

Marxists and the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese war

Old empire against new

By Hal Draper

THE MASS, united, Marxist-educated socialist movement of the decades before 1914 created a political culture largely lost in the later 20th century through the depredations of Stalinism and reformism. Yet it did not have every question clear and finalised, far from it. A persistent bias, as Hal Draper remarks in this analysis, was to believe that to assess one pole in a conflict as more “progressive” as another mandated political support for the “progressive” pole. Marx and Engels had not been of that opinion. The war between Russia and Japan in 1904-5 was one between a large, long-established empire, Russia, and a state in the

beginning stages of imperialist (and, indeed, of capitalist) development, Japan. Assessing the war in that way, many Marxists felt that consequently they should support Japan. Discussion on the policy of “revolutionary defeatism” in World War 1 was then made more difficult by reference back to the unclear debates of 1904-5. Draper’s analysis here forms the third part of a feature abridged from his book *War and Revolution: Lenin and the Myth of Revolutionary Defeatism* (edited by Ernest Haberkern: Humanities Press, 1996). The first and second parts of the feature appeared in WL 2/1 and 2/2.

ONE OF the most firmly embedded ingredients in the myth of “revolutionary defeatism” is the claim that Lenin’s line and slogan had its great historical precedent in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, and that his defeatism of 1914-1916 was a continuation of the line developed for the earlier war. Indeed, one can read that in 1904-1905 even the Mensheviks and many bourgeois liberals were permeated with defeatism. In 1916 Zinoviev wrote along these lines: “Germany today does not possess the tradition of 1905; it could not have any clear ‘defeatist’ tradition” — whereas we Bolsheviks, happily in possession of the 1905 tradition, were ready to come to the defeatist position easily in 1914.¹

The tale just summarised is completely false. Every statement made in it is fictional. The position of Lenin and the Bolshevik group on the Russo-Japanese War was fundamentally different from the line of “revolutionary defeatism” adopted by them in the first years of World War One.

If there was any truth in the tale about the Russo-Japanese War, then one might have expected that Lenin — hotly arguing for his defeat slogan in 1914-1916 — would have referred (if only in passing) to the phenomenon of defeatism in the previous war. But there is not a single reference in Lenin’s voluminous writings of those years to any alleged defeatism in 1904-1905! This fact, by itself, is enough to give one pause.

Zinoviev, however, was a horse of a different colour. He did not remain silent about socialist war policy in the Russo-Japanese War. He deliberately concealed and falsified the truth about that slice of history. And it was Zinoviev’s account particularly that served to miseducate the later movement.

The post-war work by Zinoviev which was the main instrument of this historical education was his book *History of the Russian Communist Party (1923-24)*.² The sections of this book dealing with defeatism were in good part based on one of the articles published in 1916, titled “‘Defeatism’ Then and Now”,³ dealing with

the defeatism of the Russo-Japanese War.

Zinoviev stated (accurately) that defeatist sentiment was common in Russia not only among socialists but also among bourgeois liberals. (As a matter of fact, a certain defeatism had also appeared earlier in Russia in the Crimean War.) The first peculiarity of Zinoviev's version of history is this: in not one line of his extensive discussion did he permit himself to use any of the plentiful evidence that proved the prevalence of defeatism.

None of the examples of defeatism which Zinoviev selected were an example of the real defeatism that existed.

To be sure, his selected examples show the widespread scope of antiwar feeling in the country.

Likewise, he showed that the war with Japan was unpopular, and even that many, perhaps most people, were against it.

But it should be clear that a point of view that says "Against victory" does not yet add up to a "desire for defeat", though it can go over to it. Zinoviev and Lenin were more aware of this than most, since during the war they polemicised against the viewpoint which they called "Neither victory nor defeat", labelling it "centrist". In 1904-1905, a viewpoint that rejected both the desire for victory and defeat was even more of a definite tendency.

Finished with examples of bourgeois defeatism, Zinoviev claimed that "The Mensheviks, albeit not without some hesitation, had also adopted the defeatist position." His example was Plekhanov. At the 1904 Amsterdam congress of the International, held while the war was going on, Plekhanov for the Russian delegation and Sen Katayama for the Japanese, having given opening speeches, embraced on stage amidst huge applause. They said nothing about wishing defeat. But Zinoviev says that Plekhanov's speech was "defeatist". In point of fact, he quotes Plekhanov as denouncing the prospect of Russian victory. It was this that Zinoviev automatically (without argumentation) equated with "defeatism", quite without justification. (The Menshevik party was not for defeatism — explicitly. Zinoviev was not at all interested in such facts.)

Anti-war moods in Russia

WE DO not have from Zinoviev a single unambiguous example of anyone who came out as desiring defeat. If one judged only Zinoviev's bizarre cases, one might be led to the conclusion that this alleged defeatism, which was said to have existed in 1904-1905, was only another myth created by this fertile fabulist.

And that would be quite wrong. This defeatism did exist. The real defeatists of 1904-1905, those who really did come out with a "desire for defeat", moved toward its obvious consequence: a wish for the victory of Japan.

Naturally this did not apply to antiwar elements who advocated neither victory nor defeat, who were either ambivalent about defeat or who consciously held the view that the best outcome would be a stalemate, a stand-off of mutual exhaustion. But for those people who were indeed for defeat (including bourgeois-liberal elements), the obvious corollary was to favour Japan's victory as "progressive". This was a widespread feeling not only in Russia but throughout the world; particularly in England and America, Japan was then looked on as a civilising agent as compared with Russian barbarism. (The "Yellow Peril" had not yet overwhelmed the mind of the United States.)

The strength of the Russian liberals' feeling on the war was not hard to explain. The rising bourgeoisie wanted political reforms and concessions; the czarist government froze them out of all participation in the state power. They knew that victory in war would only consolidate the autocracy's attitude, strengthen its obsti-

nacy. The bourgeoisie wanted a division of power with czarism, and knew this aim would be furthered insofar as the autocratic state was weakened.

Many also felt that the aims of this war were dynastic and did not involve the “national interest”, that is, their own class interests. Many considered the war to be merely a czarist adventure. Besides, there were divergences on whether Russia’s imperialist drive should turn its face to the Far East or to the West.

Pro-Japan defeatism

MOTIVATIONS ASIDE, there was no doubt about the fact: the existence of a real “desire for defeat” was associated with a wish for the victory of Japan. Even Zinoviev had to cite some cases in polemicising against Martov:

“During the war, when the Japanese were battling with the troops of the Russian czar, certain circles of liberal society (the students in particular) went so far, it was rumoured, as to send a telegram to the mikado of Japan.”⁴

Zinoviev, then, was claiming in his post-war history that the Bolshevik position came out for the defeat of the czarist government but not for the victory of Japan. If this were true, we would finally have here an antiwar defeatism. But we will see this claim was a falsehood.

Souvarine reported that defeatism was widespread amidst the liberal bourgeoisie, the oppressed nationalities, and the workers and peasants. “As against imperial Russia, which was undergoing defeat after defeat, the young Japanese imperialism took on almost the aspect of a champion of civilisation.”

This was the real face of the defeatism of 1904-1905.

It can come as a surprise only to those who have been nurtured on the Lenin myth of the First World War. What else in fact could have been expected?

This was why, in 1916 and 1925, Zinoviev cast around vainly for examples of defeatism which did not reveal its pro-Japan nature in 1904-1905. Not only pro-Japan in the sense of desiring the victory of the Japanese government but also in the sense of idealising Japan as a “progressive” force.*

Among those who most enthusiastically carried their antiwar opposition to czarism to the point of pro-Japanism and a desire for Japan’s victory were: not only the main leaders of the Second International, but also – Lenin.

Lenin’s pro-Japan position

THE PICTURE painted by Zinoviev’s “history” was a fairy tale from beginning to end. The truth about Lenin’s position in the Russo-Japanese War has been almost completely suppressed, not only in the post-1914 literature of the Communist movement but also in the leninological output of the academic establishment and its Authorities.

In fact, Lenin was for the victory of Japan in that war, regarding it as the standard bearer of progress versus czarist reaction. This view was expounded at length in his writings of 1904-1905.

At first, during 1904 Lenin seldom mentioned that there was a war on.

Through 1904 there are few references to the war in his collected works. Soon after the outbreak of the war, in February, Lenin wrote and the Bolsheviks circulated a strong antiwar leaflet.

“[This war] is a struggle against a 50-million-strong people who are splendidly armed, splendidly prepared for war, and who are fighting for the conditions which they believe to be urgently necessary for free national development. This is going to be a struggle by a despotic and backward government against a people that is politically free and is rapidly progressing in culture.”

At the end, it said: "In the event of defeat, the war will lead above all to the collapse of the entire governmental system based on popular ignorance and deprivation, on oppression and violence."

But nota bene that one of the concluding slogans was: "Long live Japanese Social-Democracy protesting against the war!"²⁰ The political line had not yet been thought through.

For the rest of 1904 there were three or four short mentions of the war by Lenin, none substantive. Defeat was on the order of the day, but defeatism had not yet been adopted programmatically by the Bolsheviks.

As 1905 began, the big military debacle was in plain sight; the fall of Port Arthur was a matter of days. On January 4 an article by Lenin went a certain distance:

"The development of the political crisis in Russia will now depend chiefly on the course of the war with Japan... Autocratic Russia has already been defeated by constitutional Japan, and dragging on the war will only increase and aggravate the defeat... Military disaster is inevitable, and together with it discontent, unrest, and indignation will inevitably increase tenfold."²⁵

There was as yet no more explicit statement about a wish for defeat or for the enemy's victory. This came from Lenin ten days later, with the news of the military disaster at Port Arthur. Now (January 14) for the first time Lenin wrote a full-scale discussion of the war and the defeat, and of his position on the war: a programmatic article titled "The Fall of Port Arthur".

This, as well as subsequent articles, was full of characterisations of Japan as the progressive side in the war, developing the previous statement that "Autocratic Russia" has been defeated by "constitutional Japan". The political counterposition was made explicit: "Advancing, progressive Asia has dealt backward and reactionary Europe an irreparable blow... The recovery of Port Arthur by Japan is a blow struck at the whole of reactionary Europe."²⁶

Ignorance, illiteracy, and cultural backwardness of the peasant mass forming the army led to military debacle "when they came up against a progressive nation in modern warfare", showing the close connection between the country's military organisation and "its entire economic and cultural system".

"Here again, as so often in history, the war between an advanced and a backward country has played a great revolutionary role. And the class-conscious proletariat, an implacable enemy of war – this inevitable and inseparable concomitant of all class rule in general – cannot shut its eyes to the revolutionary task which the Japanese bourgeoisie, by its crushing defeat of the Russian autocracy, is carrying out."

The proletariat is hostile to every bourgeoisie, Lenin insisted, "but this hostility does not relieve it of the duty of distinguishing between the historically progressive and the reactionary representatives of the bourgeoisie". On the next page, the struggle between these two bourgeoisies started sounding like a struggle between a progressive capitalism (Japan's) and a "semifeudal" or even "feudal" system:

"While struggle against free competition, we cannot, however, forget its progressive character in comparison with the semifeudal system. While struggling against every war and every bourgeoisie, we must draw a clear line in our agitational work between the progressive bourgeoisie and the feudal autocracy..."

Yet in the very next paragraph the war "has turned into a war between the old and the new bourgeois worlds".²⁷

Theoretically speaking, what we find in Lenin's position on the Russo-Japanese War is the line of thought which, in August 1914, became the main theoretical rationale of the pro-war majority of the international movement. Lenin put this theoretical line forward perhaps most clearly in an article written three months later:

"... in a war between exploiting nations one must distinguish between the roles

of the progressive and of the reactionary bourgeoisie of each nation. Russian Social-Democracy has had to apply these general principles of Marxism concretely to the war with Japan.” 28 [Then Lenin immediately referred the reader to the article “The Fall of Port Arthur”]

This was the political methodology underlying Lenin’s concept of defeatism in the first big interimperialist conflict of the twentieth century. In line with this view, his articles were full of admiring or enthusiastic references to Japan’s armed might. Thus in “The Fall of Port Arthur”:

“And behold, little Japan, hitherto despised by all, captures this stronghold [Port Arthur] in eight months, when it took England and France together a whole year to capture Sevastopol [in the Crimean War].” 29

In “The Fall of Port Arthur” Lenin even seemed to defend Japan’s imperialist expansion and its territorial gains — as progressive. In the Sino-Japanese War, Japan had defeated China, but when the treaty of Shimonoseki came along in April 1895, Russia, supported by France and Germany, ganged up on Japan to force her to give up annexations in China, though she did get the whole Liaotung Peninsula. Here is how Lenin referred to the fact that Japan’s burgeoning imperialism had been done out of its rightful spoils — it comes right after the above-quoted approval of “progressive Asia” against “reactionary Europe”:

“Ten years ago this reactionary Europe, with Russia in the lead, was perturbed by the defeat of China at the hands of young Japan, and it united to rob Japan of the best fruits of her victory. Europe was protecting the established relations and privileges of the old world... The recovery of Port Arthur by Japan is a blow struck at the whole of reactionary Europe.”³⁰

If this was not clear enough, Lenin dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s in a passage defending the views on the Russo-Japanese War expressed by two leaders of the Second International: Jules Guesde of France and H M Hyndman of England.

An important French socialist monthly *Le Mouvement Socialiste* had, in its March 1904 issue, carried a symposium on the war by a gallery of Second International leaders of various countries. The general line expressed was for support of Japan in the war in order to defeat Russia. Prominent among the advocates of this position were Jules Guesde, the leader of what was called the “orthodox Marxist” wing of the French Socialist Party, and H M Hyndman, leader of the Social-Democratic Federation in Britain.

The Russian S-R organ *Revolutionnaya Rossiya* for May 18, 1904, attacked these two. The Socialist-Revolutionary Party was strenuously opposed to Russia’s war, but it criticised Guesde and Hyndman for supporting Japan. It rejected Guesde’s injunction to be “against Russia and for Japan”. It charged, quite accurately, that “Hyndman’s answer [in the symposium] is nothing but a dithyrambic eulogy of Japan”. And it said: “We think the question... is posed in a radically false way. We are of the opinion that all socialists must and can be only for the working-class and people’s Japan against the imperialist Japan.”³¹

Lenin attacked the S-R criticism as “muddled”, and came to the defence of Guesde’s and Hyndman’s pro-Japan position. These two paladins were “the most determined and intransigent representatives of the international revolutionary social-democracy,” he wrote. He refuted the S-R attack in this way:

“This rebuke is as absurd as blaming a socialist for admitting the progressive nature of the free-trade bourgeoisie as compared with the protectionist bourgeoisie. [Did socialists, then, support wars by free-traders versus protectionists? There is no actual thought here.] Guesde and Hyndman [continued Lenin] did not defend the Japanese bourgeoisie or Japanese imperialism; they correctly noted in this conflict between two bourgeois countries the historically progressive role of one of them.*

The mind of the Second International

IT WAS not only a question of Guesde and Hyndman. The Lenin who wrote "The Fall of Port Arthur" was not alone; he was in the deep current. The contributions by Kautsky and Franz Mehring were more circumspect. Kautsky said:

"Never, in my opinion, has the problem been posed in terms so simple, and never has there been greater unanimity in international socialism, than on this question. The struggle against czarism — that is the central point of the foreign policy of the socialist parties of all countries..."

But Kautsky did not take up an attitude on Japan's side of the war.**

Mehring's article was one of the vaguest. He made the cloudy distinction that the revolutionary party could never have an interest for war, but it could have an interest in certain wars. The nearest he got to the moot point was in this statement: the working class was not indifferent to whether Russia or Japan would win; if Japan won, czarist despotism got a mortal blow; if Russia triumphed, czarism would be consolidated; etc.

Vandervelde, chairman of the International and leader of the Belgian party, wrote:

"One can state that, on this question, the socialist democracy is unanimous. It is with the Russian socialists and with the Japanese socialists when they denounce the capitalist influences which have unleashed the war; it has no more sympathy for the imperialism of the mikado than for the imperialism of the czar; but, in view of the inevitable repercussions of the conflict on the international and external politics of Europe, it cannot fail to take sides and wish for the defeat of the more dangerous of the two adversaries, whose victory would constitute the most fearful menace for the militant proletariat. And so from this point of view, hesitation is not possible: czarism, that is the enemy!"

Note that more than the others, more than Lenin too, Vandervelde distanced himself from the imperialism of Japan as well as the imperialism of the czar, but did so only to introduce the plainest formulation of a "lesser evil" policy: we "wish for the defeat of the more dangerous", i.e., we support the less dangerous imperialism against the more dangerous imperialism.

The International Socialist Bureau, administrative head of the International, limited itself to urging all socialist parties "to struggle with all their strength and combined efforts to prevent any extension of the war, so that their countries, far from participating in it, will seek to re-establish and maintain peace". 39

How much was glossed over, and one reason for much of the vagueness, will see when we get to the position taken by the socialist party that forthrightly came out against Japan in the war. This was the young Socialist Party of Japan itself, led by Sen Katayama. But first let us hear from a Russian.

Plekhanov's contribution was cautious. There were passing references to Japan: "...whereas in Japan the government and the nation are one, the socialist movement being only at its beginning, with us an abyss already exists between the rulers and all the best elements among the ruled..." 40

Who told the "Father of Russian Marxism" that in Japan "the government and the nation are one"? When he wrote this, he had already read a first article by Katayama on the antiwar position of the Japanese socialists, not to speak of Katayama's exposures of the anti-working-class policies of the mikado's regime generally.

The position taken by Sen Katayama was apparently partly based on pacifism and partly on a general feeling of class hostility to the mikado's regime — not on a reasoned-out analysis of the war question. The Japanese people (he said in this article) were indignant at the arrogant and unfriendly attitude of Russia, especially because Russia and its allies deprived Japan "of the fruits of our victories in the Sino-Japanese War". The attitude of the people was hostile to Russia. "Japan's pol-

icy with regard to Korea and China has always aimed at opening these countries to civilisation and developing them along the lines of modern culture. Russia has always blocked these beneficent efforts of Japan.”

Katayama set forth the antiwar views of the Japanese socialists. They were “opposed to war against Russia”. The war would only be a war in the interest of capitalists, for whose profit thousands would die. “If Japan is beaten, we would have to pay a heavy war indemnity to Russia – we, that is, ... the proletarian class. If we are victorious, the result does not seem bright for the workers.” The workers got no benefits from the victory over China; they just had to pay new taxes to maintain the armed forces, and militarism intensified. “I myself do not believe that the occupation of Manchuria by Russia is a question of life or death for Japan. Very far from it: the Japanese workers have no vital interest in it.”

He went on to describe the oppressive character of the Japanese regime: conscription; militarism; police state; no laws to protect the working class; meetings broken up by the police; the workers had no right to vote. He was sure that the great majority of the Japanese people were opposed to war with Russia, and the working class certainly was opposed. (Where had Lenin gotten his notion about “free Japan”?)

In a subsequent article after the outbreak of the war, Katayama expressed more or less the same position:

“The position taken by the Japanese socialists in the present conflict with Russia has been very clear and very frank from the very beginning. They were and remain hostile to war, not only to the war with Russia but to all war in general... the protest of the Japanese socialists against the war has been courageous and energetic.” 42

The Japanese party organised many antiwar meetings, very successful ones too. The government harassed them, and suspended socialist publications.

At the Amsterdam congress of the International, Plekhanov and Katayama demonstratively shook hands; and this symbol of the glossing over of differences was the message of the congress. To this day it is very difficult to find, in any book of any field, the truth about the position of the Second International on the Russo-Japanese War.

Position of the Mensheviks

WAS THE Japanese Socialist Party alone in the Second International opposing the war by Japan? We have already mentioned the position taken by the S-R organ *Revolutionnaya Rossiya*, which was the central organ of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. In addition, the Menshevik party also rejected the pro-Japan defeatist line.

We have seen that when Lenin criticised the S-Rs as “muddleheaded” on pro-Japanism, he also attacked the Mensheviks for the same sin. The reason was that the Menshevik organ had polemicised against Lenin’s article on “The Fall of Port Arthur”, the article in which Lenin’s pro-Japan defeatism had blossomed. The Menshevik critics inveighed against “speculating on the victory of the Japanese bourgeoisie”, and Lenin ridiculed this as a “sentimental phrase”.

What was the Mensheviks’ position on the war? It was clear from a party statement, undated, headed “Who Must Win?” and signed by the editors of *Iskra*.

“If Russia is victorious in the present war, the czar and his accomplices will have won a victory over all of Russia, over the working class and likewise over the bourgeoisie. If Japan inflicts defeat on Russia, the bourgeoisie will have won over the imperial government, after which it will unite with it and both will turn their combined forces against the working class. Complete victory of Russia or defeat of Russia will have only disadvantages for the working class, although in truth no

defeat can do more evil in Russia than is daily done to it by the existence of the autocracy. But the working class does not have to choose between the victory of democracy and the defeat of Russia. Although defeat is the lesser evil, it would, we have seen, bring enough calamities. What does the working class need, what result would be of advantage to it? First of all, it needs the end of the war. It needs peace at any price." 43

It is clear that this was a pronouncement "against both victory and defeat". The Mensheviks were trying to work out an antiwar position that would eschew the error of supporting Japan's victory. They were trying to get away from the alternatives of victory-or-defeat. Luxemburg and Trotsky did this in the First World War, as part of a revolutionary Marxist war analysis. But the Mensheviks were not capable of doing this.

In attempting to avoid the dilemma of victory-or-defeat, they fell into the slogan of "peace at any price". And this was the point where Lenin directed his attack, with a maximum of effectiveness. He showed, very powerfully from a Marxist standpoint, that a socialist could not possibly take the stand of "peace at any price" — peace, yes, but not peace at any price, as Lenin himself emphasised at one point.

In his article of April 5, "European Capital and the Autocracy", he polemicised vigorously especially against this slogan. He noted with justified glee that the Menshevik *Iskra* had started back-peddalling in an editorial on March 16 which modified the position. "One cannot limit oneself," said the new Menshevik editorial, "to demanding peace because peace combined with the maintenance of the autocracy would mean the ruin of the country". That is very good, Lenin commented; one could not in truth speak of peace at any price but only at the price of the overthrow of the autocracy.*

In other words: fight for peace, yes, but this fight for peace must be indissolubly linked with the continuation of the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the aristocracy.

The Menshevik conception of "Neither victory nor defeat", then, meant a return to the status quo ante bellum. Everybody back to Square One, as if nothing had happened. They were unable to avoid the dilemma of victory-or-defeat without falling into this pattern which Marxists had to regard as centrist or pacifistic. This mistake flowed from their fundamental politics, not from their rejection of support to Japan. But in polemicising against "peace at any price", Lenin wrote as if refuting this position was automatically a refutation of their position on pro-Japanism; and this was not true.

There is another interesting thing about the Menshevik statement quoted above. It anticipates a discussion that will arise when we get to the period of the First World War. We note that the statement contained a kind of "lesser evil" formulation: "Defeat is the lesser evil" as compared with czarist victory, said the statement, though it refused to choose the "lesser evil" by advocating the defeat of Russia by Japanese imperialism.

Let us grant that, under the conditions of this czarist despotism, defeat of the czarist regime was the lesser evil as compared with its victory. But is this the choice before us? The great principle is that to recognise the existence of a greater-or-lesser evil does not necessarily obligate socialists to choose one or the other — to support the lesser against the greater or vice-versa. We do not remain within the confines of the choice between evils, as if these unequal evils were the only possible alternatives. We propose our own socialist alternative to the victory-or-defeat of either government by the other.

Thus it is entirely possible to speak of defeat in a given war as being a "lesser evil" as compared with one's own government's victory without thereby becoming "defeatists", since there is a third way to be taken.

But when we meet the "lesser evil" formulation in Lenin in September 1914, it

will be something else, something different from the 1905 Menshevik use of what seems like a similar phrase. Where the Mensheviks dissociated the phrase from defeatism, Lenin-1914 will use it to express a new sort of defeatism.

Lenin and the “special Russian position”

LENIN'S DEFEATISM of 1914 had no precursor historically. In *ter alia*, the anti-war left of the First World War held the conviction that socialists did not base themselves on the perspective of a military decision between the imperialist contenders. But in the Russo-Japanese War, the Second International leaders quoted here did so; and, more to the point for present purposes, Lenin did so. He explicitly looked to the termination of the war by the military power (including naval power) of one or the other government.

In an article of June 9, 1905, after the destruction of the Russian fleet at Tsushima, Lenin, rejoicing over the crushing defeat, underlined the significance of the event: “All realised that the outcome of the war depended on victory at sea. The autocracy understood that an adverse outcome of the war would be tantamount to a victory of the ... revolution.”⁴⁴ Like everyone else, Lenin looked to the military victory of one of the belligerents as the outcome of the war.

Finally, it is very important to take note of another overall aspect of Lenin's position on the Russo-Japanese War. At no time did he generalise it into a “defeatism” as an international socialist policy. It was a policy for this war, between these contenders, in this concrete situation. He never gave the defeat slogan the sort of principled character which he and Zinoviev were to confer on it later, in 1914-1916. It obviously could not be internationalised. In no way could this defeat concept be applied in most of the countries where the International operated: only in Russia or some other backward, semifeudal, reactionary despotism at war with a “progressive” capitalist state.

This was brought out by Lenin's argumentation for the position. According to his reiterated analysis, Russia's defeat was due not merely to the reactionary character of its war aims, but in particular to its outlived, backward social structure as compared with “progressive” Japan. But we should remember that Japan may have been “progressive” as compared with czarist Russia but was hardly so in comparison with Western Europe.

“The war,” wrote Lenin in his June 9 article, of the autocracy, “has laid bare all its sores.”⁴⁵

Lenin, to be sure, knew that defeat was connected with revolution, but in particular in 1904-1905 he connected defeat with the unmodern, precapitalist features of the social structure of czarism, and the social divorcement between the despotism and the people — in comparison with which Japan was “modern”, “young”, “fresh” and “progressive”. The historical basis of his defeatism in this war was, therefore, the type of situation that belonged to the youthful ear of capitalism, that could not be carried over into the new imperialist era which had already begun (and of which socialist writers and thinkers had already begun talking).

In 1904-1905 this was not a “Leninist” view; it was the politics of the International. In an article published by Plekhanov in July 1905, “Patriotism and Socialism”, the then mentor of Russian Marxism wrote that “the international proletariat... must give sympathetic consideration to every war — whether defensive or offensive — which promises to remove some important obstacle from the path of social revolution.”⁴⁷

In this article Plekhanov emphasised very strongly that it was “dead dogma” to believe that socialists should oppose “every war”, or even all wars except “defensive wars”.

The touchstone was first of all the interests of the revolutionary movement,

which is defined simply as “progress”. That was what Plekhanov’s programmatic analysis came down to: one italicised word — one of the most notorious blurs in a political vocabulary. This passage continued as follows:

“The interests of this movement represent that higher point of view from which the modern socialist who does not wish to betray his principles must assess the international relations, both where they touch upon questions of war and peace, and where it is a question of commercial policy in general and “colonialism” in particular. To such a socialist *Salus revolutiae, suprema lex*. 49 [The supreme law is the well-being of the revolution.]

That “principle” about supporting a war of “progress” versus “reaction” which we could not find in Marx: here it was in this important programmatic article by Plekhanov. Was this where it really started life as a “principle of Marxism”? Such an investigation still has to be made.

In a way, Lenin’s position in the Russo-Japanese War was a case of “political lag” (on the analogy of the famous “cultural lag”): socialist theory had not yet caught up with social reality. The eventual catching-up came especially with the publication of Luxemburg’s theory of imperialism in her *Accumulation of Capital* and Lenin’s *Imperialism*, on the eve or in the very beginning of the world war. When the incredible world holocaust broke over the heads of the socialist movement, the most basic ideas about it were next to brand-new; they had to be run-in. In 1914 Lenin was among those who, more than others, caught up with the world; but this did not mean that he could immediately throw off all the remnants of the past that weighed on the socialist movement.

1. Zinoviev, “‘Defeatism’ Then and Now,” first published Oct. 1916; in *Gegen den Strom*, pp 441-42.
2. For the citations from Zinoviev’s *History of the Russian Communist Party*, see the information given in the Bibliography under this work. Note that citations below are referenced to both the *Workers Monthly* translation and the 1973 translation; but they are quoted from the former.
3. This article (cf. also note 86 above) was collected in *Gegen den Strom*, pp. 427-42.
4. For this tendency, see for example remarks by SA Korff in *Autocracy and Revolution in Russia* (1923), pp.67-69.
5. A final point about Zinoviev’s post-war history of the party: although it devotes a great deal of space, as we have seen, to defeatism in the Russo-Japanese War, when it gets (in Lecture 6) to the Bolsheviks in 1914-1917, there is not a word said about defeatism or the defeat slogan. Perhaps by this time (1923, second edition 1924) Zinoviev was aware that Lenin had dumped the whole thing. It is hard to think of an entirely rational explanation.
6. Lenin, “To the Russian Proletariat” (leaflet), Feb. 1904, in *LCW* 41:111, p. 113. (This piece was published in the fifth Russian edition of the *CW*, hence it was not available to me when I did the original version of this essay. It corrects the impression given there that Lenin wrote nothing about the war for some months).
7. Lenin, “The Autocracy and the Proletariat,” published in the first number of *Vperiod*, Jan. 4, 1905, in *LCW*, 8:48.
8. Lenin, “The Fall of Port Arthur,” in *LCW* 8:48.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.
10. Lenin, “European Capital and the Autocracy,” in *LCW* 8:268.
11. Lenin, “The Fall of Port Arthur,” in *LCW* 8:49.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
13. At the risk of introducing a side-point: note that Lenin obviously assumes — simply assumes — that establishing the “progressive” character of a bourgeoisie (or whatever) meant automatically giving political support (including support in war) to the “progressive” entity. This, we have said, was an approach alien to Marx, and it would be interesting to investigate how it arose in the Second International, for it was not peculiar to Lenin.
14. However, in 1907, at the Essen congress of the German Social-Democratic Party, August Bebel said in passing: “The Japanese were the aggressors beyond doubt; we rejoiced over that; we wished victory for them...” (38) His point at the moment was that socialists do not base their attitude on who is the aggressor. When he referred to socialist support of Japan’s side of the war, he was obviously assuming it was well known and beyond discussion.
15. Quoted in André Morizet’s contribution to *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, March issue.
16. Plekhanov’s piece appeared in the May issue.
17. In *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, April issue.
18. Quoted in the editorial notes to the French edition of Lenin’s old collected works (7:64), as explained in the footnote on page 53; presumably based on the coeval Russian edition.
19. The editorial notes by editors of Lenin’s collected works made the statement that Trotsky’s pamphlet *Our Political Tasks* put forward the “peace at any price” slogan. They quote him as writing: “It is necessary to cover Russia with proclamations... all of which must aim... at the same goal: peace at any price.” But I have not found this statement in Trotsky. Lenin himself did not make this charge at the time.
20. Lenin, “Debauchery,” in *LCW* 8:482.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 485.
22. Plekhanov, “Patriotism and Socialism,” in his *Selected Philosophical Works*, 3:90; article orig. published July 20, 1905.
23. Plekhanov, op. cit. (n. 47), same page.