

Der Spiegel churns out old lies on the October Revolution

By Peter Schwarz
15 December 2007

Some medieval courts not only condemned their worst opponents to death, they also prescribed a series of extremely cruel and bloody forms of execution to be carried out one after the other. The thirst for revenge and urge to deter others mixed with the fear that those subjected to torture could return and take revenge. The Russian Revolution and its best-known leader, Vladimir Illyich Lenin, have suffered a similar fate over the past 90 years. Up to this day, propagandistic efforts have not ceased to strike dead this most important revolution of the twentieth century.

The German magazine *Der Spiegel* supplied the most recent contribution to a long list of such vituperative attacks. It appeared last weekend with the headline, “The Bought Revolution: How Emperor Wilhelm II Financed Lenin’s October Revolution.” The heads of Lenin and the German emperor decorate the glossy title page of the magazine, which has a distribution of more than 1 million. A DVD featuring a 50-minute-long film on the same topic is attached. The film was also shown the evening of December 10 on one of Germany’s main television channels.

In the past, one has come to fear the worst from *Der Spiegel*, but the magazine has outdone itself with this latest contribution. The 12-page article and the film make a mockery of any serious attempt to deal with historical development. The authors sensationally announce the discovery of “hitherto unknown documents,” which allegedly prove “the extent of the secret cooperation” between Lenin and Germany. *Der Spiegel* investigated “more than a dozen archives throughout Europe” and discovered “hitherto unknown or unevaluated material.” The article then goes on to regurgitate a series of well-worn slanders without offering a trace of serious evidence.

“Without William II’s assistance to Lenin the October Revolution of 90 years ago would not have taken place as it did,” reads the central thesis of *Der Spiegel*. In order to back up its thesis, however, the magazine bases itself on contentions that are as old as the Russian Revolution itself: Lenin’s train journey through Germany and his alleged link to Alexander Gelfand, alias Parvus.

In his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution* of 1930, Leon Trotsky dedicates an entire chapter to such claims. The slander that Lenin had links to the leadership of the German army dominated public discourse in Russia in July 1917. Tensions between the population and the provisional government led by Alexander Kerensky had dramatically intensified. The first significant rebellion against his government took place. The workers, soldiers and peasants wanted peace and bread; Kerensky wanted to continue the war. The Bolsheviks rapidly gained support.

Under these circumstances, the rumour was spread that Lenin was in the pay of the German general staff. Trotsky writes: “The leaders of a revolutionary party, whose lives for decades had been passed in a struggle against rulers, both crowned and uncrowned, found themselves portrayed before the country and the whole world as hired agents of the

Hohenzollern. On a scale hitherto unheard of, this slander was sown in the thick of the popular masses, a vast majority of whom had heard of the Bolshevik leaders for the first time only after the February revolution. Mud-slinging here became a political factor of primary importance.”

The slanders were aimed at inciting soldiers at the front to turn against Lenin and encourage a pogrom-like mood against the Bolsheviks. Lenin was eventually forced to go into hiding, the offices and print shops of the Bolsheviks were demolished and party leaders, including Trotsky, were arrested.

Trotsky not only demonstrates in detail the factual, political and psychological untenability of the slander that Lenin was in the pay of the emperor, he also meticulously uncovers its source. It originated from the nebulous underworld of the Tsarist secret police, which had survived the February revolution intact. Trotsky writes: “The latter institution has nowhere been a propagator of good morals. But in Russia the Intelligence Service was the very sewer of the Rasputin régime.”

Der Spiegel adopts a large proportion of the anti-Bolshevist propaganda of those times. It has employed the publicist Elizabeth Heresch as its expert. This Slavacist and interpreter has published several books dealing favourably with the family of the Russian Tsar—sufficient in the eyes of *Der Spiegel* to qualify her as an expert on revolution. Seven years ago, Heresch published a book with the title *The Secret File on Parvus: The Bought Revolution*. *Der Spiegel* has now largely taken up this theme. For her book, Heresch carried out research in the archives of the Tsarist secret police—i.e., she picked her manure from the same sewer as the original slanderers of Lenin.

The central charge made by *Der Spiegel* is that the German government supported “the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries in Russia with money, ammunition and weapons” and up until the end of 1917 spent at least 26 million marks (75 million euros by today’s values). The phrase “and other revolutionaries” is telling. *Der Spiegel* furnishes no proof that the Bolsheviks actually received German money. Instead it resorts to the mechanism of amalgam. Various episodes, events and dubious statements, which bear no sequential or factual relation, are causally linked and distorted into a chain of evidence that does not hold up to any serious investigation.

The most important piece of evidence introduced by *Der Spiegel* is a “23-page plan for the overthrow of the Tsar by mass strikes” submitted by Alexander Gelfand in February 1915 to the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin. The plan lists a long catalogue of measures aimed at destabilising the Tsarist regime, Germany’s opponent in the war. The measures include acts of sabotage, the incitement of national minorities, strike agitation amongst workers and financial support for opposition tendencies, including the Bolsheviks. This plan, writes *Der Spiegel*, met with approval in Berlin, and Gelfand was subsequently given millions.

Gelfand, party name Parvus, was a well-known and notorious figure in socialist circles at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was born in Belarus and grew up in Odessa, where he joined the revolutionary

movement as a young man. In 1886, he fled to Switzerland. He established relations with prominent revolutionary socialists and wrote for Marxist publications such as Karl Kautsky's *Neue Zeit*. He took part in the Russian revolution of 1905 and together with Trotsky elaborated the theory of the permanent revolution.

In the following years, Parvus turned sharply to the right. Discredited in socialist circles following a financial scandal, he moved to Constantinople, where he earned a fortune in arms dealing and other business enterprises. At the beginning of the war he moved to Copenhagen and worked from there as an unapologetic German chauvinist. He set up and financed the magazine *Die Glocke*, which promoted war propaganda within the Social Democratic Party and tried to justify it theoretically.

At the time Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg publicly dissociated themselves from Parvus and sharply denounced his political views and manoeuvrings. When Parvus visited Lenin in Zurich in 1915, Lenin showed him the door—as even *Der Spiegel* concedes. Nevertheless, *Der Spiegel* maintains that Lenin allowed himself to be financed by Parvus with German money.

In fact, the authors of the article are merely recycling the old slanders of July 1917. Parvus had developed a commercial network to Russia from his base in Scandinavia. In Petrograd, the rumour was spread that it was an espionage network, to which Lenin was connected by the Polish revolutionaries Ganetsky and Kozlovsky. *Der Spiegel* also cites the activities carried out by Ganetsky (Jakob Fürstenberg) and Kozlovsky for Gelfand's enterprises to disprove the “thesis of Bolshevik innocence.”

All of these slanders have been dealt with and answered by Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: “The testimony...concerned the trade operations of Ganetsky and Kozlovsky between Petrograd and Stockholm. This wartime commerce, which evidently had recourse at times to a code correspondence, had no relation to politics. The Bolshevik party had no relation to this commerce. Lenin and Trotsky had publicly denounced Parvus, who combined good commerce with bad politics, and in printed words had appealed to the Russian revolutionists to break off all relations with him.”

How does *Der Spiegel* then attempt to demonstrate the opposite? With pure conjecture. “It is hard to accept that Lenin did not use this network in order to ferry money to Petrograd,” the article declares. “What is clear is that the Bolsheviks needed money for their revolutionary work.” Or to put it another way: the Bolsheviks needed money, therefore they could be bought.

The fact is that the party had hardly any money at the time. The chronic shortage of funds on the part of the Bolsheviks was well known. The situation for the party only improved somewhat after the February revolution with the influx of support and funds from numerous new working class supporters. In April 1917, in an open and public action, the Bolsheviks collected 75,000 roubles from workers in Petrograd in order to purchase their own print shop. This historically proven fact does not prevent *Der Spiegel* from insinuating that the purchase of precisely this print shop was proof of “dubious” channels used to finance the Bolsheviks.

The *Der Spiegel* authors are obsessed with the notion that in politics money makes everything possible—including revolutionary uprisings. Parvus's plan to organise a general strike in Russia in 1916 with German money failed. Nevertheless, *Der Spiegel* continues to maintain that the demonstrations against the Kerensky government, organised by the Bolsheviks two years later, were financed by German money.

To back up its claim, the magazine cites the statement found by Mrs. Heresch of a “nurse” in the Petrograd police documents. This “nurse” relates that she had seen “how Bolsheviks distributed rouble coins to passers-by in order to win their support for a demonstration. People then had posters pushed into their arms with slogans like ‘Down with the

provisional government!’ ” In the film, the “nurse” is even portrayed by an actress, and one sees greedy hands dipping into a money-filled bucket.

This scene is characteristic of the approach to historical and political issues taken by *Der Spiegel* and its staff. For such people, any notion of a genuine popular mass movement, which turns against a hated regime, is incomprehensible and fills them with fear. They are incapable of imagining the development of great social movements, which are not motivated by financial incentive or bribery. Their only conception of politics is based on the commonplace practices of modern bourgeois society—i.e., narrow-mindedness, corruption and a readiness to be bought.

Since the material from the Petrograd police archives does little to prove their case, the magazine finally turns to Lenin's journey through Germany. The facts are so well documented that it is not necessary to go into them at length here.

Lenin, of course, knew that the German general staff had reckoned it could benefit from his presence in Russia, otherwise it would not have allowed him to travel through Germany. The Russian revolutionary, however, was more farsighted than the German generals. While the latter thought that political unrest in Russia (they never reckoned with a successful revolution) could relieve the pressure on one of the two main fronts in their war, Lenin knew that a success for the revolution in Russia would also bring about an end to the German empire. He was to be proven correct. The empire survived the October Revolution by just one year.

Lenin sought to carefully eliminate any suspicion of complicity between himself and the Hohenzollerns. This was behind the designation of his train carriage as extra-territorial and the detailed agreements negotiated with the Germans by the Swiss revolutionary Fritz Platten (not Parvus). This, however, does not prevent *Der Spiegel* from re-evoking the spectre of Lenin as a German agent. Across the glossy front page of the magazine and the article inside is the copy of a text taken from a “German secret service communication” that reads: “Lenin's passage to Russia successful. He is working completely to plan.”

The wishful thinking of a German spy is simply equated with reality.

In its argumentation, *Der Spiegel* is merely repeating the agitation of those Russian nationalists who, after three years of bloody war, were prepared in 1917 to send hundreds of thousands of additional Russian soldiers to their deaths in the trenches in order to defend the interests of Russian, British and French imperialism against Germany and Austria. From the very start of the war, Lenin, on the other hand, had based his stance on the interests of the international working class and put forward the slogan “The main enemy is at home.” He refused to support any of the warring imperialist camps and regarded the war as proof that the capitalist system had reached its final stage and was ripe for socialist revolution.

If one regards Lenin's behaviour from the standpoint of the political principles he put forward and publicly fought for, then there is not the least discrepancy between his deeds and his words. The claim that he was a mercenary of the Hohenzollerns, whom he hated and publicly opposed, is simply absurd.

The workers of Russia and Germany understood that. In Russia, the slanders against Lenin quickly failed to find a hearing when the workers and soldiers saw that only the Bolsheviks were ready to terminate the war and fulfil their demand for land and bread. And when workers and soldiers rose up against the emperor in Germany in November 1918, they looked upon Lenin as a role model, and not as a mercenary of Wilhelm.

This, however, is beyond the comprehension of the *Der Spiegel* writers. Their view of history is entirely subjective. They can only see intrigues and corruption as the driving force in great historical events that involve and influence millions. The mere fact that Lenin opposed the chauvinist delirium in 1914 and ruled out any armistice with the Tsar is proof enough for them that Lenin was a German agent.

In the DVD issued by *Der Spiegel*, the historian Gerd Koenen declares: “From the standpoint of the other Russian socialists they [the Bolsheviks]

were something like German agents whether they received money or not, because they had decisively sabotaged from the inside the assertiveness of Russia against the German war machine.” This from, of all people, Gerd Koenen! In the 1970s, he attacked Leon Trotsky and the Marxist tradition of the October Revolution in his function as a devoted Maoist and supporter of Stalin; today, he does the same as an outright anticommunist.

The question arises as to why *Der Spiegel* invests so much of its time and energy in order to slander the October Revolution, which took place 90 years ago. Has it not endlessly been declared that the break-up of the Soviet Union 15 years ago meant not just the end of the Stalinist bureaucracies, but also socialism and Marxism? This is obviously not the case. Against a background of increasing social crisis, a rapidly expanding gulf between rich and poor and the return of war and militarism, the ruling class once again fears the spectre of revolution.

Many workers and young people are looking for a socialist alternative. They could turn to the October Revolution and seek to penetrate the web of lies and distortions left by bourgeois and Stalinist propaganda. According to *Der Spiegel*, this necessary process of clarification must be prevented at all costs. This explains why the magazine dredges the sewer in its attempt, 90 years on, to vilify the Russian Revolution.

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