Introduction to ‘The Lessons of the Revolution’

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The effect that the following exposition by Leon Trotsky exercises and will exercise on the Russian Communist Party and perhaps the Russian state is neither self-evident nor understood. This is a historical consideration with – in itself – a not excessively sharp critique of the errors at the time of the present leader of the Communist International, but in the meantime the latter has also wholly admitted these himself, so that does not by itself explain the excitement, and, after all, do not the saints of the Catholic Church also get to heaven, not thanks to their innate virtues, but on account of overcoming their inherent defects? This criticism refers to things from the past, and where it does include more recent matters, it does not, in our opinion, even start with the correct assumptions. And finally, in these more topical parts, the criticism does not even refer to Russian affairs, but it is German sufferings that are brought up, and the great effect they have on the Russian situation. In our opinion, these are apparent contradictions for which the German reader requires an explanation.

Trotsky persists in the thesis that a situation existed in Germany during October 1923 in which the Communist Party, with a decisive leadership – as that of Lenin in October 1917 – would have succeeded in taking power. Why Trotsky arrives at this assumption is, for us, understandable. The war in the Ruhr had been lost. One can confidently maintain that what occurred was something unequalled in modern history, and perhaps in history in general. A people had been dragged through a terrible war lasting four years, whose end only exacerbated the suffering. According to general opinion, one must believe that the lesson has taken root: only the pike gives two consecutive bites on the fishhook, and so it is said not to feel the pain. The Germans – an extremely emotional nation as is known – took two bites. The war in the Ruhr was fought according to the formula of the World War. Like that, it was a fight over principle, a fight about the sanctity of treaties and all manner of fine things. But the German government carried out this second war with more inhuman methods than the Wilhelmine government carried out the World War. From the standpoint of the

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2 Zinoviev, Document 11, p. ??.
German bourgeoisie, the World War had at least still a trace of decency within it. One shot the ‘enemy’ dead and got on with plundering one’s own people only as an agreeable sideline, so to speak. In the war in the Ruhr, these side effects became shameless and the whole point of the thing: the French hardly bothered fighting the whole swindle; on the contrary, the longer the thing lasted the greater their chance of gaining a permanent foothold in the Ruhr, whereas the effects internally were devastating. Such a total undermining of every social condition in the short space of a few months, as occurred at that time in Germany, has perhaps not yet been seen anywhere else. Out of the ocean of tears represented by the war in the Ruhr emerged a small stratum of capitalists with increased economic power and increased lust for political power, and who had begun to undertake a terrible sorting out within their own capitalist ranks. The earlier inflationary bloodletting faded away, and the ‘honest ones’, who had not grasped the possibility of the Ruhr robberies in good time, were brought to their knees. The middle class, both those in industry and the intellectuals, lost their economic foundations. The workers saw their wages in gold pfennigs drastically reduced, and this effect on their economic basis also meant that all their organisational structures, trade unions, co-operatives and so forth, were brought to their knees. It was – one can safely say – a much stronger social earthquake than that upon which the events described by Trotsky are based. Trotsky’s assumption has a certain logic on its side: since humankind has not yet died out, after such a social catastrophe some power will emerge that forms a new structure. And to such an extent one can still go along with Trotsky: for logically the force that must emerge after such a catastrophe will not be the one that caused it, so it is only logical that it will end with the seizure of power by the proletariat.

Trotsky only errs on one point, but this error is important. It does not follow that this force must therefore be the Communist Party, just because the German Communist Party (KPD) is affiliated to the Communist International, and simply because, once upon a time, in a comparable situation in Russia, Lenin risked this gamble and won, and since also by chance – we don’t know whether Trotsky agrees also with this third premise – Grigori Zinoviev is in charge of this Third International. So when all three preconditions coincide, when the German situation is wholly comparable to the Russian one, when the Communist International has become the most flawless organisation ever created, and when Zinoviev has become a politician of great stature and not just an idiot of European fame, there we have it: nevertheless, even if all that occurred, the KPD has still not yet earned the legal title to put itself forward as the force which could shape the state after that catastrophe. This title can only be earned legitimately. The Bolsheviks too could not have gained power in October on the basis of a declaration that they felt themselves fit for the job, but only on the basis of a determined policy which had been pursued from April to October 1917. Only this policy gave the Bolsheviks the necessary legitimacy.