Alexander Israel Helphand (Parvus) was one of the most controversial and visionary Marxists to participate in the Russian revolution of 1905.¹ His insight into Russian and world events came from his knowledge of Marx and his study of political economy, in which he earned a doctorate from a Swiss university in 1891. As early as 1895–6, he endorsed the tactic of the political mass strike,² initially as a means of proletarian self-defence and, by 1904, as a weapon of attack and a ‘method of revolution’ that presupposed thorough organisation of the workers in both the Social-Democratic party and trade unions.³ Parvus was involved in most of the polemics as well as the intrigues of both German Social Democrats and Russian exiles. In the campaign against Bernstein’s revisionism, he was one of the first to explain cyclical crises in terms of a modern theory of imperialism.⁴ But Parvus enters the historiography of Russian Marxism primarily through the profound influence

¹ For a biography of Parvus see Zeman and Scharlau 1965.
³ Parvus 1904a.
⁴ English versions of Parvus’s articles against Bernstein can be found in Tudor and Tudor (eds.) 1988, pp. 174–204.
of his ideas on Leon Trotsky. In his biography of Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher says that, by 1904,

Not only were Parvus’s international ideas and revolutionary perspectives becoming part and parcel of Trotsky’s thinking, but, also, some of Trotsky’s views on Russian history, especially his conception of the Russian state, can be traced back to Parvus.⁵

Deutscher devoted an entire chapter to the ‘intellectual partnership’ between Parvus and Trotsky. In My Life, his autobiography, Trotsky wrote:

Parvus was unquestionably one of the most important of the Marxists at the turn of the century. He used the Marxian methods skilfully, was possessed of wide vision, and kept a keen eye on everything of importance in world events. This, coupled with his fearless thinking and his virile, muscular style, made him a remarkable writer. His early studies brought me closer to the problems of the social revolution, and, for me, definitely transformed the conquest of power by the proletariat from an astronomical ‘final’ goal to a practical task for our own day.⁶

In February and March of 1904, Parvus published two articles in Iskra on the world economy and the Russian autocracy that influenced Trotsky’s view both of imperialism and of the prospects for permanent revolution. The first article, ‘Capitalism and War’, began with a declaration that ‘The Russo-Japanese war is the bloody dawn of impending great events’.⁷ There followed a sweeping picture of geopolitics in which Europe was making feverish preparations for world war. Surveying the rise of militarism and imperialist barriers to trade, Parvus traced the expansion of capitalism around the globe and particularly into Asia. ‘Each capitalist state,’ he wrote, ‘is an enormous and complex machine for squeezing labour out of the people and for the endless capitalist transformation of surrounding areas.’ Capitalism produced a torrent of commodities that periodically surpassed the capacity of domestic markets and compelled a never-ending search for new peoples and territories to conquer. In the struggle over colonies, all the great states of

⁵ Deutscher 1965, p. 105.
⁷ Iskra, No. 59 (10 February, 1904).