

## Chapter 3

### LENIN AND GERMAN ASSISTANCE FOR THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

**It was not until the Bolsheviks had received from us a steady flow of funds through various channels and under varying labels that they were in a position to be able to build up their main organ *Pravda*, to conduct energetic propaganda and appreciably to extend the originally narrow base of their party.**

Von Kühlmann, minister of foreign affairs, to the kaiser, December 3, 1917

In April 1917 Lenin and a party of 32 Russian revolutionaries, mostly Bolsheviks, journeyed by train from Switzerland across Germany through Sweden to Petrograd, Russia. They were on their way to join Leon Trotsky to "complete the revolution." Their trans-Germany transit was approved, facilitated, and financed by the German General Staff. Lenin's transit to Russia was part of a plan approved by the German Supreme Command, apparently not immediately known to the kaiser, to aid in the disintegration of the Russian army and so eliminate Russia from World War I. The possibility that the Bolsheviks might be turned against Germany and Europe did not occur to the German General Staff. Major General Hoffman has written, "We neither knew nor foresaw the danger to humanity from the consequences of this journey of the Bolsheviks to Russia."<sup>1</sup>

At the highest level the German political officer who approved Lenin's journey to Russia was Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, a descendant of the Frankfurt banking family Bethmann, which achieved great prosperity in the nineteenth century. Bethmann-Hollweg was appointed chancellor in 1909 and in November 1913 became the subject of the first vote of censure ever passed by the German Reichstag on a chancellor. It was Bethmann-Hollweg who in 1914 told the world that the German guarantee to Belgium was a mere "scrap of paper." Yet on other war matters — such as the use of

unrestricted submarine warfare — Bethmann-Hollweg was ambivalent; in January 1917 he told the kaiser, "I can give Your Majesty neither my assent to the unrestricted submarine warfare nor my refusal." By 1917 Bethmann-Hollweg had lost the Reichstag's support and resigned — but not before approving transit of Bolshevik revolutionaries to Russia. The transit instructions from Bethmann-Hollweg went through the state secretary Arthur Zimmermann — who was immediately under Bethmann-Hollweg and who handled day-to-day operational details with the German ministers in both Bern and Copenhagen — to the German minister to Bern in early April 1917. The kaiser himself was not aware of the revolutionary movement until after Lenin had passed into Russia.

While Lenin himself did not know the precise source of the assistance, he certainly knew that the German government was providing some funding. There were, however, intermediate links between the German foreign ministry and Lenin, as the following shows:

#### LENIN'S TRANSFER TO RUSSIA IN APRIL 1917

Final decision	BETHMANN-HOLLWEG (Chancellor)
Intermediary I	ARTHUR ZIMMERMANN (State Secretary)
Intermediary II	BROCKDORFF-RANTZAU (German Minister in Copenhagen)
Intermediary III	ALEXANDER ISRAEL HELPHAND (alias PARVUS)
Intermediary IV	JACOB FURSTENBERG (alias GANETSKY) LENIN, in Switzerland

From Berlin Zimmermann and Bethmann-Hollweg communicated with the German minister in

Copenhagen, Brockdorff-Rantzau. In turn, Brockdorff-Rantzau was in touch with Alexander Israel Helphand (more commonly known by his alias, Parvus), who was located in Copenhagen.<sup>2</sup> Parvus was the connection to Jacob Furstenberg, a Pole descended from a wealthy family but better known by his alias, Ganetsky. And Jacob Furstenberg was the immediate link to Lenin.

Although Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg was the final authority for Lenin's transfer, and although Lenin was probably aware of the German origins of the assistance, Lenin cannot be termed a German agent. The German Foreign Ministry assessed Lenin's probable actions in Russia as being consistent with their own objectives in the dissolution of the existing power structure in Russia. Yet both parties also had hidden objectives: Germany wanted priority access to the postwar markets in Russia, and Lenin intended to establish a Marxist dictatorship.

The idea of using Russian revolutionaries in this way can be traced back to 1915. On August 14 of that year, Brockdorff-Rantzau wrote the German state undersecretary about a conversation with Helphand (Parvus), and made a strong recommendation to employ Helphand, "*an extraordinarily important man whose unusual powers I feel we must employ for duration of the war ...*"<sup>3</sup> Included in the report was a warning: "*It might perhaps be risky to want to use the powers ranged behind Helphand, but it would certainly be an admission of our own weakness if we were to refuse their services out of fear of not being able to direct them.*"<sup>4</sup>

Brockdorff-Rantzau's ideas of directing or controlling the revolutionaries parallel, as we shall see, those of the Wall Street financiers. It was J.P. Morgan and the American International Corporation that attempted to control both domestic and foreign revolutionaries in the United States for their own purposes.

A subsequent document<sup>5</sup> outlined the terms demanded by Lenin, of which the most interesting was point number seven, which allowed "Russian troops to move into India"; this suggested that Lenin intended to continue the tsarist expansionist program. Zeman also records the role of Max Warburg in establishing a Russian publishing house and adverts to an agreement dated August 12, 1916, in which the German

industrialist Stinnes agreed to contribute two million rubles for financing a publishing house in Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, on April 16, 1917, a trainload of thirty-two, including Lenin, his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya, Grigori Zinoviev, Sokolnikov, and Karl Radek, left the Central Station in Bern en route to Stockholm. When the party reached the Russian frontier only Fritz Plattan and Radek were denied entrance into Russia. The remainder of the party was allowed to enter. Several months later they were followed by almost 200 Mensheviks, including Martov and Axelrod.

It is worth noting that Trotsky, at that time in New York, also had funds traceable to German sources. Further, Von Kuhlmann alludes to Lenin's inability to broaden the base of his Bolshevik party until the Germans supplied funds. Trotsky was a Menshevik who turned Bolshevik only in 1917. This suggests that German funds were perhaps related to Trotsky's change of party label.

## THE SISSON DOCUMENTS

In early 1918 Edgar Sisson, the Petrograd representative of the U.S. Committee on Public Information, bought a batch of Russian documents purporting to prove that Trotsky, Lenin, and the other Bolshevik revolutionaries were not only in the pay of, but also agents of, the German government.

These documents, later dubbed the "Sisson Documents," were shipped to the United States in great haste and secrecy. In Washington, D.C. they were submitted to the National Board for Historical Service for authentication. Two prominent historians, J. Franklin Jameson and Samuel N. Harper, testified to their genuineness. These historians divided the Sisson papers into three groups. Regarding Group I, they concluded:

We have subjected them with great care to all the applicable tests to which historical students are accustomed and . . . upon the basis of these investigations, we have no hesitation in declaring that we see no reason to doubt the genuineness or authenticity of these fifty-three documents.<sup>7</sup>

The historians were less confident about material in Group II. This group was not rejected as outright forgeries, but it was suggested that they were copies of original documents. Although the historians made "no confident declaration" on Group III, they were not prepared to reject the documents as outright forgeries.

The Sisson Documents were published by the Committee on Public Information, whose chairman was George Creel, a former contributor to the pro-Bolshevik *Masses*. The American press in general accepted the documents as authentic. The notable exception was the *New York Evening Post*, at that time owned by Thomas W. Lamont, a partner in the Morgan firm. When only a few installments had been published, the *Post* challenged the authenticity of all the documents.<sup>8</sup>

We now know that the Sisson Documents were almost all forgeries: only one or two of the minor German circulars were genuine. Even casual examination of the German letterhead suggests that the forgers were unusually careless forgers perhaps working for the gullible American market. The German text was strewn with terms verging on the ridiculous: for example, *Bureau* instead of the German word *Büro*; *Central* for the German *Zentral*; etc.

That the documents are forgeries is the conclusion of an exhaustive study by George Kennan<sup>9</sup> and of studies made in the 1920s by the British government. Some documents were based on authentic information and, as Kennan observes, those who forged them certainly had access to some unusually good information. For example, Documents 1, 54, 61, and 67 mention that the Nya Banken in Stockholm served as the conduit for Bolshevik funds from Germany. This conduit has been confirmed in more reliable sources. Documents 54, 63, and 64 mention Furstenberg as the banker-intermediary between the Germans and the Bolsheviks; Furstenberg's name appears elsewhere in authentic documents. Sisson's Document 54 mentions Olof Aschberg, and Olof Aschberg by his own statements was the "Bolshevik Banker." Aschberg in 1917 was the director of Nya Banken. Other documents in the Sisson series list names and institutions, such as the German Naptha-Industrial Bank, the Disconto Gesellschaft, and Max Warburg, the Hamburg banker, but hard supportive evidence is more elusive. In general, the Sisson Documents, while themselves outright forgeries, are nonetheless based partly on generally

authentic information.

One puzzling aspect in the light of the story in this book is that the documents came to Edgar Sisson from Alexander Gumberg (alias Berg, real name Michael Gruzenberg), the Bolshevik agent in Scandinavia and later a confidential assistant to Chase National Bank and Floyd Odium of Atlas Corporation. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, stridently repudiated the Sisson material. So did John Reed, the American representative on the executive of the Third International and whose paycheck came from *Metropolitan* magazine, which was owned by J.P. Morgan interests.<sup>10</sup> So did Thomas Lamont, the Morgan partner who owned the *New York Evening Post*. There are several possible explanations. Probably the connections between the Morgan interests in New York and such agents as John Reed and Alexander Gumberg were highly flexible. This *could* have been a Gumberg maneuver to discredit Sisson and Creel by planting forged documents; or perhaps Gumberg was working in his own interest.

The Sisson Documents "prove" exclusive German involvement with the Bolsheviks. They also have been used to "prove" a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy theory along the lines of that of the Protocols of Zion. In 1918 the U.S. government wanted to unite American opinion behind an unpopular war with Germany, and the Sisson Documents dramatically "proved" the exclusive complicity of Germany with the Bolsheviks. The documents also provided a smoke screen against public knowledge of the events to be described in this book.

### THE TUG-OF-WAR IN WASHINGTON<sup>11</sup>

A review of documents in the State Department Decimal File suggests that the State Department and Ambassador Francis in Petrograd were quite well informed about the intentions and progress of the Bolshevik movement. In the summer of 1917, for example, the State Department wanted to stop the departure from the U.S. of "injurious persons" (that is, returning Russian revolutionaries) but was unable to do so because they were using new Russian and American passports. The preparations for the Bolshevik Revolution itself were well known at least six weeks before it came about. One report in the State Department files states, in regard to the Kerensky forces, that it was "doubtful whether government



. . . [can] suppress outbreak." Disintegration of the Kerensky government was reported throughout September and October as were Bolshevik preparations for a coup. The British government warned British residents in Russia to leave at least six weeks before the Bolshevik phase of the revolution.

The first full report of the events of early November reached Washington on December 9, 1917. This report described the low-key nature of the revolution itself, mentioned that General William V. Judson had made an unauthorized visit to Trotsky, and pointed out the presence of Germans in Smolny — the Soviet headquarters.

On November 28, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson ordered no interference with the Bolshevik Revolution. This instruction was apparently in response to a request by Ambassador Francis for an Allied conference, to which Britain had already agreed. The State Department argued that such a conference was impractical. There were discussions in Paris between the Allies and Colonel Edward M. House, who reported these to Woodrow Wilson as "long and frequent discussions on Russia." Regarding such a conference, House stated that England was "passively willing," France "*indifferently against*," and Italy "actively so." Woodrow Wilson, shortly thereafter, approved a cable authored by Secretary of State Robert Lansing, which provided financial assistance for the Kaledin movement (December 12, 1917). There were also rumors filtering into Washington that "monarchists working with the Bolsheviks and same supported by various occurrences and circumstances"; that the Smolny government was absolutely under control of the German General Staff; and rumors elsewhere that "many or most of them [that is, Bolsheviks] are from America."

In December, General Judson again visited Trotsky; this was looked upon as a step towards recognition by the U.S., although a report dated February 5, 1918, from Ambassador Francis to Washington, recommended against recognition. A memorandum originating with Basil Miles in Washington argued that "we should deal with all authorities in Russia including Bolsheviks." And on February 15, 1918, the State Department cabled Ambassador Francis in Petrograd, stating that the "department desires you gradually to keep in somewhat closer and informal touch with the Bolshevik authorities using such channels as will avoid any official recognition."

The next day Secretary of State Lansing conveyed the following to the French ambassador J. J. Jusserand in Washington: "It is considered inadvisable to take any action which will antagonize at this time any of the various elements of the people which now control the power in Russia .... "<sup>12</sup>

On February 20, Ambassador Francis cabled Washington to report the approaching end of the Bolshevik government. Two weeks later, on March 7, 1918, Arthur Bullard reported to Colonel House that German money was subsidizing the Bolsheviks and that this subsidy was more substantial than previously thought. Arthur Bullard (of the U.S. Committee on Public Information) argued: "we ought to be ready to help any honest national government. But men or money or equipment sent to the present rulers of Russia will be used against Russians at least as much as against Germans."<sup>13</sup>

This was followed by another message from Bullard to Colonel House: "I strongly advise against giving material help to the present Russian government. Sinister elements in Soviets seem to be gaining control."

But there were influential counterforces at work. As early as November 28, 1917, Colonel House cabled President Woodrow Wilson from Paris that it was "exceedingly important" that U.S. newspaper comments advocating that "Russia should be treated as an enemy" be "suppressed." Then next month William Franklin Sands, executive secretary of the Morgan-controlled American International Corporation and a friend of the previously mentioned Basil Miles, submitted a memorandum that described Lenin and Trotsky as appealing to the masses and that urged the U.S. to recognize Russia. Even American socialist Walling complained to the Department of State about the pro-Soviet attitude of George Creel (of the U.S. Committee on Public Information), Herbert Swope, and William Boyce Thompson (of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York).

On December 17, 1917, there appeared in a Moscow newspaper an attack on Red Cross colonel Raymond Robins and Thompson, alleging a link between the Russian Revolution and American bankers:

Why are they so interested in enlightenment? Why was the money given the socialist revolutionaries and not to the constitutional democrats? One would suppose the latter nearer



and dearer to hearts of bankers.

The article goes on to argue that this was because American capital viewed Russia as a future market and thus wanted to get a firm foothold. The money was given to the revolutionaries because

the backward working men and peasants trust the social revolutionaries. At the time when the money was passed the social revolutionaries were in power and it was supposed they would remain in control in Russia for some time.

Another report, dated December 12, 1917, and relating to Raymond Robins, details "negotiation with a group of American bankers of the American Red Cross Mission"; the "negotiation" related to a payment of two million dollars. On January 22, 1918, Robert L Owen, chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking and Currency and linked to Wall Street interests, sent a letter to Woodrow Wilson recommending de facto recognition of Russia, permission for a shipload of goods urgently needed in Russia, the appointment of representatives to Russia to offset German influence, and the establishment of a career-service group in Russia.

This approach was consistently aided by Raymond Robins in Russia. For example, on February 15, 1918, a cable from Robins in Petrograd to Davison in the Red Cross in Washington (and to be forwarded to William Boyce Thompson) argued that support be given to the Bolshevik authority for as long as possible, and that the new revolutionary Russia will turn to the United States as it has "broken with the German imperialism." According to Robins, the Bolsheviks wanted United States assistance and cooperation together with railroad reorganization, because "by generous assistance and technical advice in reorganizing commerce and industry America may entirely exclude German commerce during balance of war."

In brief, the tug-of-war in Washington reflected a struggle between, on one side, old-line diplomats (such as Ambassador Francis) and lower-level departmental officials, and, on the other, financiers like Robins, Thompson, and Sands with allies such as Lansing and Miles in the State Department and Senator Owen in the Congress.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Max Hoffman, *War Diaries and Other Papers* (London: M. Secker, 1929), 2:177.

<sup>2</sup>Z. A. B. Zeman and W. B. Scharlau, *The Merchant of Revolution.. The Life of Alexander Israel Helphand (Parvus), 1867-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>3</sup>Z. A. B. Zeman, *Germany and the Revolution in Russia, 1915-1918. Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6, doc. 6, reporting a conversation with the Estonian intermediary Keskula.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92, n. 3.

<sup>7</sup>U.S., Committee on Public Information, *The German-Bolshevik Conspiracy*, War Information Series, no. 20, October 1918.

<sup>8</sup>*New York Evening Post*, September 16-18, 21; October 4, 1918. It is also interesting, but not conclusive of anything, that the Bolsheviks also stoutly questioned the authenticity of the documents.

<sup>9</sup>George F. Kennan, "The Sisson Documents," *Journal of Modern History* 27-28 (1955-56): 130-154.

<sup>10</sup>John Reed, *The Sisson Documents* (New York: Liberator Publishing, n.d.).

<sup>11</sup>*This part is based on section 861.00 of the U.S. State Dept. Decimal File, also available as National Archives rolls 10 and 11 of microcopy 316.*

<sup>12</sup>*U.S. State Dept. Decimal File, 861.00/1117a. The same message was conveyed to the Italian ambassador.*

<sup>13</sup>*See Arthur Bullard papers at Princeton University.*

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