offender ought to entitle me to that much. A little taken aback, the young man looked up from the folder in front of him, which had my name on the cover, and replied, "No, that is forbidden. Besides, what would you get out of it anyway?" It was useless to press the matter, and so I left the camp without having found out what was in the mysterious file. Did it contain, perhaps, a statement of the grounds for my conviction; an explanation of how the "evidence" against me had been fabricated; or, possibly, a list of those who had informed against me? Much as I should have liked to know the answers, I decided that the young prisoner was doubtless right, and that a look at my dossier would probably have made me none the wiser.

This brings up the larger question of how true a picture of Soviet reality is provided by the documents stored in the massive safes and secret files of the NKVD offices and party secretariats. The ordinary Soviet citizen is inclined to believe that these records hold the answers to all the secrets and mysteries of Soviet life, but in reality they are but fragmentary clues to the citizen's hard existence and the functioning of the system. They

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Mrs. Bronska-Pampuch, who has also written under the pen-name of Alfred Burmeister, is a German journalist of Polish descent. After seven years in the Soviet Union, she was arrested in 1938 as a "spy for Pilsudski," and spent the next eight years in a concentration camp. Her book *Polen zwischen Hoffnung und Verzweiflung* (Poland Between Hope and Despair) has just been published in Germany.

are as diverse and complex as that existence itself—often false or unconvincing, yet sometimes remarkably genuine; frequently grim and terrifying, yet at times uplifting. The overall image pieced together from such fragments can be as true, or again as false, as any picture of the whole based on the observation of individual phenomena; how close it comes to reality depends upon the intuitive, analytical and inductive capacities of the observer.

THE EXCELLENCE OF Mr. Fainsod's study based on the materials contained in the so-called "Smolensk Archive" demonstrates that he possesses these talents in high degree. The Archive, comprising the entire documentary files of the regional CPSU headquarters at Smolensk for the period from the Bolshevik Revolution through 1938, fell into the hands of the Nazi invasion forces in 1941, was removed to Germany, and finally came into American possession at the end of the war. By dint of long and painstaking research, Professor Fainsod has succeeded in weaving this unique body of historical material into a comprehensive and authentic study of the evolution of Soviet rule in the Smolensk region during the first two, formative decades of the Communist regime. But while it is specifically the experience of this small segment of the Soviet Union, with its particular local characteristics, which the author examines, his book in fact illuminates a much broader area. For the Smolensk experience was not merely an integral part, but at the same time a reflection, of the larger experience of the nation as a whole—as the author puts it, "a mirror of Soviet reality" and a "record in miniature" of the emergence of Soviet totalitarianism and its impact on the lives of the people.

The authentic quality of Fainsod's study cannot fail to impress itself particularly upon anyone who lived in the Soviet Union during this period of national transformation. Nor need one necessarily have witnessed the specific developments in Smolensk to recognize this authenticity. The reviewer, for example, lived in the interior of the country and never saw Smolensk or any of the outlying regions. Yet the events portrayed by Fainsod have a