

Marxism and Ireland

"The attempt... to 'fix' for all time the point of view Marx held in a different epoch was an attempt to use the letter of Marxism

For decades Lenin's small body of work on Ireland, filtered through a number of Stalinist pamphlets purporting to expound the ideas of "Marx, Engels and Lenin" on Ireland, has helped shape socialists' views. In this extended review article, Sean Matgamna argues that this "Marxist dogmatism" has meant, in fact, giving up on any attempt at serious Marxist analysis. Lenin's writings on Ireland were only casual journalism, worthless and worse if taken as paradigms for socialist politics.

against the spirit of Marxism".

Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self-Determination

IF POLITICAL VIRTUE LIES, and it does, in supporting the struggle of "Ireland" against British rule and British interference — that is, the struggle of the oppressed Nationalist Catholic Irish — then the Marxists, beginning with Marx himself, have a record to be proud of.

Marx came late — surprisingly late — to

support for Irish Home Rule. Repeal of the Union (of Britain and Ireland, enacted in 1800-1) was already part of the common programme of the left in Britain from Chartist times, and in fact from considerably earlier. Though Marx had examined Ireland and its relations with England for his economic studies — there is a great deal about Ireland and its role in the development of early British capitalism in *Capital* — it was the activities of the Fenian, the militant and left-wing Republican movement of the 1860s, that won Marx to firm support for the separation of Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom. He explained his conception of the Irish Question as it was in the 1860s in a famous letter to Engels:

"What the English do not yet know is that since 1846 the economic content and therefore also the political aim of English domination in Ireland have entered into an entirely new phase, and that, precisely because of this, Fenianism is characterised by a socialistic tendency (in a negative sense, directed against the appropriation of the soil) and by being a lower orders movement. What can be more ridiculous than to confuse the barbarities of Elizabeth or Cromwell, who wanted to supplant the Irish by English colonists... with the present system, which wants to supplant them by sheep, pigs and oxen!...

Clearing of the Estate of Ireland! is now the one purpose of English rule in Ireland... The question now is, what shall we advise the English workers? In my opinion they must make the Repeal of the Union (in short, the affair of 1783, only democratised and adapted to the conditions of the time) an article of their pronunziamento... Experience must show later whether a mere personal union can continue to subsist between the two countries. I half think it can if it takes place in time.

What the Irish need is:

1) Self-government and independence from England.

2) An agrarian revolution. With the best intentions in the world the English cannot accomplish this for them, but they can give them the legal means of accomplishing it for themselves.

3) Protective tariffs against England. Between 1783 and 1801 every branch of Irish industry flourished. The Union, which overthrew the protective tariffs established by the Irish Parliament, destroyed all industrial life in Ireland. The bit of linen industry is no compensation whatever... Once the Irish are independent, necessity will turn them into protectionists, as it did Canada, Australia, etc." (30 November 1867).

Marx explained further in a note for the First International (28 March 1870):

"If England is the bulwark of landlordism and European capitalism, the only point where one can hit official England really hard is Ireland.

In the first place, Ireland is the bulwark of English landlordism. If it fell in Ireland it would fall in England. In Ireland this is a hundred times easier since the economic struggle there is concentrated exclusively on landed property, since this struggle is at the same time national, and since the people there are more revolutionary and exasperated than in England. Landlordism in Ireland is maintained solely by the English army. The moment the forced union between the two countries ends, a social revolution will immediately break out in Ireland, though in outmoded forms. English landlordism would not only lose a great source of wealth, but also its greatest moral force, i.e. that of representing the domination of England over Ireland. On the other hand, by maintaining the power of their landlords in Ireland, the English proletariat makes them invulnerable in England itself...

Quite apart from international justice, it is a precondition to the emancipation of the English working class to transform the present forced union (i.e. the enslavement of Ireland) into equal and free confederation if possible, into complete separation if need be".

Once he had made up his mind Marx's commitment was whole-hearted. Marx threw himself into the struggle against British rule in Ireland. He exerted his influence in the General Council of the International Working Men's Association (the First International) to get it to try to persuade the international labour movement to back the people of Catholic Ireland — though they did not define it thus — against Britain. He became heavily involved — as did two of his daughters — in agitation on behalf of the Irish Fenian political prisoners.

Not only Marx but also his close collaborator Frederick Engels studied Ireland — Irish history, Irish conditions, Ireland's place in the UK economy and in UK politics. Engels toured Ireland and even, at an advanced age, learned the most ancient version of the Gaelic language so that he could write a history of the country and its people'. Long after Marx and Engels were dead, their analysis of Ireland and support for Irish Home Rule were part of the common stock of the European socialist movement and then of the communist movement.

They had established a "Marxism" on the Irish question that seems to survive to this day. Marxists of the first generation after Marx and Engels used their views on Ireland

as a paradigm on the national question in general, and on agrarian questions. Men like Karl Kautsky and Lenin — though, interestingly, not Rosa Luxemburg, who was concerned in part with Poland, “the Ireland of the east” — followed Marx and Engels on Ireland. Kautsky made his own studies of Irish agrarian conditions; Lenin took Marx and Engels on Ireland as a model on the national question. Naturally, the Communist International backed Ireland during the war of independence with Britain in 1919-21; and it and supported the no-compromise Republicans in the civil war of 1922-3.

But there was a problem about this tradition. Marxism analyses a reality that is changing more or less quickly and more or less radically: being a Marxist means updating or revising or negating old codifications in the light of new events. Marx and Engels died and Ireland continued to change and develop. In historical time the changes were very quick. In unexpected ways a very thorough agrarian revolution was achieved, and the division in the Irish people crystallised out into not one but two Irish bourgeois states, both with Home Rule and one with effective independence from 1922.

II

TREMENDOUS MASS agitation and a long series of British Acts of Parliament, from 1870 to 1903, radically transformed the position of the Irish farmers.

Gladstone's far-seeing legislation in the overall interests of the British state to limit the power of the landlord over land let out to tenants — the famous 3 “F”s — seems rather tame now, but in its time it was a radical attenuation of the accepted rights of property and, as such, was denounced as revolutionary tyranny by much of the British establishment.

The peasants, in fact though not in name, came to acquire a dual ownership of the land paralleling that of its legal ‘lord’ and owner. It was no longer the landlord's to do with as he liked. By the turn of the century many landlords were eager to get out — if only they could get a good enough price. In 1902 a conference of landlords and Irish popular leaders produced the proposal that the British government should finance the full-scale buying out of the landlords by the tenants. Notable among the Irish leaders there was William O'Brien, who would soon, because he advocated constructive compromise and conciliation with various aspects of Irish Unionism, become a sort of Trotsky figure, arch-heretic and apostate to the Redmond-Dillon official Home Rule Party.

The Wyndham Act of 1903 put this plan into effect. Earlier Acts of Parliament provided for some transfer of land; this time it was to be wholesale. Despite going through a crisis of financing in 1909, the Wyndham Act brought a thoroughgoing agrarian revolution to Ireland. Lots of little landlords replaced the big ones.

Marx and Engels had advocated Home Rule (etc.) in the interests of the British

people, expecting Home Rule to lead to an agrarian revolution from below against the alien landlords in Ireland and that in turn to shatter the power of the landlords in Britain. Wyndham's Land Act of 1903 inaugurated, or qualitatively accelerated, a thoroughgoing revolution from above. Continued agrarian ‘disturbances’ and cattle-driving in the west of Ireland notwithstanding, this was on the whole a neatly-ordered Irish bourgeois revolution, organised and midwifed by the British bourgeoisie in their own interest and in the overall interests of the British state and Empire. The land programme of international socialism, represented in Ireland by the Irish Socialist Republican Party whose paper *Workers' Republic* was edited by James Connolly, had no chance. Ireland's agrarian revolution, naturally, bore the stamp of the British bourgeoisie whose government organised it.

Politics changed too. The revolutionary Fenians of the 1860s, shattered in defeat into sects like the terrorist Invincibles, gave place to Parnell's assertive tactics in the 1880s in the House of Commons to gain Home Rule and the aggressive agrarian semi-trade-union of the Land League. When the strong-minded Home Rule leader Charles Stuart Parnell, was brought down in 1891 by the Catholic hierarchy and the Gladstone Liberals, seizing the chance of Parnell's involvement in a divorce case, he was replaced by time-serving middle-class politicians. Once one of the of the ‘great’ British parties embraced Home Rule, as the Liberals did in 1886, the middle-class Home Rule movement gravitated towards the Liberals and became attached to them by the most powerful forces of interest and logic: only the Liberals could ‘deliver’ constitutionally-won Home Rule. Combining “revolutionary” rhetoric with the sectarian winking-out of Protestant business competitors in the towns and villages of Catholic Ireland, this Redmond-Dillon Home Rule Party was a tail of the Liberal Party at Westminster.

But the Irish Unionist resistance to Home Rule developed and consolidated too, allied to the other ‘great’ British party, the Tory-Unionist party. At first the British opponents of Home Rule “played the Orange card” in order to stop any part of Ireland getting Home Rule. A divided Ireland, they argued, required British rule. Neither of the two segments of the Irish was fit to rule the other. The famous editor of the *Economist* magazine, Walter Bagehot, had argued that Home Rule would lead to war and, once more, to Protestant subjugation of the whole island.

For Lord Randolph Churchill, the Tory anti-Home Rule leader in the mid-1880s, the “Orange card” was a mere instrument in a political game to stop Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill (1886). But the Irish Unionists were always deadly serious about it. It was no game to them.

In 1892-3 they were again roused up to oppose Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill and stop the Catholic majority of peasants, shopkeepers and small bourgeois, together

with their priests and the underdeveloped proletariat of the southern towns and cities, gaining political power over the Protestant-Unionist minority. The Protestant/Unionist opposition included most of the landlords, and also shopkeepers, industrialists, and the big majority of the Irish industrial proletariat, which was concentrated in north-east Ulster.

The second Home Rule Bill was passed by the House of Commons, and vetoed by the Lords, whose power of veto was still absolute. The Unionists were returned to power in 1894; soon they set out to “kill Home Rule with kindness”, granting local government in 1898 and promoting the Wyndham Land Act which, they hoped, would replace peasant grievance with peasant gratitude.

However, removing the causes of grievances does not necessarily remove their consequences. Identities, politics and governing ideas, rooted as they initially may be in economic and national oppression, can take on a life of their own that survives the withering of the seed from whence they sprung. Gaelic Ireland was one of the oldest and most tenacious “nations” in Europe, with laws and culture, a language and a literature that stretched back beyond the Dark Ages. It had played a central role in reviving civilisation and learning all over Western Europe in the centuries after the northern barbarians conquered Rome. Shaped and reshaped by conquests and resurgences, stamped with a Catholic identity in the wars of the 16th and 17th centuries and again by the 19th century Catholic revival, the strong sense of Catholic Irish national identity was a force transcending mere economics, though without the economic struggles it might have weakened and dissipated. With such an autonomy and momentum of its own, the Home Rule movement was not to be stopped by patronising “kindness”, nor even by controlled agrarian revolution.

The Liberals returned to office in 1906. In 1909 the Lords vetoed Lloyd George's so-called “People's Budget”. Britain faced the biggest constitutional crisis since the struggles around the Reform Bill of 1832. It was resolved by the defeat of the Tory-Unionists and the capitulation of the Lords to the Commons. Absolute veto by the Lords was replaced by a two-year delaying power, after which, if the Commons was determined, a disputed Bill would become law despite the Lords.

The Tories denounced the Liberals as a revolutionary government. This was the most bitter political struggle Britain had seen in three-quarters of a century. It was the reawakening of echoes of older and deeper class struggles. Yet it was no clear-cut clash between the progressive bourgeoisie leading the people on one side and constitutionally-entrenched reactionary aristocrats on the other. The Tory-Unionist Party which backed the Lords and opposed the reforming Liberal government had by this time emerged as the leading party of both the big bourgeoisie and the landed gentry, who were in a hundred ways

entwined. Most of the old Whig grandees had gone over from the Liberal Party to the "Unionists" in the mid-80s — but so too had the "Radicals", led by the Birmingham manufacturer, Joseph Chamberlain.

Engels had pointed out over thirty years earlier: "The Tories are no longer the mere tail of the big landowners as they were until 1850; the sons of the Cobdens, Brights, etc., of the big bourgeoisie and anti-Corn-Law people, all went over to the Tory camp between 1855 and 1870, and the Liberals derive their strength now from the non-conformist petty and middle bourgeoisie. And since Gladstone's Home Rule Bill of 1886 the last remnants also of the Whigs and the old Liberals (bourgeois and intellectuals) have gone over to the Tory camp..." (Letter to Bebel, 5 July 1892).

When, in the course of "going to the people" in the struggle with the Lords and the Tories, the Liberals lost their overall House of Commons majority in the second 1910 General Election, they could continue to rule only with the support of the 70-odd Irish Home Rule MPs at Westminster.

Reluctantly, the government prepared a new, third, Home Rule Bill. Without the failsafe of the Lords veto, a House of Commons vote for Home Rule — and there was a certain majority for it — would make it law in two years. Out to bring down the government, the embittered Tory-Unionists now played not only the "Orange card" but a full panoply of Orange fifes, drums and trumpeting war horns. They pledged their support to the Protestant people of north-east Ulster in resisting, in arms if necessary, the writ of any Dublin Home Rule parliament the British parliament should choose to set up. The Tories backed the creation of a vast armed and uniformed private army, the UVF, to prepare this resistance. An Ulster provisional government was prepared. To outsiders, the UK seemed on the eve of civil war. There are those who argue that Germany's behaviour on the eve of World War One was shaped by the belief that Britain was too preoccupied at home to honour its treaty obligations. Germany

was sending guns to the UVF just weeks before war broke out.

By now there were two Unionisms, increasingly distinct: that of the thin crust of landlords and their attendants over most of the island, and that of the masses of industrial Ireland in north-east Ulster. On the eve of World War 1 the Unionists split: the north-east Ulster Unionists, the compact majority in the most developed parts of Ireland, separated their interest from that of the Unionists in the predominantly Catholic areas — betraying them, so many southern Unionists felt. They would fight, the Ulster Unionists now said, to keep their own areas, where they were the majority, outside the control of a Dublin government. Some of them defined "their own areas" very ambitiously, to take in big areas with predominantly Catholic populations. The political bloc organised around this programme included the big majority of the Irish industrial working class.

By this stage, on the eve of World War 1, it was not possible outside of a delirium to see "the Irish question" as Marx and Engels had seen it forty or fifty years earlier — and in their time, rightly seen it. Initiated from above by Unionist and landlord-cherishing British Tories who, out of office, were willing to organise armed rebellion against the British government to stop it setting up a Dublin Home Rule parliament, the post-1903 agrarian revolution was already more than half carried out, and continuing. This agrarian revolution had indeed, despite Marx's expectations, been "accomplished for" the Irish by the British, in response it is true to great Irish mobilisations.

While Marx had looked to agrarian revolution in a Home Rule Ireland to trigger a revolutionary crisis in Britain, events had in fact gone pretty much in the opposite direction. The constitutional crisis around the People's Budget came first, before the Home Rule crisis, and added intensity, bitterness and Tory-Unionist revanchism to the intra-Irish dispute around Home Rule.

The Irish Home Rule middle class were

being offered and were willing to accept a Home Rule in which the Dublin parliament would have not much more power than the then London County Council; nursery tariffs to protect infant Irish industries were ruled out. The Catholic-nationalist Volunteer movement supported the British government, which did not stop British soldiers shooting some of them down, in July 1914 at Bachelor's Walk in Dublin. The majority of Ireland's industrial proletariat, and a sizeable chunk of the peasantry, were not roused and armed against the landlords by the bourgeoisie, but mobilised behind the landlords and industrialists against a "progressive" Liberal government offering Home Rule.

The heirs of the revolutionary Fenians with whom Karl Marx had allied and in response to whose activities he had taken a fresh look at Ireland in the late 1860s were, on the outbreak of the Home Rule crisis, a tiny subterranean sect, withered by decades in the shade of Liberal-allied Home Rule parliamentarianism at Westminster and the venal parish pump politics which complemented it and fed its roots at home. Their confusion and disorientation in face of the Orange revolt is exemplified in the idiotic offer by the good-hearted Patrick Pearse to the Unionist leaders that nationalist Ireland would subordinate itself to their threatened provisional government — if only they would declare their independence from England!

The Home Rule crisis would allow the faction which believed in physical force as the only way to win Irish independence to grow into a serious power in a short time, following in the wake of what "the North began" and emulating the example of the Orangemen. Out of that came the 1916 Rising. But they would be a force in Catholic Ireland only.

III

IT IS AGAINST THESE events that we must judge Lenin and Trotsky's comments on Ireland and those of their contemporaries who founded the Communist International, which will be found — unfortunately garbled at important points — in the collection under review.

Where Marx and Engels studied Ireland, Lenin never did anything of the sort. His writings make this plain. They show him to have an unsure and even patchy acquaintance with Irish, and even with aspects of British affairs. Though he refers here and there to the early 20th-century agrarian reform in Ireland, it is plain that Lenin based himself very heavily on general ideas derived from the writings of Marx and Engels about an Ireland that had already vanished or transmuted enormously. Moreover, with the exception of two pieces on the 1913 Dublin labour war, and on a different level, two pieces about the Home Rule crisis of 1914, Lenin never wrote anything in which he looked concretely at Irish affairs. He cited Ireland as depicted by Karl Marx and later by Karl Kautsky in agrarian studies as evidence, as data, as example, as intellectual token of known value, in his

Reference points

17th century: the bulk of Ireland's land seized and given to English or Anglo-Scots-Irish landlords or farmers. But the only large area where English and Scots settlers become the majority is in the north-east.

1783-1800: a period of "Home Rule" for Ireland, under Protestant domination.

1800: Britain takes direct control of Ireland through the Act of Union. Industry declines in most of Ireland, but develops round Belfast.

1845-8: over a million starve to death in the Famine; the population falls; land turned over to sheep and cattle; Irish nationalist politics greatly embittered.

1870: Liberal government starts a series of attempts at reform from above.

1886: first Liberal Home Rule bill

defeated in Commons.

1892: second Home Rule bill passes Commons, vetoed by Lords.

1903: decisive acceleration of buying out the landlords through the Tories' Wyndham Land Act.

1913-4: Dublin lock-out.

1912: third Home Rule bill passes Commons; Lords can now only delay for two years. Huge Protestant resistance in north-east Ireland.

1914: Home Rule bill "suspended" on outbreak of World War.

1916: Easter Rising in Dublin by militant nationalists and socialists against British rule.

1918: Militant nationalists win 73 of Ireland's 105 seats. They refuse to go to Westminster and instead set up an independent Irish parliament.

1919-21: war of independence. Ends with two "Home Rule" states in Ireland,

writings about Russian affairs — Russian land policy, Russian Liberals, Russian national questions and (in his writings on 1916, for example) the national question in general. Trotsky did write one article in which he really tried — mistakenly but illuminatingly — to depict Irish dynamics, and that is all.

Those — like the generations educated on Stalinist-produced commentaries on “Marx, Engels and Lenin on Ireland” — who look to “Lenin” for analysis of Ireland, are like the gawpers in Hans Andersen’s story who looked to the naked Emperor wearing, they were told, a splendid new suit of clothes, for guidance on fashion. Really there is next to nothing of value there. To find what “Lenin” can teach us about Ireland, we have to proceed from what Lenin argued in general about the national question and so forth, filling in the facts and history of Ireland for ourselves, *thinking* about them. Lenin did not do it for us; and even if he had done so, seventy years after he ceased to think we would still have to do it again for ourselves.

To prove this, I will examine the key texts of Lenin and Leon Trotsky on Ireland in this collection, the two pairs of articles on the Dublin lock-out of 1913 and on the Home Rule crisis of 1914, and Trotsky’s article on 1916.

IV

IN SEPTEMBER 1913, 400 Dublin employers, led by the progressive Home Rule nationalist William Martin Murphy, locked out the members of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, whose leaders were Jim Larkin and James Connolly, in an attempt to destroy the union. A bitter war lasting eight months followed. The union was damaged but not destroyed. In the course of the strike the union created its own militia, the Citizen Army. In 1916 James Connolly would lead the Citizen Army into the Easter Rising.

Lenin’s “lockout” articles were, it seems, written for the legal workers’ press in Russia in the first half of September 1913 at the beginning of the Dublin struggle. Obviously written on the basis of bourgeois and social-democratic press reports of the spectacular scenes in Dublin, they deal with the events known as Bloody Sunday — one of a number of “Bloody Sundays” in modern Irish history — when hundreds of police attacked a peaceful meeting of locked-out workers, killing two and injuring hundreds. Lenin graphically depicts the Cossack-like pogrom of the Dublin police against the workers. Lenin then goes into the background to these events, drawing on the common stock of ideas on Ireland which the European socialists had got from Marx and from “the Pope of Marxism”, Karl Kautsky.

Lenin being Lenin, even this summary “from stock” and newspaper reports is very interesting, and has much to teach “Marxist” vulgarisers and Irish nationalists, native or adoptive, today.

He understands and sketches for the Russian workers the most significant things —

that the Irish bourgeoisie is set to rule Ireland, and that at last the “unskilled” are organising. It is not, according to Lenin, only national oppression that plagues Ireland: “National oppression and Catholic reaction have turned the proletarians of this unhappy country into paupers, the peasants into toilworn, *ignorant and dull slaves of the priesthood*, and the bourgeoisie into a phalanx, masked by nationalist phrases, of capitalists, of despots over the workers...” [Emphasis added]

He goes on to fill in the background of the “class war in Dublin.” Taking it for granted that Home Rule is about to be won, he says: “The Irish nationalists (i.e. the Irish bourgeoisie) are the victors... buying up the land from the... landlords; they are getting national self-government (the famous *Home Rule*...); they will freely govern “their” land in conjunction with “their” Irish priests.” And they are celebrating “by declaring war to the death against the Irish labour movement.” Why? “On the heels of the Irish bourgeois scoundrels... celebrating their ‘national’ victory presses the Irish proletariat, awakening to class consciousness... A new spirit has been aroused in the Irish workers’ unions. The unskilled workers have brought unparalleled animation into the trade unions. Even the women have begun to organise...”

Lenin indicts the Irish capitalists and reports on the work of Jim Larkin as labour organiser. Paraphrasing and almost directly quoting a letter Frederick Engels wrote to Marx in 1855 describing what he saw on a tour of Ireland, Lenin writes: “The country that used to be typified by the fat, well-fed Catholic priest and the poor, starving, ragged worker, in tatters even on Sunday because he could not afford Sunday clothes — this country, bearing a double and triple national yoke, was beginning to turn into a land with an organised army of the proletariat.”

So, says Lenin, Irish nationalist bourgeois leader Murphy proclaimed a crusade to beat down labour. Lenin cites the trade-union leader Jim Larkin, pointing out that the Tories, whom Lenin describes as “the party of the British bourgeois enemies of Home Rule”, can get away with threatening rebellion against Home Rule but the workers are not allowed even to organise without being beaten down. With the concerns of his Russian readers in mind, he contrasts Ireland with Russia, reporting on the indignation provoked in the UK by the ban on a workers’ meeting. These are the events leading up to Bloody Sunday. After the police riot, 50,000 Dublin workers followed the coffin of Nolan, who had been beaten to death. He cites “an old Irishman’s” comment to a “German correspondent” that the funeral was bigger even than Parnell’s.

Lenin declares that the events in Dublin mark a turning point in the history of the labour movement and of socialism in Ireland, destroying “the last remnants of the influence of the nationalist Irish bourgeoisie over the proletariat in Ireland.” Murphy “has helped to steel the working-class move-

ment in Ireland, to make it independent, free of nationalist prejudices, and revolutionary.” He erroneously reports that Jim Larkin is the grandson of a Fenian hanged in 1867, presumably picking it up from some newspaper report.

Lenin then reports on the inflammatory impact of the Dublin events on the annual TUC meeting in Manchester only days after the police riot. A delegate from Dublin, William Partridge, was given a standing ovation. He reports that when the TUC sent a delegate to Dublin to investigate “the bourgeoisie there again took up the weapon of nationalism (just like the bourgeois nationalists in Poland, or in the Ukraine, or among the Jews)... declaring that ‘Englishmen have no business on Irish soil’. But *fortunately* [Lenin’s emphasis] the nationalists have already lost their influence over the workers.” In a footnote to this sentence, Lenin reports that “the Irish nationalists are already expressing their fear that Larkin will organise an independent Irish workers’ party, which would have to be reckoned with in the first Irish national parliament.”

In a final paragraph Lenin fits “Dublin” into the general wave of militancy sweeping the UK — the mass of “British” [sic] workers are breaking with the labour aristocracy and beginning to struggle for a new society. “And once on this path, the British proletariat, with their energy and organisation, will bring socialism about more quickly and securely than anywhere else.”

V

THIS ARTICLE IS instructive in its communist attitude to nationalism and to elemental movements of workers, but it painfully depicts the limits of Lenin’s acquaintance with Ireland and his dependence on bourgeois papers and the Marx-inherited stock of socialist ideas on Ireland. This is not Lenin the scientist who produced profound studies of Russia and of such theoretical issues as the national question and imperialism. Here he is writing off-the-cuff journalism for Russian workers, reporting the international class struggle and drawing for them the indicated lessons about the link between the capitalists and the state and the desirability but insufficiency of the British-style civil rights the Russian labour movement was fighting for. He draws out the most optimistic and encouraging prospects for his readers.

His idea that the Dublin workers had broken with the nationalists should, in the circumstances, have been true, but it was not true even in terms of organisational allegiance, except for a minority. Evidently Lenin had no acquaintance with Larkin’s paper *The Irish Worker*, which was awash with sentimental Home Rule Party-style nationalism (and even with strands of vicious chauvinism, including on at least two occasions of anti-semitism). This reflected Jim Larkin, the Liverpool Irishman, not the harder-headed James Connolly, who was generally very frigid towards such sentimental nationalism, scoffing at it as ‘sunburstery’ (the flag of Catholic nationalism was a sunburst, supposedly an

emblem handed down from Dark Ages Ireland); he would employ it himself in the *Workers' Republic* in the months before the 1916 Rising.

Indeed, Lenin's political conclusion that the strike movement, the battle on the economic front, had already and "spontaneously" worked political miracles is curiously un-Leninist, even "economistic", strikingly remote from measurement according to Lenin's usual standard and the all-conditioning primacy he — rightly — ascribed to the struggle on the level of ideas. But Lenin was writing from a great distance about "objective" trends, not as the interventionist, prescriptive, class-party politician he was in Russia. He would not know that in Ireland no all-out struggle against nationalist ideas and no root and branch struggle against the priests was unleashed even when the priests actively intervened against the strikers. Larkin certainly and Connolly probably were Catholics themselves.

Savage Catholic sectarianism, with priests acting as both propagandists and thugs for the employers, had not yet become a feature of the strike when Lenin wrote.

Lenin believed that the granting of Home Rule would remove the cause of mass Irish nationalism. But, believing the national question about to be settled, he anticipates too much.

For Lenin these events in Ireland are all movements in the distance, seen through a mist. He is even unaware that Larkin has already begun to organise an independent Irish workers' party to fight the Home Rulers: the Clonmel Congress of the Irish TUC in 1912 had already passed James Connolly's motion to establish a Labour Party on the model of the British Labour Party.

The second article on 1913 written a week later is half as long and little more than an appendix to the first. Here he is almost entirely concerned with the lessons for Russia. He reports on the huge protest meeting a week after the police riot. The "police kept out of sight." He draws the lesson for his Russian readers: "Britain *has* a constitution" [Lenin's emphasis]. The ruling class did not dare use the police a second time.

Reporting on the meeting held in London simultaneously with the Dublin demonstration, Lenin says that the "outstanding" speech in London was that of the trade-union leader Ben Tillett, who showed that the Liberal government was no better than a reactionary one. He notes that the principal slogan in Dublin and London was "the right to organise." Because Britain has a constitutional regime and the foundations of political liberty, this demand is achievable there.

He links "Britain" and Russia: the right to organise is equally indispensable. But in Russia the "foundations of political liberty" do not exist, and the right to organise will not be achieved by Liberal reform.

Here, and properly, Lenin's concerns are entirely Russian: he draws the lessons that are appropriate for Russia.

That is the whole of Lenin on 1913. The

articles are a vivid, angry account of Dublin's Bloody Sunday, knowledge of which they have helped spread around the world, so that '1913' is one of the best known strikes ever. They are the nearest thing to a concrete account of Ireland — to comments based on an examination and analysis of Irish conditions — by Lenin. As I said above, in everything else he wrote, Ireland is mere object lesson, typical case, special case or interesting object for data about either the agrarian or the national question. Lenin's 1914 articles on the Home Rule crisis are only apparently an exception.

VI

LIKE EVERYTHING LENIN wrote, the article on 1913 is sharp and thought-provoking. His comments about the priests and the nationalist bourgeoisie implicitly have all sorts of interesting things to tell us about the resistance to Home Rule, the rule of those bourgeois and priests, by the majority of the Irish industrial working class, the Protestant workers in north-east Ulster who followed the Orange Irish bourgeois politicians rather than the Green ones.

Lenin never developed those implications — they were not his focus, not his concern, not what he wanted to direct his Russian readers to consider — but those who really want to learn from Lenin, as opposed to parroting him, should contemplate what he writes.

Such comments are useful — but Lenin's articles are not in any shape, dimension or degree an account of the eight-months 1913-14 labour war in Dublin, one of the events that shaped the nascent pre-war communist movement in the UK.

An interesting commentary on Bloody Sunday and the background to it, the articles are radically and thoroughly misleading about the overall course of the struggle. With his friendly references to the British TUC and Ben Tillett, Lenin gives a starkly false view of the relationship that would shape the course of the strike in the next 8 months.

Together with the railway workers' leader J H Thomas and other TUC leaders, it was Tillett who sold out the Dublin workers. That lock-out/strike, which lasted about 7 months after Lenin's last comment, became a war of attrition between half-starved workers on one side and, on the other, the Irish capitalists and the British state with the Catholic church, waging a dirty nationalist-sectarian guerrilla war on their behalf to sap the spirit of the workers.

The British labour movement responded with magnificent material solidarity, sending ships with food up the Liffey, caring for strikers' children and so on; but that could do no more than help the Dublin workers to hold out: to turn the tide against the Dublin employers solidarity strikes and industrial boycotts were necessary.

That is what Larkin and Connolly called on the British labour movement to provide. That is what a whole network of rank and file militants in Britain tried to promote. The call for general strike was raised by these militants — the first time it was heard

as a popular idea since Chartist times — in connection with Dublin. (Lenin notes it.) The TUC leaders wouldn't budge. When some railworkers took unofficial action, J H Thomas acted quickly to quell them. Because the British labour movement did not give adequate industrial solidarity, the war of attrition dragged on to an inconclusive finish: the union survived, despite the bosses, but it was half-crippled.

Is the account I have given here "stock-Trotskyism", the result of using the post-1917 Leninist way of looking at things and reading it backwards anachronistically, second-guessing those alive in 1913? No — it is what the militants, in both Britain and Ireland, said then. Larkin and Connolly said it at the special TUC congress of December 1913. James Connolly wrote in a British labour paper:

"The working-class unity of the first days of the Dublin fight was sacrificed in the interests of sectional officialdom. The officials failed to grasp the opportunity offered to them to make a permanent reality of the union of working-class forces brought into being by the spectacle of rebellion, martyrdom and misery exhibited by the workers of Dublin... Sectionalism, intrigues and old-time jealousies damned us in the hour of victory, and officialdom was the first to fall to the tempter.

"And so we Irish workers must go down into Hell, bow our backs to the lash of the slave-driver, let our hearts be seared by the iron of his hatred, and instead of the sacramental wafer of brotherhood and common sacrifice, eat the dust of defeat and betrayal".

The truth is that the sort of comments Lenin makes were made at the same time — not only by Ben Tillett, who was by then no left winger — but even by such Liberal parliamentarians as James Ramsay MacDonald. It is what the Irish and British communists — the "*Leninists*", if you like, said and did about 1913 — that is curiously absent in *Lenin*.

The explanation of course is that Lenin never made — and writing when he did, in the first two weeks of the labour war, could not have made — a rounded account of '1913'; he never concerned himself with the question of strategy and dynamics that concerned both the Dublin strikers and their British sympathisers, but with the broad, basic 'lessons' for Russia. His article was a "letter from afar"; a culling of a vignette from events for the purpose of encouraging the Russian workers and interesting them with references, above all else, to Russian concerns.

In the next *Workers' Liberty* I will examine Lenin's articles on the 1914 Home Rule crisis. ■

1. He wrote a draft up to the year 1014.
2. Curiously, the fact that Irish Communists like James Connolly were against peasant proprietorship and for land nationalisation is now one of the buried inconvenient facts of Irish history.
3. Even when they had Dominion status, finally conceded in 1921, which allowed tariffs, the Irish bourgeoisie did not seriously use that power until a decade later, in the depths of the world economic crisis, when every other state, including Britain, was doing it.