‘An Unsuccessful Depiction of the “German October” (Comrade Trotsky’s “The Lessons of October”)”

O. Kuusinen

In the latter half of last year, we saw here a classic demonstration of how to let slip a perfectly exceptional revolutionary situation of world historical significance.

TROTSKY in September 1924 in *Uroki Oktiabria*\(^2\)

\[\ldots\]

If the (German) party had proclaimed an insurrection in October (of last year), as proposed by the Berlin comrades, it would now be lying with its neck broken.

From a draft of theses by TROTSKY and RADEK in January 1924\(^3\)

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Both in September 1923 and in January 1924, I had the opportunity in my capacity as secretary to take part in the commissions on the German question formed under the Executive Committee of the Comintern; I am therefore not only familiar with the attitude of the Executive Committee as a whole but also with the position of individual leading comrades in the Comintern vis-à-vis the October events in Germany. I was therefore extremely surprised to see how comrade Trotsky covered these matters in his introduction to *1917* (‘The Lessons of October’). After all, these events are barely seven years old – and

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\(^1\) O. Kuusinen, ‘Neudavsheesia izobrazhenie ‘nemetskogo Oktiabria’’, *Pravda*, no. 273, 30 November 1924, pp. 5–6.

\(^2\) Trotsky, Document 1, p. 87.

\(^3\) I am unable to locate this quotation. The extant sections of the theses are reproduced in *Deutscher Oktober* 2003, pp. 403–6.
it is incomprehensible how such recent facts can be distorted. As these facts are still not generally well-known, comrade Trotsky’s picture of them must be contrasted with the actual state of affairs.

The Charge

Comrade Trotsky devoted his ‘The Lessons of October’ to the development and elucidation of the following subject. The experience of the Russian October, and the experiences of many European countries, especially the experience of the ‘abortive German October’, as he puts it, tell us one and the same thing. At the decisive moment, on the eve of armed insurrection, several leading comrades from our own ranks rose up against the insurrection. In Russia however, thanks to the pressure exerted by comrade Lenin, and thanks to comrade Trotsky’s direct collaboration, the insurrection was launched and victory was won. During the ‘German October’ of 1923 however, the insurrection was not started, even though, as comrade Trotsky puts it, ‘all the conditions for a revolution are in place, with the exception of a far-sighted and resolute party leadership’. The revolutionary nature of this situation was not recognised in time, and nobody emerged who was able to put pressure on the cc which was trying to hold it back. For this reason, neither an insurrection nor a seizure of power occurred. The German October did not happen. We saw only ‘a classic demonstration of how to let slip a perfectly exceptional revolutionary situation of world historical significance’.

For comrade Trotsky, this drama of the German October played against the backdrop of the history of the Russian October. Comrade Trotsky describes in detail how resolutely he himself acted in 1917, and in even greater detail how several other comrades tried to pursue a ‘political course of refusing to fight’. These comrades – ‘opponents of the insurrection’ – had wildly overestimated the forces of the enemy just two weeks before the bloodless victory of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd (‘even Lenin believed that the enemy had serious forces in Petrograd’). According to comrade Trotsky, the leaders of the German party last year were also guilty of overestimating enemy forces:

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4 Trotsky, Document 1, p. 134.
5 Trotsky, Document 1, p. 88.
6 Trotsky, Document 1, p. 87.
7 Trotsky, Document 1, p. 114.
8 Trotsky, Document 1, p. 112.
9 Trotsky, Document 1, p. 113.