

# Vladimir Medem

## On Terror

*Vladimir Medem was one of the major intellectual figures in the Bund, the Jewish socialist movement of Poland. Strong-willed and clear-minded, he was one of the first socialists in Europe to propose a principled criticism of the Bolshevik regime and its methods. In September 1918, in the Bund publication Lebensfragen (Problems of Life), he wrote an article "On Terror," attacking the methods of the Lenin regime. We reprint this article in a slightly abridged form—its contemporary relevance need not be underlined. — ED.*

**W**hen Trotsky, in the first weeks of his regime, threatened opponents with an ingenious gadget that shortens a person "only by the length of a head," one may have dismissed the remark as a bad joke from a temperamental orator trying to cut the figure of a Robespierre. A few months passed and the tasteless joke became harsh reality, the difference being that, in "liberated" Russia, now instead of the chop of the bourgeois guillotine, "socialist" bullets whistle from Latvian rifles.

The system of ruthless persecution, doing away with freedoms and negating the achievements of the fledgling Russian democracy, has reached its logical consequence: a reign of mass terror, a governmental terror, broad and far-reaching, unknown in Russia since the dark days of Czar Ivan the Terrible.

A government that treads the path of terror signs its own death warrant. Terror has always been an indication of weakness and a source of future bankruptcy. Never in history has government terror yielded a definitive victory for the political system that depends upon it.

"Blood," says Goethe's Mephistopheles, "is a unique sap." Blood gives birth to blood.

On the grave of every executed victim of government terror arise a hundred vengeance-seekers. Each shot sets in motion new waves among the sufferers. The terror-minded government grows increasingly isolated; its circle of support, narrower. It becomes demoralized: use of raw force decivilizes the holders of power.

A socialist government that uses mass terror is absurd: the very meaning of socialism connotes salvation for the overwhelming majority of a population. Socialism can be realized only by the people themselves. A socialism forced upon people—with rifles and machine guns, grenades and cannon, exclusive decrees and prisons—is no socialism. It is a ghastly misrepresentation of the term "socialism" and a perversion of its essence. Socialism is liberation. Slavery can never be a means to deliverance.

"But what can we do," the Bolsheviks claim, "the bourgeoisie are rebellious. Shall we let ourselves be guided by sentimental humanitarian-

ism, put on white gloves and wait patiently till the bourgeoisie lovingly 'permits' us to realize our socialist ideal? Would that not be a utopian dream? Are we not obligated to sweep the obstruction from our path—sweep it away with weapons?"

The Bolsheviks answer their own question: "Yes, we must persecute the bourgeoisie and not await its popular demise." These are their words, but what are their actions? Against whom do they direct this merciless process of oppression?

Read through the material on Bolshevik deeds that we printed in our last three issues—material gathered not by sensation-seeking newsmen but by longtime, proven fighters for socialism, whose hearts tremble at the destruction of their lives' ideals. Read through the material carefully, word for word, and you will get a clear impression that it is not the laboring masses which employ such means but a group of bitter, confused usurpers fighting against the people.

Some bloody battle against the bourgeoisie! Is Spiridonova part of that bourgeoisie that must be exterminated? The same woman who sat at one table with Lenin—the party leader whom he proclaimed the "true representative of the poorest peasantry"? \*

And Raphael Abramovitch, the left-wing Menshevik, who during the entire revolution fought against any coalition of workers with bourgeois parties—is he of the bourgeoisie?

Or the socialists who were thrown in jail, tried before "revolutionary tribunals," and stand threatened with a death sentence—are they of the bourgeoisie, just because they want to organize a conference of socialist workers? And the workers thrown out of the Soviets, deprived of voting rights because they are not Bolsheviks—are they of the bourgeoisie? And the Soviets themselves, which are, according to the Bolsheviks, the very embodiment of popular sovereignty—now they are hunted down by Bolshevik satraps, just because they do not

agree to return a Bolshevik majority at elections. Are they, too, a bourgeois institution?

It is enough for us to pose such questions—answers are self-evident. Terror is used not against the bourgeoisie but against whatever does not carry the Bolshevik seal.

The Bolsheviks trifle with the meaning of "bourgeoisie." In their parlance the term loses any sense of relating to a specific social class; it becomes merely a label for non-Bolsheviks—even for tried and true proletarians. Since the Bolsheviks, even by their own admission, form only a small minority in Russia, the repressions of the government are directed against the large majority of the population.

Even were we to restrict the meaning of bourgeoisie to a pure usage, could members of that class really be wiped out? In Bolshevism's infancy it was customary to refer to a small band of giant capitalists who controlled the country's economy. According to this view, the revolution should have entailed just the arrest of three *minyanim* (quorums) of bankers. But even Lenin understood that this was a mistake: just a few months ago, in an informal talk, he declared the main enemy to be no longer the robber barons but the petty bourgeoisie. It turns out, though, that the latter comprises Russia's majority! Certainly, a political war can be waged against the petty bourgeoisie. Certainly, that class, under the increasing atmosphere of proletarianization, will become a minority sooner or later. One can oppress a huge economic class, but one cannot exterminate it, choking its members in blood through punitive expeditions.

THE MAIN POINT IS that rifles of hired Bolshevik soldiers are not directed at bourgeois millions but at workers, socialist proletarians. The day is not far off when we will see revolutionary tribunals in which the more kosher Bolsheviks will execute the more suspect; the circle of "kosher" or "authentic" socialists grows narrower. If today Lenin desires to shoot Abramovitch, who can tell that tomorrow he will not shoot Trotsky?

A socialist government that takes to mass terror signs its own death warrant.

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\* Maria Spiridonova, a leader of the left wing of the Socialist Revolutionaries (the Russian populist party), who had become a heroine in revolutionary circles because of the sufferings to which she had been subjected after she had assassinated a czarist general. —Ed.

Translated by GERSHON FREIDLIN □