

B U L L E T I N

HOW AND WHY HISTORY IS RE-WRITTEN

by

J. R. Johnson

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A JOHNSON LEGEND

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Albert Gates

March, 1944

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"It was agreed before the convention to publish the following discussion article by comrade Johnson in the Internal Bulletin. Technical difficulties made this impossible at the late date when it was submitted. Comrade Johnson has made a special request that it be printed now, even though the convention discussion is over. It is printed here, along with a reply by comrade Gates, not in order to reopen the discussion on the question but to terminate it. - Editor."

In the September NI, I gave the following interpretation of Lenin's passage on the transformation of an imperialist war into a war of national emancipation.

"Lenin is here taking as a precedent the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. From 1793 to about 1807 revolutionary France fought a progressive war against monarchical and feudal Europe. About 1808, the progressive German aristocracy and the bourgeoisie reorganized Germany, introducing the reforms of the French Revolution (as far as was possible from above) in order to free the country from the imperialist domination of Napoleon. The war thereupon changed its character, becoming, in its next stage on the part of Germany, a progressive war of national emancipation."

In the October issue of the NI, Comrade Gates answers me by writing his own history of Germany.

1) Gates denies that there was a progressive German aristocracy under Frederick IV.

Everyone knows the names of the battleships, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. Every Marxist theoretician should know that they are the names of the aristocrats who, despite their vacillations, did great work in mobilizing Germany against Napoleon. Baron von Stein, the most famous of the aristocrats, was responsible for the Edict of Emancipation, issued in 1807 and known to every schoolboy. This Edict: "abolished the institution of serfdom throughout Prussia from October 8, 1810. All distinctions affecting the tenure of land (noble land, peasants' land, etc.) were also swept away, and the principle of free trade in land was established forthwith. The same famous edict also abrogated all class distinctions respecting occupations and callings of any and every kind, thus striking another blow at the caste system which had been so rigorous in Prussia." (Enc. Brit.)

Von Stein's reforms were directly inspired by the observations that such reforms had increased the national strength of France. In turn, he inspired and sponsored von Hardenberg's civil reforms and von Gneisenau's and von Scharnhorst's reorganization of the army along national lines.

2) Gates asserts that the war of Germany against Napoleon in 1813 was not a war of national emancipation. Tarle says:

By 1811 "the newly developed bourgeoisie was becoming a force in all the lands conquered by Napoleon or dependent on him. Nothing could be done to crush the industrial development of the whole of western and a part of central Germany, of Bohemia (as the Czech part of Austria was then known,) of Belgium, of portions of Silesia."*

"September 1813 came to an end indecisively, but both Napoleon and the Allies desired a general battle before winter. Germany was in a state of continued unrest. Volunteer guerilla detachments were organized by the Jugenbund and other patriotic associations. The youthful bourgeoisie, the student bodies of Prussia, Saxony, the states of the Confederation of the Rhine and Westphalia, now began to entertain hopes of liberating themselves from the alien conqueror - and at the same time from surviving feudal-absolutist conditions. At that moment they saw in Napoleon only a despot." (p.324)

3) Gates concludes that Lenin, in the disputed passage "did not have in mind the wars at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the national wars in middle and latter half of that century."

This is a truly monstrous error. On the very page on which he talks about the transformation of imperialist war into national war, Lenin says:

"A national war can be transformed into an imperialist war, and vice versa. For example, the wars of the Great French Revolution started as national wars and were such. They were revolutionary wars because they were waged in defense of the Great Revolution against a coalition of counter-revolutionary monarchies. But after Napoleon had created the French Empire by subjugating a number of large, virile, long established national states of Europe, the French national wars became imperialist wars, which in their turn engendered wars for national liberation against Napoleon's imperialism." (italics in original).

This is not a mistake about "history." Gates says that Lenin and Trotsky "were mistaken" because he had not the slightest idea what Lenin and Trotsky were talking about. Gates has taken a false political position on the national question in Europe today. In order to defend this, he now has to prove that Lenin was not writing about the things that Lenin says he was writing about. This is the very root of our discussion, as I have insisted from the very beginning (April 11). Once more, our basic theoretical structure is twisted and torn to fit false politics.

*Bonaparte by Eugene Tarle. Knight Publications, 1937

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It is sad that Comrade Johnson thought it imperative to extend the dispute on the Lenin quotation and the question of the "progressive German aristocracy. Having erred in his appreciation of that whole historical period, he now persists in extending those erroneous views.

The dispute between us was simple in itself and the issues easily verifiable by what was already printed. For example, Johnson objected to my reference to Lenin's writing in 1915 on the possibility of a new period of national wars in Europe. The quotation in dispute is repeated for the purpose of refreshing memories. Lenin wrote:

"It is highly improbable that this imperialist war of 1914-16 will be transformed into a national war... Nevertheless, it cannot be said that such a transformation is impossible: if the European proletariat were to remain impotent for another twenty years; if the present war were to end in victories similar to those achieved by Napoleon, in the subjugation of a number of virile national states; if imperialism outside of Europe (primarily American and Japanese) were to remain in power for another twenty years without a transition to socialism, say, as a result of a Japanese-American war, then a great national war in Europe would be possible. This means that Europe would be thrown back for several decades. This is improbable. But it is not impossible, for to picture world history as advancing smoothly and steadily without sometimes taking gigantic strides backward is undialectical, unscientific and theoretically wrong." (Emphasis in original - A.G.)

Johnson denies that Lenin meant what was attributed to him by me. What Lenin meant, says our historian, is something else, because he was "taking as a precedent the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars." (J.R.Johnson, MI, October, 1943).

Then, says Johnson: "From 1793 to about 1807 revolutionary France fought a progressive war against monarchical and feudal Europe. About 1808 the progressive German aristocracy and the bourgeoisie reorganized Germany, introducing the reforms of the French revolution (as far as was possible), in order to free the country from the imperialist domination of Napoleon... the war thereupon changed its character, becoming, in its next stage, on the part of Germany, a progressive war of national emancipation." (Monarchical and feudal Europe fought a progressive war against Napoleon - A.G.)

My objections to this kind of "telescoped history" were several. One, that this was not history in that it did not aid to an understanding of, nor did it characterize, Napoleon in his wars, other than to indicate that he was a conquerer.

Secondly, Germany was not a nation at that time but divided into separate states, some allied with Napoleon, others independent, some allied to Prussia, others in deathly opposition to and in fear of Prussian rule under King Frederick William III.

Thirdly, that there was no "progressive German aristocracy," but that this ruling class was "one of the most corrupt, reactionary, bourbon-feudal classes on the continent."

Fourth, that the reforms introduced into Prussia and the other German States were initiated by Napoleon and forced upon a recalcitrant absolutist regime. That these bourgeois reforms, reflecting the rise of the new social order, found favor among the weak, vacillating and cowardly bourgeoisies of the independent German States who looked to Napoleon for aid in the struggle against their feudal rulers.

Fifth, that Johnson's dates are wrong. That in 1808, Napoleon had complete sway over Prussia and a terror-stricken reigning House, and even strengthened his hold over the largest German state in 1810-11, after a pretense of a struggle against him by more militant elements of this decadent absolutist regime.

Sixth, that the Holy Alliance of Metternich, which Prussia joined as a subordinate power, as on a bandwagon, was a reactionary coalition of feudalism and, finally, that this war therefore, "was not a war of national emancipation as we understand it today."

THE LENIN QUOTATION AGAIN

Let us first settle the question of the Lenin quotation. This is easily disposed of and will permit us to return to the question of Prussia and Napoleon. What Lenin meant is clear in the quotation when he says: "...if imperialism outside of Europe (primarily American and Japanese) were to remain in power for another twenty years without a transition to socialism, say, as a result of a Japanese-American war, then a great national war in Europe would be possible. This means that Europe would be thrown BACK for several decades.."

I am fully acquainted with what Lenin wrote in this article. I know, too, the quotation Johnson has referred to, but his reference has nothing whatever to do with the dispute. When Lenin, in 1915, wrote "thrown BACK several decades," he meant exactly that. He did not mean a dozen decades, or a hundred years; he meant "several," three, four, or five. How is it possible to extend "several decades" to fit the artificial and schematic concepts which Johnson holds? Only by assertion and nothing else. This may sound like quibbling, but actually what is involved is understanding the whole theory, practice and the spirit of Lenin's concepts of the national question.

A "PROGRESSIVE" FEUDAL CLASS!

Let us return to the "progressive German aristocracy" and Napoleon and see just what it is Johnson says. First, why did Napoleon's war cease to be progressive in 1807? Why not, 1808, or 1810, or 11? Did not the continuation of his war also carry with it the continued extension of bourgeois reforms on a feudal Europe? What made the German aristocracy "progressive in 1808, and not 1806-07 when they were warring Napoleon? Was the German aristocracy "progressive" when it joined the black Holy Alliance? And in what consisted its progressiveness, in reforms of a capitalist character, or

merely its wars (there were many within a short space of years) against Napoleon? These questions are asked to indicate that Johnson's views on this important period of European development is utterly unhistorical, and undialectical.

When Johnson speaks of a "progressive German aristocracy" he is factually and therefore historically wrong. Unless... unless he means that there were representatives of this class who were "progressive." But this is something altogether different. Actually, Johnson does not say this. He means that the bourbon-feudal aristocracy was, as a class, progressive. Johnson is often loose and unprecise in his terminology, but here the idea is clear from the impassioned defense he has written.

of his analysis?

Where does he go for proof? To the Encyclopedia Britannica, that well-known source book of Marxism. And what do we learn? Namely, that Baron von Stein and von Hardenburg were "opposition" members of their class advocating military and civil reforms and reforms in land (abolition of serfdom, which was already doomed by Napoleon). And then, he adds another important historical fact: "Everyone knows the names of the battleships, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau." So what?

What Johnson is saying and proving is that there were members of this venal ruling class who were "progressive." But that is really not so strange. All classes develop "opposition groups" and have their "freaks." They are present in every social order and many examples of this fact can be cited. Yes, even the proletariat has its "bourgeois apostles." But, to deduce from the existence of Von Stein and von Hardenburg, and Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, (why not Clausewitz?), that the feudal-bourbon ruling class was a progressive aristocracy, is to fly in the face of history.

There were good and practical reasons for the actions of these "progressives". Whatever "progressive measures" they championed and introduced have to be examined in order to determine exactly what it was they proposed, why they championed them, and their aims. In order to explain this conflict within the German aristocracy, to explain the existence of militant, ^{and military} "oppositionalists", it is necessary to understand the role of Napoleon and his impact upon the European states.

It will be seen then, that Stein and Hardenburg, were appointees of the Hohenzollern King, for the purpose of preparing Prussia for a new war with Napoleon. The reforms they championed were copied from Napoleon and the reason behind their actions was the recognition that unless they enacted these reforms it would be impossible to organize for war against the French dictator. Yes, army reforms were necessary; land reforms were necessary, civil reforms were necessary. Stein and Hardenburg were for these. They even drew up the new decrees. Some were actually announced as edicts. But few, if any, were carried out.

The same Encyclopedia which Johnson cited could have shown him that. And not only that, but at the same time the utter lack of unity in Prussia, the conflicts between the aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie, between the aristocracy and Stein, between Stein and Hardenburg. Otherwise, Johnson must conclude that measures formally taken and not applied, and even those enacted and applied, especially in military affairs, were the beginnings of the rise of the capitalist order in Prussia and this was accomplished by the aristocracy! This is what Johnson is saying. What he should have said was simple.

Namely, that the pressures of Napoleon led to the rise of oppositionists in the ruling class who wanted to match Napoleon's strength with "French reforms" but without the overall social purposes as those which actuated Napoleon as the representative of the French bourgeoisie.

C. S.

HISTORICAL ROLE OF NAPOLEON

One cannot understand this history without a knowledge of the historical role of Napoleon. The "Little Corporal" was a product of the French revolution but not its Jacobin representative. He was the agent of the powerful French bourgeoisie and he represented its interests on the Continent against feudalism. His movement, even as he, was full of contradictions. His contradictions notwithstanding, the fact that he overreached himself, has nothing whatever to do with the essential role he played in the struggle against the Romanoff's, the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs. The struggle was a complicated one. His conquests not only engendered national wars (Spain against him, Poland with him), but a feudal-reactionary alliance under Metternich (Austria, Prussia and Russia) against him and the gains of the French Revolution. Within this conflict, was the struggle against the main competitor of Bourgeois France, namely, Bourgeois England. Each sought the subordination of the Continent to their bourgeois aims! And how can one possibly consider the wars on the Continent without once making reference to this quintessential factor which lay behind the conflicting alliances? Yet Napoleon's historical role was assessed long ago. Marx wrote in the 18th Brumaire that:

"... Napoleon brought about, within France, the conditions under which alone free competition could develop, the partitioned lands be exploited, the nation's unshackled powers of industrial production be utilized; while, beyond the French frontier, he swept away everywhere the establishment of feudality, so far as requisite, to furnish the bourgeois social system of France with fit surroundings of the European Continent, and such as were in keeping with the times."

After the 1806-07 war and defeat of Prussia, Tarle in his celebrated Napoleon, wrote:

"Here was a collision of two different social-economic wars of life, of two different governmental regimes, of two different military organizations and tactical methods, conditioned by two wholly different social systems. A servile, industrially backward feudal-absolutist order came in conflict with a state which had experienced the profound bourgeois revolution - a revolution which had destroyed all the traces of feudalism - and was now coping with a rapidly growing condition of industrialism. At the head of Prussia was a king who boasted of being the first noble and landowner of Brandenburg; at the head of France was a dictator who consciously endeavored to develop an autonomous national state of mighty industrial and agrarian stature, based on the principle of private ownership... We have already spoken of the organization of Napoleon's army. The Prussian army faithfully mirrored the servile structure of the state."

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRUGGLE

Isn't it obvious that what Stein and Hardenburg wanted were some of the reforms of Napoleon in order to make possible a struggle against him in defense of the feudal-absolutist order? But even the limited aims of Stein and Hardenburg were not the aims of the "progressive German aristocracy." Its momentary concessions to these oppositionists were not of long duration. The battles for bourgeois reforms in Prussia, as in the other German states were to extend through 1830, 1848 and finally culminate in the struggle for national unification of the German states in 1870.

In the interests of the French bourgeoisie, Napoleon's wars of conquest took a sharp turn toward the subjugation of Europe, in the interest of that one powerful state, to enable it to fend off the rivalry of England. In seeking the organization of the Continent against England, Napoleon made or sought to make, "colonies" of many European nations and states. These engendered all kinds of wars against him. A national war in Spain? Yes, In Italy? Partially. They were really wars of separate states for emancipation and not wars for the national unification of Italy. That struggle did not come until the 50's and 60's. In this period, it was still a struggle over who will dominate these separate states, Austria or France.

How about Russia? Was its wars against Napoleon, national wars? In 1805? That would be nonsense. It was part of the feudal coalition (Prussia feared to join it then) against Napoleon when Napoleon was nowhere near Russia. During the invasion of Russia? Johnson says, yes. The new Stalinist historians say, yes. But the Marxists, as represented by Tarle, have denied that it was a national war. Says Tarle: "It is clear that if the Spanish guerrilla warfare might justifiably be called a national war, it would be impossible to apply this term to any Russian movement in the war of 1812."

I think it was Riazanov who referred to them as "so-called national wars."

Was the Holy Alliance under Metternich (uniting Prussia, Austria, Russia, and joined by England) a movement of national emancipation? Only in a very limited sense and then it could be applied perhaps only to Prussia. This was a war of feudal absolutism against the new order in Europe, seeking the retention of its own power and the restoration of the Bourbon royalty in France against the "rabble."

Certainly conquest engenders the desire for emancipation. But having said that, it is necessary to understand the historical period, the concrete as well as the abstract, the ebb and flow of class conflict, of aims, of alliances, etc. There is more to the question than mere guns and powder. And here is where Johnson makes his greatest errors. His views are unhistorical, undialectical and, therefore, unMarxist. This is neither the time nor place to completely evaluate the historical period before 1815, but enough has been stated to indicate that Johnson is off on a tangent.

If there was this "progressive German aristocracy", then what did it make of Napoleon? In 1806-07? Or 1808? Or 1810-11? Or in the war against the Holy Alliance?

Which was progressive, Napoleon, or Metternich, or England, or none of these forces? Was Tzar Alexander of Russia, a leader in the Holy Alliance, also head of the "progressive Russian aristocracy?" And Metternich the leader of the "progressive Austrian aristocracy?" Was the struggle of Prussia,

a struggle for its national emancipation, also a fight for the emancipation of all the German states, including those allied with Napoleon? Was it for the national unification of all Germany? If yes, was this carried on under the leadership of the feudal Hohenzollern family?

There are the questions which Johnson's views require him to answer in the affirmative. And are we to accept this as Marxism? As Lenin's position on the National question?

TARLE'S VIEWS OF THAT STRUGGLE

When Johnson says that in 1811 (not about 1808) the newly developing bourgeoisie was becoming a force in all the lands conquered by Napoleon, he is correct. But does this square with his main thesis? Not at all. The rising bourgeoisie was for Napoleon and turned on him only when their independent interests conflicted with those of the French bourgeoisie. But the newly developing bourgeoisie was to experience another fifty years of struggle against the "progressive German aristocracy" in Prussia, and its absolutist relatives in other countries, before the bourgeois revolution was achieved. Of course, I deny the existence of a progressive German aristocracy, Stein and Hardenburg, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, notwithstanding. I have already quoted from Tarle. Listen again to his writing on the period immediately preceding Napoleon's second seizure of Prussia:

"Confusion and irritation reigned among the Prussian nobility and among a section of the middle class. The King was accused of cowardice, Haugwitz of treachery. The nobility loathed Napoleon not so much with a national as with a class hatred. They regarded him as the destroyer of ancient, feudal conditions - of that existence which fostered landowners and serfs. A part of the Prussian trading class was alarmed at Napoleon's energy in erecting tariff and other walls between his vassal possessions and Prussia. With grave concern it watched the deliberate manner with which he instituted measures to the advantage of French manufacturers."

Elsewhere, Tarle writes:

"Yes and how could the French peasant army forget that its Emperor had issued out of Revolutionary ranks, when it witnessed with its own eyes that serfs had ceased being serfs and that the nobility no longer dared to humiliate them without fear of reprisal, as was the rule in the days of the Bourbons. Instinctively, they knew that outside of the borders of France, in the Europe he was conquering, their leader was fulfilling the aims of revolution, rather than counter-revolution."

What happened in the course of Napoleon's conquest is quite another story and study. But it can be easily seen why I wrote that the wars against Napoleon were not wars of "national emancipation as we understand it today."

This was not Lenin's concept either, because Johnson's quotation from him on the Napoleonic wars precedes in order my reference to Lenin. Isn't it clear that if Lenin had reference to that period in European history that he, who was always precise in his writing, especially of a polemical character, would have said so? He would not have said exactly, "thrown BACK several decades."

If this discussion seems to have gone far afield, then, of course, I feel entirely blameless, for its origins are to be found in Johnson's contributions to the discussion and his unconsidered mutilation of history. But if it serves as an incentive for comrades to study this extremely interesting and important period of the historical development of capitalism, then it will have been worth the effort.

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March, 1944