

Marxism and the Irish revolution

Sean Matgamna reviews
*The Communists and the
 Irish Revolution: the
 Russian revolutionaries on
 the Irish National
 Question, 1895-1924*
 edited by Rayner Lysaght.
 Literaire publishers,
 Dublin.

THE STRIKING thing about this collection is that one of the key documents reproduced here "The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination", 1915 — one of Lenin's most important texts on the national question — has been bowdlerised so that the meaning of what Lenin wrote is transformed into its very opposite. The words in square brackets below have been excised from Lysaght's text:

Socialists of "the oppressing nations must demand the freedom of the oppressed nations to secede, for otherwise recognition of equal rights for nations and of international working-class solidarity would in fact be merely empty phrase-mongering, sheer hypocrisy. On the other hand, the Social-Democrats of the oppressed nations must place in the forefront the unity and the merging of the workers of the oppressed nations [with those of the oppressing nations] for otherwise these Social-Democrats will involuntarily become the allies of this or that national bourgeoisie, which *always* betrays the interest of the people and of democracy, and is *always* ready in its turn to annex and to oppress other nations." [Emphasis, Lenin's].

Whereas the real Lenin proposes unity of workers of oppressed and oppressing nations to fight not only oppression but also chauvinism on the part of the workers of the oppressed nation, "Lenin" here explicitly tells workers in oppressed nations to unite with workers in other oppressed nations, and implicitly not with the workers of the oppressor nation.

The common struggle against national oppression, not the struggle for socialism, is

the central thing for these workers.

What might be the implications of this doctored "Lenin" for Ireland? Where the plain meaning of what Lenin actually wrote is that communists should work for the unity of the Irish and British working classes, and within Ireland for Protestant-Catholic — that is essentially British and Irish — working class unity, the bowdlerised text here divides the working class into oppressing and oppressed segments for the duration of "the struggle".

Irish workers should aspire to unite with the workers of say, Zimbabwe, but not with the workers of Belfast or Manchester? Not "Workers of the World Unite" but "Workers of the Third World Unite"?

The most narrow Catholic-nationalist or Catholic chauvinist "Republican" self-satisfaction is thus in the Irish context seemingly endorsed by Lenin.

Everything here is stood on its head.

I am reluctant to believe that the editor of the collection, Rayner Lysaght, could have done this deliberately. To believe that it was not done deliberately but by typesetter's mishap you have to believe that serendipity has conspired to chop and edit Lenin's text, neatly and precisely, so that Lenin is made to disagree with his own real world outlook and to agree with the romantic Third-Worldist wing of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, and with its severed brethren of the American SWP... And with the Catholic-nationalist-politics-with-a-socialist-veneer adhered to by the editor of this collection.

The change from the real Lenin here in mid-text is as stark as a baritone changing to falsetto in mid-sentence. Did nobody involved in producing this book notice that a Third World populist Lenin had been substituted for the real, Communist, Lenin? Did no one read the proof? Was an erratum slip impossible to produce? As far as I know, not one of the learned comrades who reviewed this book in the press of Lysaght's international organisation noticed the change. Is Leninism so much of a foreign language to them that they do not notice when he is made to lapse into gibberish?

This book essays to bring together every single reference to Ireland in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky. There are also epilogues and appendices. One of these contains a letter of June 1936 from Trotsky to James Connolly's daughter, Nora, written in English. It has previously appeared only in a small "Lambertist" journal.

"... I always have been greatly interested in Ireland, but unfortunately my interest remained only platonical. I never had the opportunity to study more in detail Irish history and politics. Since my early years I have got, through Marx and Engels, the greatest sympathy and esteem for the heroic struggle of the Irish for their independence. The tragic fate of your courageous father met

me in Paris during the war. I bear him faithfully in my remembrance. I made up my mind to read your book about your father in the very next time.

The revolutionary tradition of the national struggle is a precious good. Would it be possible to imbue the Irish proletariat with it for its socialist class-struggle, the working class of your country could, in spite of the numerical weakness of your population, play an important historical role and give a mighty impulse to the British working class now paralysed by the senile bureaucracy."

Trotsky's comment on James Connolly in that brief letter is, as far as I know, the sole direct reference to Connolly by either Lenin or Trotsky.

The main body of the book consists of 67 extracts and articles, organised in seven sections, amounting to just over 80 pages in all. The sections have these titles:

1. Lenin on the Irish land question (six extracts in three and a half pages).
2. Lenin on the Irish class war, 1913 (three items, two of them complete articles in six pages, one a short stray item).
3. Lenin: For the right to self-determination (11 items in 23 pages).
4. Trotsky, "Early scraps on Ireland" (sic: two items, two pages).
5. Polemics on the Easter Rising (seven items in 12 pages, one of them an article by Karl Radek against which Lenin polemicalised).
6. From Easter 1916 to October 1917.
7. The Soviet power and the Irish revolution (28 items in 21 pages).

The most important selection from Lenin here is that entitled "For the right of self-determination, 1914-16". If Lenin's writings on Ireland itself are thin, flimsy and false (See WL 22 and 23) his writings on self-determination are great and profound works of Marxism. Lysaght gives us a selection of 25 pages from this seed bed of Marxist science, including the two pieces on the 1914 Home Rule crisis examined in *Workers' Liberty* 23 (about a quarter of the whole).

This anatomy of the collection tells the story: far too many of the items here are indeed mere "scraps". Some of the scraps — that is, bits culled by the editor in which Ireland is mentioned, almost always in passing — are ripped out of works which are in themselves of immense importance; but scraps even of good things are... scraps.

Anything written on Ireland by Lenin and Trotsky would be worth collecting, with more or less critical commentary. Editor Lysaght's difficulty is that they wrote next to nothing on Ireland. He is reduced to trawling works on other subjects for glancing references to Ireland. Instead of providing full texts on things like the National Question, Lysaght chops most of them up to extract direct references to Ireland.

"Lenin on Ireland" does not exist as the

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editor of this work thinks he exists. Had he set his mind to analysing Irish problems directly and concretely, we would probably, even after 70 or 80 years, have before us reliable keys to what has happened since. He did not. Because of the paucity of his concerns with Ireland, and the great space of time between him and us, all "Lenin" can tell us now about Ireland is what we can take from what he told us about national questions in general. Lenin's serious work can teach us how to analyse Ireland for ourselves — as Leninists, not as text-chewing epigones.

Filleting these works in order to chop out and collect all the bare references to Ireland in them is too much like the man in the fable who killed the goose that laid the golden eggs to get imaginary nuggets of gold.

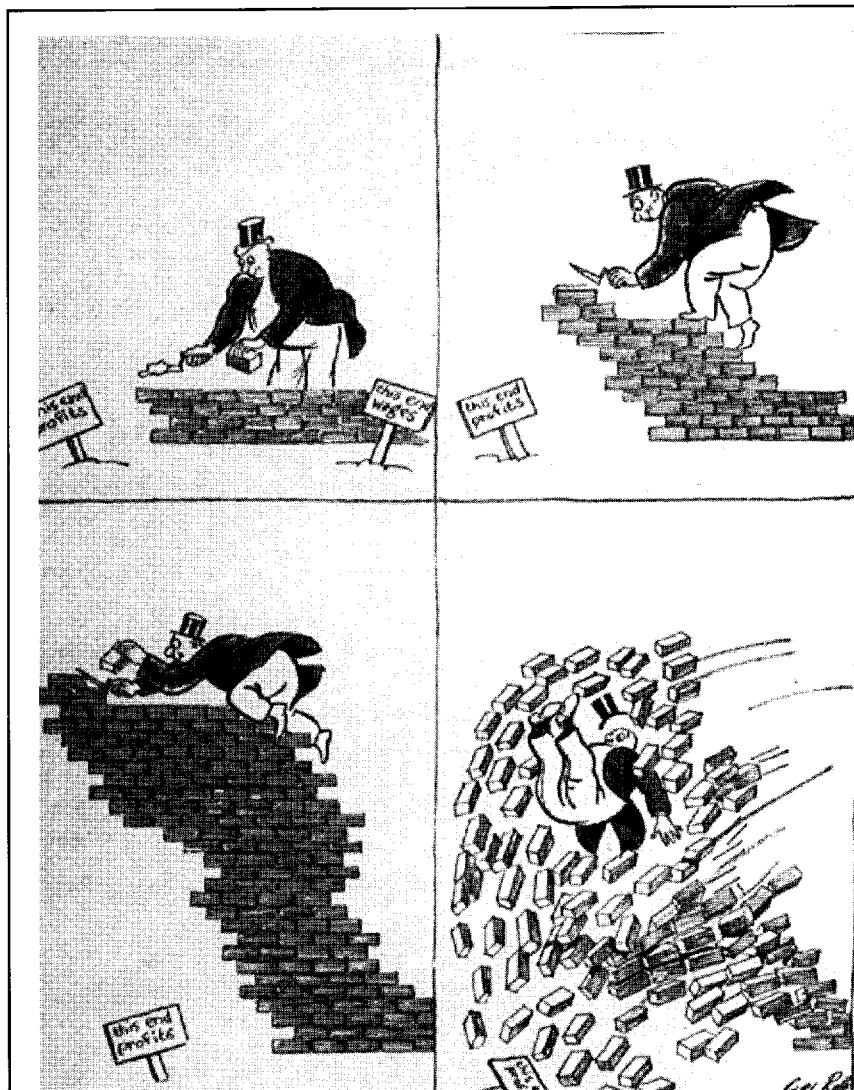
Text worship is the opposite of living Marxism and much of what Lysaght does here is ridiculous. Nothing could be more senseless than to chop and fillet key texts of Lenin's like this. For example, a whole page, out of 80 that make the main body of the book, is occupied by a list of parties invited to the founding conference of the Communist International in 1919, just to establish that the Irish Communists were invited too! Such a key text of Lenin's as the Communist International's "Theses on the National and Colonial Question", 1920, is represented by a little snippet consisting in the main of a list in which Ireland is included. And so on.

To give so much space to "scraps" of little or no importance — except that they go to make a "full" collection of all references to Ireland in Lenin's and Trotsky's works — is to substitute the concerns of a matchbox or bottle-top collector for those of a Marxist!

Revolutionary Marxism is a way of looking at the world, analysing it and changing it. It embodies certain key basic ideas (the ultimate priority of the mode of production in shaping society, including its ideas; the class struggle; the centrality of the working class in modern history). Marxism deals with an ever-changing reality. There is no rest, no finality. Reality moves, permutes, is transformed. The best texts of Marxism "age" and become progressively divorced from the evolved reality whose ancestor, so to speak, they captured.

There can be no "sacred texts" To treat any of the texts of Marxism, the past judgements of Marxists, as embodying supra-historical truth, is to break with the heart of Marxism and to transform attempted works of science into quasi-religious objects of veneration. To the degree that such texts are worshipped instead of being critically reviewed, used, worked over, they lose whatever power they had to illuminate reality and thus help us in the work of changing it. We kill or fail to develop the capacity in ourselves to use the tools of Marxism.

The Marxists whose work is now venerated worked differently. Marxism was a method of analysing concrete reality. Previous Marxist attempts to analyse the same or antecedent reality offered guides, models, ideas, comparisons for the working, thinking, living Marxists. In truth, of course,



A short history of the profit system

everyone thinks about the world, even the religious text-worshippers, except that their cogitations do not go further than the thought that Marx or Lenin or Trotsky — or Stalin or Mao — was infallible and could tell you about your world, though it may have come into existence after they were dead. Of course, what the dogmatist usually does in practice is pragmatically and impressionistically take an attitude on current events and then find the 'right quotes' to dress it up. Marxism as a method of analysing reality atrophies.

Ireland shows at its worst this process of atrophying — and of dead "Marxism" being filled with alien content. Marx and Engels analysed Ireland. They died; Ireland changed. Partial analyses of aspects of Ireland's evolution were made by later Marxists influenced by Marx and Engels. Ireland evolved into two bourgeois states. And there, frozen at the point when the Communist International died as a Marxist, working-class organisation, "Marxism" on Ireland stopped. Comments and analyses of Marx and Lenin (Lenin's radically wrong at the start) became timeless truths of the Stalinist church and gained wide influence by merging with left-wing petit-bourgeois Republicanism.

"Trotskyists" who thought they had done their duty as Marxists if they re-labelled what the Stalinists called "completing the bourgeois revolution" and straight Republicans called "reunifying Ireland", calling it "Permanent Revolution" instead, have been a part, and not the least influential part, of this process. Nobody who knows both Irish reality and Trotsky's theory of "Permanent Revolution" could believe "Permanent Revolution" has any bearing on Irish politics! I have *never in 30 years found anyone able to argue for its seriously*. But they "believe" it. It is the common dogma, functioning as a licence for playing the chameleon to petit bourgeois nationalism.

Marxists, if they are Marxists, draw from life, not from the dead or half-dead reflection of ever-changing life in old analyses.

All Lenin's articles included or excerpted in this collection have been available in English for 6 or 7 decades, and apart from the letter to Nora Connolly, those of Trotsky for 20 or 30 years. The importance of this book lies not so much in what it tells us about "the Communists and the Irish revolution" but in what its appearance now tells us about the decadence of parts of the Irish and international kitsch-"Trotskyist" left. ■