

BARBARA C. ALLEN

Sergei Medvedev's 1924 "Letter to a Baku Comrade"

Translated and introduced by Barbara C. Allen

Background

Lev Trotskii, by the autumn of 1923, had begun to criticize his rivals in the party leadership (triumvirs Iosif Stalin, Grigorii Zinov'ev, and Lev Kamenev) openly. In a letter to the Politburo in early October, he attacked the party's economic policy; and condemning appointmentism, that is, the new tendency to make appointments to party positions rather than hold elections, he faulted the new-found lack of democracy in the party. Forty-six party members signed the "Declaration of the 46," supporting his views and calling for an extraordinary conference of the Party Central Committee (CC) to discuss them.¹ Instead, on October 25-27, 1923, a joint meeting of the CC and the disciplinary body, the party Central Control Commission (CCC), convened to discuss both Trotsky's letter to the Politburo and the Declaration of the 46 in support of him. The conclave censured Trotskii. Passions rose on all sides and drew into the debate members of older factions, including the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists. Increasing agitation in party cells over the declaration forced party leaders to broaden the discussion in early November.²

* I offer many thanks to Alexis Pogorelskin for her suggestions that added clarity to the manuscript. The research that led to this article was supported by an International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) Individual Advanced Research grant and by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship. Irina Shliapnikova permitted me access to the Central Control Commission (CCC) files where I found a comparison of the two versions of the Baku letter. Iurii Fel'shtinskii assured me that I needed no permission to translate the Russian-language version of the Baku letter published in the 1990 collection of oppositionist materials that he edited, *Kommunisticheskaia oppozitsiia v SSSR, 1923-1927*, 4 vols.

1. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 112-13; Richard Day, *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 87-88.

2. V. P. Vil'kova, editor, *RKP(b): vnutripartiinaia bor'ba v dvadtsatye gody, dokumenty i materialy 1923* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), pp. 272-73; Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, pp. 116-18.

Meanwhile, foreign affairs intruded into the debate. Soviet communists paid close attention to German politics in 1923, a year of hyperinflation and political unrest in Germany. When the uprising of the German Communist Party (KPD) failed in Hamburg in late November, the debacle intensified conflict in the Russian party.³

The turmoil in party cells reached a fever pitch in December 1923. The Trotskyists and Democratic Centralists decried the government's neglect of heavy industry and the lack of 'democracy' within the party. Trotskii tried to harness the energy of young party members and Komsomolists, claiming that a generational divide existed in the party. Rather than siding with either Trotskii or the triumvirs, Aleksandr Shliapnikov and Sergei Medvedev held their own views and appealed to supporters in several ways. Firstly, they wrote and promoted a resolution in party cells. Secondly, Shliapnikov spoke at party meetings, most visibly at the Khamovniki district party conference in Moscow in January 1924. Thirdly, he wrote an article which was published in *Pravda* in January 1924.⁴

The debate ended with the Thirteenth Party Conference, 16–18 January 1924. Few supported Trotskii's views at the party conference, elections to which the triumvirate had manipulated in its favor. Trotsky was condemned, the triumvirate prevailed and Trotsky went south to recuperate from malaria attacks. On the way he heard of Lenin's death on 21 January, but did not return to Moscow for the funeral. His absence from that event struck a blow to his prospects for the succession. Shliapnikov and his comrades were pleased with the conference's decision to admit a massive number of workers into the party. The number of one hundred thousand recommended by the conference was increased after Lenin died (the 'Lenin levy'). As a result, in February to May, two hundred and forty thousand workers joined the party.⁵

Introduction to the Baku Letter

In January 1924, near the close of intraparty discussion, Sergei Medvedev responded to a request by like-minded individuals in Baku, a major center of the oil industry on the Caspian Sea, for information about his and Shliapnikov's stance on the current party debates regarding indus-

3. Gleb J. Albert, 'German October is Approaching: Internationalism, Activists, and the Soviet State in 1923', *Revolutionary Russia*, 24 (2011): 111–42.

4. Deutscher claims that members of the Workers' Opposition figured among the 46, but I did not recognise any of their names (Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, p. 114). For more about Shliapnikov's participation in the 1923-24 debate, see my forthcoming biography of him, *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2015 [cloth]); Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016 [paper]).

5. Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, pp. 132–35.

trialization, the peasantry, Comintern tactics, and intraparty democracy. He sent documents and a letter, addressed to Valerian Barchuk, a former metalworker employed by the Commissariat of Enlightenment in Baku. The letter was discovered when Azerbaijani police arrested some of the people in Barchuk's circle to which Medvedev had sent it. In the context of a split between Zinov'ev and Kamenev on the one hand, and Stalin on the other, in 1925-1926, the letter became the pivotal issue in a CCC investigation of Shliapnikov and Medvedev on charges of factionalism.⁶

Stalin, Nikolai Bukharin, and other leaders criticized the document based on the version the CCC received from Baku which has not been published. Medvedev delivered a "corrected" version to the CCC in July 1926; this version was published in Russian only in 1990. The published version of Medvedev's letter is identical to documents I found among Medvedev's personal papers in the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (TsA FSB RF).⁷ Shliapnikov's CCC file contains a comparative layout of both versions.⁸ The version that Baku authorities sent to the CCC had stylistic, grammatical and spelling errors uncharacteristic of Medvedev and a few significant differences in content. One whole paragraph in the Baku version was missing from the version Medvedev offered in 1926 as a copy of the original. Unfortunately, I could not find any copy that was signed by Medvedev and hence clearly the original from January 1924. Therefore it is not certain how closely the version transmitted from Baku might resemble the original. It is possible that some divergences stemmed from intentional doctoring, while others were due to careless copying. Medvedev might have made careless errors in the original and corrected them in the 1926 version. Whether insertions were made by the Azerbaijani police or members of the group in Baku is open to conjecture, although a consultation of police files in Baku should be undertaken.

6. For a detailed analysis of the investigation, see my essay, "Transforming Factions into Blocs: Alexander Shliapnikov, Sergei Medvedev, and the CCC Investigation of the 'Baku Affair' in 1926," in *A Dream Deferred: New Studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History*, eds. Donald Filtzer, Wendy Goldman, Gijs Kessler, and Simon Pirani (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 129-52.

7. "Pis'mo S. Medvedeva 'Bakinskomu Tovarishchu,'" *Kommunisticheskaia opozitsiia v SSSR, 1923-1927*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Terra, 1990), ed. Iu. Fel'shtinskii, vol. 1, pp. 90-101 (reprint of Benson, Vermont: Chalidze Publications, 1988); Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi Sluzhby Bezopasnosti (TsA FSB), R33718, delo 499061, vols. 13, 41; Bukharin wrote a 10 July 1926 *Pravda* editorial condemning the letter, while Stalin denounced it at a July 15, 1926 party plenum (Lars T. Lih *et al.*, eds., *Stalin's Letters to Molotov* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995], pp. 104-05).

8. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 589, op. 3, d. 9103, vol. 2, ll. 226-33.

There were substantive differences between the Baku version and the one Medvedev offered as the genuine version. The version seized in Baku made it seem as if Medvedev had given up hope that European workers could be revolutionary; at the same time he assessed Comintern methods in Western Europe as flawed. In the Baku version Medvedev appears to disagree with the Comintern's assessment of European Social Democratic governments as bourgeois. Medvedev's version has no such statement. Finally, the Baku version presented him as an advocate of large-scale industrial concessions and foreign loans at the cost of major losses for the Soviet state. Such differences raise the suspicion that police organizations could have introduced distortions in order to cast a negative light on Medvedev and/or his comrades in Baku. Much of the criticism party leaders made of the document was based on the distorted passages. Therefore in making the document available in English, it is important to highlight the differences between the two versions.

Below I italicize the sections where Medvedev's purported original differs significantly from the version transmitted from Baku, and I place in brackets the relevant segment from the version authorities in Baku sent to the CCC.

Sergei Medvedev's Letter to a Baku Comrade

"Dear comrade V.,

We⁹ received your¹⁰ letter and materials about the discussion in Baku. We saw and talked with comrade Kobyzev.¹¹ From the letter as well as from discussion with comrade Kobyzev it became clear that you still don't know about our article published in *Pravda* on January 18, 1924. It was written and submitted to the editors of *Pravda* on December 20, that is, when even here in Moscow, the discussion was unfolding ever more broadly. All positions by that time had been defined and in our article we gave a clear stance toward all questions, placed for discussion. It's very unfortunate that this article didn't make its way to you. In any case you will now have it – we are sending it with comrade Kobyzev, and together with it we are sending a clarification of our general positions – the steno-

9. "We" probably refers to himself together with Shliapnikov.

10. Uses formal "you" (Вы).

11. A misspelling; this was D. M. [or N?] Kolosov. Kolosov (b. 1874) had a technical education and had been a party member since 1904. A mechanic, Kolosov was working in 1924 for the Technical Supply Board of Azerbaijani Oil and was on a business trip to Moscow. According to the case against him, upon his return to Baku he suggested making copies of Medvedev's letter and the other documents and reading them aloud to workers in factory shops (RGASPI, f. 589, op. 3, d. 9103, vol. 1, ll. 293-300, February 8, 1926, "O gruppe Bakinskikh 'opozitsionerakh': rezoliutsiia plenuma partiinoi kollegii kontrol'noi komissii AKP(b), January 12, 1926").

graphic report of comrade Shliapnikov's speech at the Khamovniki district party conference where he gave a report, and a copy of the resolution which we introduced chiefly in worker cells. Examine these attentively and you will find answers to the basic questions in your letter. Keep in mind that in these materials we define only the basic direction of party policy, not touching on separate features of it in various areas. In this letter I treat only those aspects which perhaps *after familiarization with the indicated material* [phrase omitted from version 2] will still be insufficiently clear for you.

1. About your resolution it's necessary to say this: it incorrectly defines the role and significance of the CC's internal party policy. One should never forget that this area of party policy is a derivative, subordinate area. It is defined by the party's fundamental and all-defining economic policy.

And this last, in the end is the result of the correlation of *class forces in our country, their proportion and strength in the country's general economy. It is defined directly by the social composition of our party, where the working masses compose only one-sixth or one-seventh of its members* [class forces of our side, its proportion and the economic strength of each social class in the country's general economy, the result of the correlation of each group's proportion in our party's current composition, where worker groups, where the working masses compose just one-sixth or one-seventh part of its members]. Thus we define the *dependence of intraparty policy* [significance of intraparty policy and so forth], clarifying it as such in our documents. It would be deeply incorrect to think that it's possible to divide various areas of party policy into separate – completely independent parts and then, sharing the basic economic policy of the CC – to successfully and logically criticize those separate parts or features of its policy, which in their essence are a direct result of the content, character, and direction of this economic policy. This mistake is the basic flaw of your resolution. It is aggravated even more by the fact that in your attempts to defend your resolution, you emphasize that you are not criticizing or, more accurately, are not linking your disagreements on questions of intraparty policy to the general policy of the CC. Here in Moscow we have the "September Opposition" (comrades Preobrazhenskii, Piatakov, Smirnov and others) – which on this basis was smashed and completely demoralized. This inescapably could occur with you as well, if in Baku in official party circles there were more *experienced* [propertied]¹² politicians.

12. *Искушенные* [имущественные]

2. a) In questions about economic policy – we do not share the general character of it that the CC gives it in its resolution and *which it possesses in reality* [omitted from version 2]. I say “general character” – not because we were supporters of all particular features of this policy. Far from it. But in this letter I must be brief and so, touching only on the fundamentals of this policy, I leave aside its individual features. The main all-defining feature in the CC’s resolution “on immediate tasks of economic policy” is that in this resolution all large state industry is designated as an appendage to the small peasant household. All that is doomed to *downsizing* [shattering], to so-called “concentration” and only where such a reduction can elicit the outright indignation of the working masses who are doomed to long-term unemployment, only at that moment will this reduction or “concentration” give way to considerations of a political character. But it’s obvious, that this only eliminates the reduction itself, but not by one iota does it solve the question of the actual preservation and expansion of our centers of industry and of revolutionary proletarian forces. He who knows or is at least interested in the brief history of our industry, will easily see, that never in its chief areas, – metallurgy and machine building, coalmining and oil, fuel extraction in general – was it, in its origins and development, based on the peasant household but instead rested on railway, highway construction, on the *uninterrupted* [omitted] expansion of all *industrial* [omitted] branches of the economy, supplying them with materials, *machines, instruments* [omitted] and so forth, on the growth of the urban economy *and* [omitted] on enormous resources “for defense of the country” [quotation marks omitted]. The entire peasant world consumed an insignificant sum, in comparison with these consumers, and was not even a significant aid for these branches of heavy industry. And now when the CC proclaims, that for state industry this peasant market is the limit beyond which it cannot go, that namely in this direction it will solve all questions of industry, – we, naturally, see in such a policy a direct threat to heavy industry and to the very existence of the working class. And most of all to the *achievements of the working class, which it secured by means of the October seizure of power* [And most of all to all but for the working class, the conquerors of the October seizure of power].

I can give you here a concrete example of the situation in which such a policy puts, for example, the Baku oil industry. Since we now have *significant* [enormous] supplies of kerosene, gasoline and mineral oil, and since demand for them *for now* [omitted] is very limited, in accord with the general economic policy of the party which has been decreed – the entire Baku and Grozny oil refining and processing industry will be downsized and all oil extraction will be focused only on procuring unrefined oil. This

means that we will have an inescapable reduction of worker cadres in the indicated branch of the oil industry, and together with that the *contraction* [improvement]¹³ of our material base.

This is the basic character of the party's economic policy, *outlined in the CC's resolution* [omitted] for the immediate period of time in power. In it is concealed, in our opinion, a great danger to the interests of the working class and the further fate of Large State Industry.

b) This danger will become even more threatening, if we look at still another feature of our intraparty policy, at the attitude of *party leaders, supported by* [omitted] the overwhelming majority of members – toward the “new economic policy.”

Until recently they have *portrayed* [associated] this policy as a maneuver in keeping with socialism.

By means of this maneuver they meant temporarily, under the pressure of cruel necessity, to give some space to the petty bourgeois capitalist pressure of the peasantry and the *rural and urban* [omitted] bourgeoisie engaged in trade (which are inseparably linked to the peasantry), in order to revive and consolidate the material base of our supremacy, *large state industry*, [omitted] with maximum energy, and with the help of fortified state industry to begin to struggle with the inescapable growth of NEP and with private capital on the free market.

Now almost no one presents the question in such a way. On the contrary, now we hear almost entirely of near rapture over this policy, dictated to us by a force hostile to the proletariat and in this way attesting to the fact that “from need this policy is transformed into the highest political virtue,” that this policy ceases to be represented as a *forced retreat* [free-thinking attitude] from our conquests, by its very price to save them; rather, it increasingly is depicted as our only conceivable *economic* [and reasonable] policy, which would be the policy of strengthening all accomplishments of the working class as a result of the October Revolution, the policy which is directed toward and in essence consists of the consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

So, if you will pay attention to this criticism of the so called “new economic policy,” which in fact is a direct expression of the interests of the petty bourgeois peasant and urban masses, – whose political pressure it was proclaimed it would weaken, – then the emphasis on the transformation of large state industry is just an appendage to the economic policy of the small-holding peasant household, to the limited household uses and personal demands of the peasant masses themselves, - and [this course]

13. *Сужение* [улучшение]

becomes even more threatening to the fundamental conquests of the working class.

c) We've come to the point that for every million employed, we have over a million unemployed.

The further accelerated development of agriculture, *in the first instance* [omitted] of kulak and *more or less* [rather more] well-off¹⁴ *or the so-called "serednyak"* [omitted] masses of peasants, *being* [was] a deeply progressive phenomenon for our exhausted economy, will inescapably lead to the displacement of the less economically *secure* [alleviated] peasant masses and former workers before anything else will flood cities and towns.

Already now this influx is becoming more and more massive. Along with this, after the *impending* [omitted] recognition of us in Europe, we will enter into *closer* [greater] contact with the world market, and this means, that our own state economy must *catch up* [be equal] to economic development in Europe.

As concerns the development of our agriculture, which is *largely* [overwhelmingly] based on the small peasant holder, it must catch up to *international* [omitted] markets, selling its products not only in Europe but also in America, and this will intensify the displacement, the self-expulsion of the weaker of these farmers in our countryside and will push toward the towns more and more masses of the ruined ones. If state industry seems to be in a bad situation *at this moment* [at one moment], when we cannot secure work even for the currently unemployed, then *it can be even worse, if* [at that moment we can seem thrown off from our current pedestal of power by] a small group of Bonapartist swine *would try to overthrow us* [omitted] and in attempting to do so might not meet the necessary resistance from those enormous unemployed masses *of the towns* [omitted], fragmented by poverty, which might in their situation seem not only passive, but in their suffering, might even relate sympathetically to such a confluence of events, in the hopes that the victory of private capital, although it would condemn them to cruel exploitation, would not allow them to expire from hunger. And such a mood could be found not only among unemployed workers, but even among those who work and who live under constant expectation of layoffs.

If such a misfortune were to befall us, we would still less be able to count on the rural poor supporting us.

Not in vain was it unarguably established during discussion that these rural poor are leaving the ranks of the party.

14. СОСТОЯТЕЛЬНЫХ

Thus, we do not share the policy of the CC, which in the main for the nearest period will be directed toward its own preservation, its reinforcement and even the development of the petty peasant economy; which bases all industrial policy only on its *current needs* [extirpations].

We think that the petty peasant household, under NEP and depending on the international market, is doomed to *stagnation in barbarian conditions and to inevitable* [omitted] ruin.

All efforts to save it, to help it resist and even develop *in its current form* [omitted] – are reactionary-utopian attempts.

The solution for these doomed peasant masses can lie only in developing state industry, where the rural masses could find application for their hands and strengths.

Any support of the illusions of small peasant holders that Soviet power must and will save them from destruction, while preserving capitalist competition and free trade, will only corrupt *them politically* [their consciousness] in so far as these illusions are confirmed; [small peasant holders will make] constant demands on the government, to make up with various subsidies from its means the difference between the cost of the products of their labor, as it is defined on the one hand according to the world market and on the other by that minimum of resources, which are necessary to them for their personal and economic existence. These features in our economic policy exist right now. In the future under that economic policy, *which the CC outlines in its resolution* [omitted], confirming the possibility of a seemingly broad development for the small peasant economy, – these features will inescapably expand, will exhaust the already deficit state budget and will lay an even more colossal burden on the working class, for all these subsidies the government will spoon out chiefly, as the resolution of the CC says, “from the income of state enterprises and state property,” that is from increasing the exploitation of workers in state industry.

That part of the rural population, which remains, with the exception of the masses as indicated, is the rural kulak bourgeoisie, which is no less hostile to us than is the old sort of bourgeoisie.

We can only conduct a cruel political struggle with it.

This is the main essence of our disagreements on questions of party economic policy. We see in this policy the prevalence of the interests of that six-sevenths of its composition, which are petty bourgeois elements, and not the reinforcement of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the economy as well as in politics.

What do we offer as a counterweight to this policy:

a) the transfer of the chief center of economic policy from the peasant economy to large industry, to its resurrection, to its expansion, its devel-

opment, to the employment of all state resources particularly in this direction. This policy will serve the vital interests of the proletarian masses of the towns, as well as the interests of those semiproletarian masses of the countryside, who all the more will be ruined for the reasons shown above and as if in mockery of them – this expansion will be all the more destructive for them, the more plentiful the harvests, for particularly in these conditions the products of their labor will be more devalued.

This policy will [further] serve our communist goals. It is the only *correct and really possible* [omitted] communist policy, capable of securing for us the most painless resolution of the question of the *petty* [omitted] peasantry *and of solidifying its political union with the working class in our republic* [omitted];

b) when introducing such proposals, usually they frighten you with questions: where to get the resources for this? We don't have them. We answer thus: if we don't have enough resources for this, then we have in the current budget anyway such resources that go *not toward the development of the large state economy, but to support the petty bourgeois economy of the well-off part of the peasantry and to support the utopian illusions of the small-holding peasantry indicated above, which our party itself consolidates with this layer of the peasantry* [to development of the policy outlined by us, and partially to support those utopian illusions of the small-holding peasant economy, which the overwhelming majority of our party supports in this layer of the peasantry];

[We know, however, that these resources are insufficient. And we demand that the government search more energetically for resources by way of foreign and internal state loans and granting concessions, and with greater losses than those our government was prepared to allow for upon being granted such credits.]

c) we consider that in our country's current economic condition, with those perspectives *for it* [omitted], of which I spoke above, [which await us] great material sacrifices to international capital, which is ready to go toward the revival of our *dormant* [violated] industrial regions, - is a lesser evil, than that condition in which we are and can be found in recent years in the area of our industrial and agricultural economy, the condition, which can seem for us ruinous.

To think that we can with that [role and] specific gravity of the working class, which it has in state policy, gather the necessary masses of capital for the turn around of ruined industry by way of *income and property* [omitted] taxes, – means to amuse oneself with futile illusion.

To think that these masses of capital we'll put together only *more protractedly* "*penny by penny, nickel by nickel*" [out of nickels only more protractedly] *from that same industry* [omitted], this means to supplement

the [former] illusion of *the small-holding peasantry* [omitted] with the illusion of petty bourgeois imitators of *the towns* [omitted]. For such a way of accumulation we would need half a century. We still don't know what period of time it will take for us to emerge from the deficit of our state budget. Only empty-headed windbags can speak in this circumstance about *actual* [omitted] accumulation.

These are our basic disagreements with the economic policy of our party and the existing policy in the countryside. The results of these policies at the current moment already bear down on the working masses as weights, in the future they will become heavier.

To think that in the future they will patiently bend their backs, – means not to see surrounding phenomena, or not to understand their significance.

3) Our party's international policy – as is any party's such policy, – is the continuation of our internal policy in the international arena.

That which *distinguishes* [mitigates] our policy within the country, are the same features it brings to a significant degree to the international area. Its basic flaw consists in that it wants to see everything in the light of our country's experience.

The so-called "Worker-peasant government," coming to replace the "Worker government" – is *an expression of* [omitted] a hopeless attempt to resolve the basic problems of the West European workers' movement by the means and methods of our country. This leads to failures, willingly or unwillingly, but this policy constantly discredits the role of the better organized and more conscious *masses* [circles] of the Western European proletariat and tries to find for itself support in its less conscious elements and in the "peasantry" of the Western European countries. But such a peasantry, which we had up to the moment of our revolution, doesn't exist in Western Europe. It exists in the Near and Far East. But we now know what the attempt to rely on the peasantry came to, for example, in Bulgaria. This Comintern-dictated attempt led to the downfall of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

We know just as well that even in peasant Finland the slogan "worker-peasant government" has *fewer chances* [least liabilities] than anywhere else.

Such is the chief direction of our international policy. It also defined the character of Comintern tactics, which they tried to impose in Germany, Italy, and France. In all these central European countries, which have a decisive significance for the international revolution, this tactic led to the fact that from the general mass of the proletariat's organized forces, the forces of the communist part of it were torn out and were set in opposition to the remaining mass of the proletariat, as the more revolutionary

parts against those supposedly incapable of conscious participation in the revolutionary demonstrations of the working masses. The more they disorganized the general working class movement and the communist part of it, the more they isolated it from the general mass of the organized proletariat and they deprived it of steady influence on the masses from outside their ranks. We are the bitterest opponents of this policy. We see no possibility to speed up the course of events in Western Europe toward revolution, while standing apart from and against the overwhelming mass of the organized working class. We are for the communist working masses to remain the constituent part of the working masses, organized in trade unions, cooperatives, soviets, factory committees and so forth, so that any attempts to seize power in these organizations, bypassing the will of the overwhelming mass of their members, or to create an organization isolated from the masses would be decisively rejected, as a venture which disorganizes the workers' movement.

This, in general outline, is our attitude toward the question of international policy.

If the support of the Western European proletariat was necessary for us up to now, then now, when our links with Europe are broadening and taking shape, this support is a hundredfold more necessary to us. But with that policy of constantly discrediting the more organized and conscious workers, which we defended and conducted through the Comintern, we arrived at full isolation of the working masses of our country from the proletariat of the Western European countries and to a similar isolation of the communist part of the latter from the bulk of the masses in Western Europe.

Attempts to artificially graft our methods of work onto all Western European countries lead only to what we see, for example, in Norway. From this example it's especially obvious, how these attempts have literally led to the disorganization of that country's worker movement; to the emergence of materially feeble "communist" sections and to their maintenance on the account of the Russian working masses, for which they paid with blood and sacrifices, but which they cannot use for themselves under current conditions.

In fact there is being created a horde of petty bourgeois servants, *supported by Russian gold, depicting themselves* [which for Russian gold depict themselves] as the proletariat and allegedly as *representatives of* [representing] the "revolutionary workers" of the Comintern.

Those methods, by which the Comintern tries to conquer the Western European working masses – are obviously hopeless. [But the soil, on which the Comintern feeds – the Western European working masses – is

obviously hopeless.] They not only do not bring us closer to the organized international proletariat masses, but on the contrary, estrange us.

Seeing these misfortunes, its leaders, in the persons of our party leaders, seek support for their policy outside of the masses and preach, for example, that American tenant farmers are more revolutionary, than the American organized working masses.

From here, naturally, it remains to take just one step toward these farmers, and they will turn out to be that fundamental base of "communism," on which must be staked the entire activity of American communists. Similar quests occur in all other European countries. They are evidence that the Comintern's policy, as guided by our party leaders, as a consequence of failure in the proletarian masses, is imbued with strivings toward the petty bourgeois property-owning classes. These classes are all the more often juxtaposed to working class associations, as the more capable of carrying out a socialist revolution, which lacks only organized leadership.

If such leadership is secured for them in the person of the communist party, they they will be the first in completing a socialist revolution. This is the basic flaw of all our international policy.

This flaw explains all the systematic persecution and discrediting of Western European proletarian-class associations, which still do not follow communist slogans. [It explains such a discrediting of social democratic government in general, such as the current labour government in England. The latter pretty often is depicted as a government of the bourgeoisie. We cannot agree even one iota with such policy and tactics.] It is disastrous for the cause of the real socialist revolution.

Our evaluation of Western European Social Democratic parties deeply departs from those evaluations, given by our leaders.

They regard all leading cadres of these parties as traitors, lackeys of the bourgeoisie and so forth. And this relates to the German just as well as to other Social Democratic parties.

This fact alone is enough to reject a similar characterization of these *cadres as explaining nothing and to doubt that they are the* [peoples as the] chief reason why in Western Europe the bourgeoisie still reigns. It is obviously not Marxist and leads us to a dead end.

Given such an explanation of the bourgeoisie's supremacy, there is no ray of hope ahead, *since* [indeed] all the most conscious, organized and disciplined working class cadres, from which are organized all leading circles of Western European socialist parties, are traitors and so forth. *Then who is the actual bearer of the socialist revolution* [omitted]?

In fact, these elements *in the eyes of the broad working masses of the Western European states* [omitted] not only do not betray any working

class interests, but on the contrary, from the point of view of the proletarian masses, they are most devoted to their interests.

Therefore Social Democrats are still strong and powerful. Therefore they still can utilize the deep trust of the proletarian masses.

Namely a Marxist analysis can easily explain such an evaluation of these parties and leaders *by broad masses of the workers* [omitted]. The entire solidity of their link with the working masses and the masses' wholly deep trust in them is explained by the fact that these Social Democratic party leaders never subordinated the working masses' overall everyday needs to various individual demands by the party regarding the interests of the revolution. On the contrary, they see their interests chiefly in the satisfaction of the everyday [improvements of the] needs of the working masses.

At times they are willing to consider as a revolutionary goal the successful resolution of these *partial* [omitted] needs for broad circles of the worker masses through shortening work time, through raising their pay and through elevating their role in government or community administration. And since the international proletariat has many such needs, then there's nothing unnatural in entrusting the whole leadership in their struggle namely to those who present them not with red pipedreams in the form of a wider perspective, but to those who capably defend them from everyday adversities.

That is the soil, on which is formed the Western European socialist parties' devilishly durable link with the working class of their countries, which we have so far observed, despite the occasionally really criminal behavior of their parties' leading circles in *important* [separate] moments of these masses' struggle.

Departing from such an evaluation of the role of socialist parties and their leaders, we say that for the conquest of the Western European working masses, the Comintern does not need to constantly discredit as traitors organizations that unite the proletarian class and their leaders. By such means you'll not win them over. To achieve this goal it is necessary to gather patience and skill to defend the everyday needs of the working masses, in order to reveal before them more intensively the whole illusion of proposals that the satisfaction of such needs will essentially change their social and material situation.

It's necessary to decisively reject all attempts to realize a socialist revolution by circumventing the conquest of Western European proletarian mass organizations.

Finally, it's necessary to change resolutely the relations with these organizations, which have formed up to now.

We think that the actual situation is such that our organizations such as Profintern, in fact are willingly or unwillingly, a weapon of alienation of both the Russian working masses and the Western European communist masses from resolute masses of all the proletariat. It is a direct obstacle, not at all justified in fact, on the path to formation of an actual unified front of the working class of each country and on an international scale.

This is the basic thing that separates us from current party *leaders* [policy] in questions of international policy.

4. Now regarding the death of comrade Lenin.

His loss is, understandably, an important and painful event. But all is relative in this world. We are by no means in such a hopeless mood regarding the future, as some of our party circles. And in this we are shored up by the fact of the mass entry of workers into the party ranks. This in our opinion coincided with comrade Lenin's death, but was not a direct consequence. This is the second act of that revival of Russia's worker masses which began in August and September with mass strikes aimed at the improvement of their desperate situation. In this act we perceive the more active mass elements' attempt to find in the party the lever for changing their difficult material situation, in which they are found even now, to force it to defend the interests of the mass of workers in its everyday policy and work. This factor we regard as cause for rejoicing not only for our country's working class, but also for the party and for us personally.

Regarding this phenomenon [omitted] we experience the deepest satisfaction with our efforts to make our party truly a workers' party. Whatever worker elements this movement captures, we see in it a boon.

It doesn't concern us if these are not the most conscious elements. On the contrary, this confirms our rather great hopes that the party namely under the influence of these elements, which are perhaps less conscious but more broadly based, will have to rise to defend a policy which will link it more closely with workers' interests, since *namely these elements' direct interests are the interests of the working masses, and their direct pressure to a great degree is capable of securing today's immediate interests more so than the pressure of more conscious circles of these masses* [namely these elements' interests are the interests of the masses to a greater degree than we'll say the direct interests of today's more conscious circles of the masses].

This new entry must exert influence on the party's economic policy. To close a factory where there are 10-15 communists out of 500, for example is a lot easier to do than when 150-200 or even 60-100 are communists. This alone is sufficient to gladden us. It's necessary only, of course, not to be beaten down by that banality which is proposed in con-

nection with this phenomenon, supposing that all these workers surged into the party “in order to study Leninism,” and that it is necessary quickly to organize as many party lectures, courses, schools and so forth as possible. It’s necessary to see a direct danger in such a welcome, which can quickly chase out of the party’s ranks not only those entering now but also those who were in the party earlier.

Now about the results of the discussion.

As with the question of the “new course,” so the discussion and its outcome in no way were linked with Lenin’s death. This course and discussion of it arose long before any suggestion of Lenin’s possible demise, even *before* [at] the all-Russian conference.

This means that it is impossible to connect all these events. You will find an answer to your main question – “indeed has everything come to nothing,” in our January 18, 1924 article in *Pravda*, where we clearly explicated, how it came to be that since the Tenth Party Congress worker democracy was laid to rest in the CC’s depths. You’ll find even more explanation in the stenographic report of Comrade Shliapnikov’s paper.

All this seems so simple and clear, as if there were no special need to explain this circumstance.

We perceive that already before the Tenth Congress our party became so socially differentiated, that it nearly fell apart as a result of bitter discussion. This is the first thing. The second is that at that same congress and afterwards the CC gave itself the task, no matter what, to create party unity, which, it was understood, was threatened from the outside by the possibility of a new civil war. Third, the “Workers’ Opposition” was the only faction, which had a future in the working class, therefore all whips and scorpions, stipulated by secret points of the resolution on “unity” were directed precisely against supporters of the “Workers’ Opposition,” [that is] against *supporters of the need to resolutely protect* [policy not in] the direct interests of the proletarian masses of our country.

Fourth, could the CC under such conditions implement within the party principles of workers’ democracy? Of course not. Implementation of these principles would on the next day have confronted it with worker elements in the party uniting around the “Workers’ Opposition” and would have made absolutely impossible that economic policy which it mapped out at the congress itself and which in the future would assume such a character that it would be directly aimed against the interests of the masses, at least on the issues of loans for gold, bread and other things.

Implementation of principles of workers’ democracy would not have allowed the implementation of that “concentration,” *which is the curtailment* [omitted] of the economy, which became the essence of the CC’s policy already from that time.

Well all that to one side, but from the other – the overwhelming petty bourgeois composition of the party itself which could be an active supporter of bourgeois democracy but not of workers' democracy, that is, a democracy that would not only guarantee each party member's active participation in party activity, but would obligate it moreover to direct this activity toward working class interests, to infuse it with the workers' spirit and interests. These two basic conditions determined the fact that the resolutions of the Tenth Congress, despite the presence in it of essential limitations on the principles of worker democracy, nevertheless remained unrealized.

Ask yourself, have any of these conditions essentially changed. If so, then in what direction, and then you'll give yourself a clear answer to your question. Now this circumstance, like a thunderbolt, struck all worker elements in factories and higher education, who in some places supported rather energetically the "September opposition." Now they've become bitterly disappointed in their illusions both in the possibility of implementing worker democracy, given the party's current composition, and in the "September opposition." But all this disillusionment and bitterness is just a result of their illusions and nothing else. It would be sad, if you were to yield to such illusions and would reap disillusion from them.

We are convinced that it will not be difficult now for you, on the basis of these materials, to resolve all questions regarding the period just experienced and in the present.

With this I must finish my letter.

I intended to write briefly, but in fact as you see it became a whole brochure, but if this will help elucidate questions still not clear to you, I will not regret that I spent two whole days writing you this letter.

In conclusion I express our sincere desire that you would more solidly link up with those new worker cadres which doubtlessly are responding in your region to the all-Russian phenomenon of workers' entry into the party.

If these writings did not clarify everything, don't pass up a convenient opportunity to get in touch, then it'll be possible to provide additional information to you.

With communist greetings from all of us¹⁵
(Medvedev)

15. Under NKVD interrogation in 1935, Medvedev named those he meant by "all of us" as: Mikhail Mikhailov, Mikhail Chelyshev, Ivan Nikolaenko, Genrikh Bruno, Aleksandr Pravdin and Aleksandr Shliapnikov (TsA FSB, R33718, d. 499061, vol. 5, ll. 28–31). All these had supported the Workers' Opposition in 1920-1921.

One last urgent and ardent request.

If you need to preserve this letter, even for a little while, please try to type a copy of it for yourself on a typewriter and return this original to me no matter what. I did not write this letter quickly. This explains some carelessness, necessitating corrections. During the writing itself I was interrupted and called away a hundred times, so you'll figure out for yourself what kind of insertion is called for and where. I can't rewrite the letter. I repeat, try to return it to me no matter what, and if possible, in a short time. [circa 20 January 1924]

Conclusion

In 1923–1926 Shliapnikov and Medvedev perceived the policy of Soviet leaders as increasingly favorable to the peasantry and they worried about its implications for the development of industry and the growth of the working class in Russia. They saw the New Economic Policy echoed in international affairs, as Bukharin and other party leaders allied with Stalin looked towards less industrialized countries in Asia to spread revolution. Shliapnikov and Medvedev fretted that party leaders were on a path that alienated more advanced workers from communist policies in European Russia. They shared their views with supporters, but only spoke publicly during periods of official debate in the party. Recognizing that factional struggle would only back them into a corner, they sincerely disapproved of it, but they remained strong advocates of free intra-party discussion. Urging their supporters to remain within the party, they did not formally ally or join other oppositionist factions or blocs. Nevertheless Stalin's supporters in the party and secret police kept changing the terms of political struggle and the definition of party discipline so that in 1926 Shliapnikov and Medvedev were found guilty of factionalism based on the private letter to a comrade in Baku translated above.