

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘The Driving Forces of the Russian Revolution and Its Prospects’ (November 1906)

Karl Kautsky

In late 1906, Plekhanov addressed three questions to a number of foreign socialists: 1) What is the ‘general character’ of the Russian revolution: bourgeois or socialist?; 2) What should be the attitude of Social Democrats towards the bourgeois democrats?; and 3) Should the Social-Democratic Party support the opposition parties in the Duma elections? The responses have been summarised as follows:

Plekhanov’s questionnaire was answered by the Italians Turati and Ferri, the Frenchmen Lafargue, Vaillant and Milhaud (an associate of Jaurès), the Belgian Vandervelde and the British Marxist and editor of *Justice*, Quelch – in short, by a fairly representative selection of left and right within European socialism. Of course their answers were not identical, but more or less amounted to the same thing. They implied cautious support for the Menshevik point of view. Most Western socialists were modest and did not want to play the role of armchair critic. But they all thought that the Russian revolution could not be a socialist one, and only at best a bourgeois revolution with socialist elements.

They all considered the Duma boycott a mistake, and cooperation with the bourgeois opposition in any form was essential. There was, however, one important exception and that was Kautsky.¹

Karl Kautsky's response² to Plekhanov appeared in four separate Russian editions, one of them with a preface by Lenin³ and another with a preface by Trotsky,⁴ both of which are included here together with Kautsky's article. In a review published in the Bolshevik journal *Proletarii*, Lenin described Kautsky's essay as 'a brilliant vindication of the *fundamental principles* of Bolshevik tactics. He added: 'Kautsky's analysis satisfies us completely. He has fully confirmed our contention that we are defending the position of revolutionary Social Democracy against opportunism, and not creating any "peculiar" Bolshevik trend.'⁵ Despite his differences with Lenin, Trotsky was no less enthusiastic. His commentary on Kautsky's work expressed warm praise; and in August 1908 he wrote to Kautsky that his response to Plekhanov's inquiry was 'the best theoretical statement of my own views, and gives me great political satisfaction'.⁶

The fact that Lenin and Trotsky could equally claim Kautsky's support attests to Kautsky's deliberate ambiguity. Since he was unable to read Russian and acquaint himself at first hand with the political life of the country, Kautsky's primary concern was to make clear that a bloc of the workers with the Cadets, representing bourgeois liberalism, was out of the question. Agrarian reform was at the heart of the democratic revolution, and the bourgeoisie was too closely linked with the landlords, and too frightened by the workers, to support confiscation of the landed estates without compensation. The urban petty bourgeoisie, in turn, was too weak to play the role it had assumed during the French Revolution. On these grounds, Kautsky concluded that Social-Democratic workers would be forced to seize power together with the peasants to carry out the democratic revolution.

¹ Naarden 1992, p. 221.

² Kautsky 1907a, pp. 184–90, 324–33.

³ Lenin's preface to the Russian edition of Kautsky 1907e), pp. 1–7, is available as Lenin 1906b.

⁴ Reprinted in N. Trotsky 1907, pp. 122–48.

⁵ Lenin 1906c, pp. 372–3, emphasis in the original.

⁶ L. Trotsky 1908. Quoted in Donald 1993, p. 91.