

THE IDES OF MARCH

Germany in Transition. By M. Philips Price (Labour Publishing Co. 5s.).

NOT only is it difficult to escape memories of the Commune of 1871 (when reminded by the calendar of the approach of the 18th of March), but they have grown directly topical by a swift combination of events.

A Labour Government has taken office (as a Minority Administration) in Britain : Lenin, the embodiment of the revolutionary will of the triumphant Russian workers and peasants, has been borne to the tomb amid scenes of devotion quite without parallel ; Britain and Italy each " recognise " the Soviet Republic ; Poincaré, his hand on his heart and his eye on the tape-machine, counts the days before the elections which will send him off the stage and threaten his tenure of the box-office : every day brings us a fresh rumour of an armed insurrection by the German Communists—now driven " underground." If the Bolshevik Revolution and Russia stand to Europe as Paris and its Commune stood to France, then the whole of Europe seems approaching its Whit Sunday—this time *perhaps* " with a difference."

Philips Price has already told us the story of the Russian Revolution, and told it in a fashion that brings out all the thrill of alternating crisis and accomplishment. The Soviet Republic lives—a newer and vaster Commune. The question is still unsettled whether Europe at large will be conquered by the " Thiers," " Bismarcks " and " Porceaugnacs." But of one thing there is no question. Should they win—should the Reaction secure a definitive triumph throughout the rest of Europe—the days of the Revolution are numbered—even in Russia. We have the uncanny experience of living through a process whose end we have seen in a dream, grappling with details we imperfectly comprehend, and tortured all the time by a fear lest the dream—through some neglect or bungle on our part—should prove prophetic.

Price tells the story of the German Revolution feelingly, critically, analytically and lucidly. If the reader feels on laying his book down that it is not so good as his *Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution*, it will be a tribute to his even greater skill. He will have conveyed to the reader the unspoken suggestion, immanent in the whole book, that the experience of the German proletariat from November, 1918, till to-day, constitutes a tragedy even greater than the triumph of the proletariat in Russia. And what is more : that, such is the nature

of capitalism to-day, it may serve but as the prelude to vaster tragedies still—inflicted upon the workers of France, Britain and the U.S.A.

There is (it has been remarked before !) a time for everything—even for football, fine art and Mrs. Philip Snowden. But now is not the time for optimism as to the immediate future of the British working class. *Because* Soviet Russia is recognised and *because* a Labour Government is in office the task of the Labour Movement has acquired a complexity out of all proportion to the methods and expectations to which it had grown accustomed.

The Soviet Republic as an officially recognised thing will be indistinguishable in the eyes of the newspaper-fed mass from any other State : a thing to which one must "hats off" or "punish" or "make pay" as the case may be. While the Labour Government (peers and knights added to its collection of Right Honourables) may easily provide in its new Court costumes (marked down to £18 at enormous sacrifice—and significantly lacking the sword) a perfect camouflage behind which the Counter-Revolution masses its storm troops for a push that will destroy our hopes for a generation.

The essence of the danger lies in the fact that the Labour Government holds Office without Power—exactly as the Social-Democrats led by Schiedemann, Ebert and Noske took office without power in Germany.

They had been so "great," these German Social-Democrats. While the Socialist and Labour Parties of other countries had to struggle on with a few thousands of members the great German Social-Democracy numbered its members by hundreds of thousands and its voters by millions. Every year seemed to bring nearer the moment when by the mere lapse of time its snowball-like expansion would obliterate Kaiserdom and Junkerdom and make Germany the first Socialist Republic in the world.

Then came the war and the appalling, heart-breaking process of disillusionment. The "snowball," exposed to the Imperialist *flammenwerfer*, revealed its muddy soul and collapsed into the unsavoury thing that after following its Kaiser for longer than even Junkerdom deemed credible, sat palsied in the seats of office while the Junker guards "saved society" from the *Spartakus-bund* and beat out the brains of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. After 25,000 German workers have been slaughtered in three bloody uprisings against the régime nominally presided over by the Social-Democracy, the military agents of the industrial and financial dictators of Germany (who have held the real power all the time Ebert, Schiedemann and Co., have been anchored in their arm-chairs) find Social-Democracy no longer necessary even as a camouflage.

Flung from their bureaus and their ministerial benches the Social-

Democrats (their millions of voters discounted like inflated marks into the cold units of actuality) are rescued from annihilation beneath an avalanche of universal hatred and contempt only so far as they are included in the proscriptions of the military dictators. To one, and one only, straw can they cling to save them from sinking to the bottom of the foulest bog in the deepest hell. They are still friends with the British Labour Party. It is not impossible that the new knights and peers of the once-despised British Party may be called upon before long to help drag the *ci-devant* Marxists and *quondam* Revolutionists of German Social-Democracy from beneath the trampling feet of the armies of Revolution and Counter-Revolution.

If this were all it would be enough to excite the interest of the most jaded. But there is more, much more !

We can see now—now that it is all but too late—that the crimes of Otto Wels and Hugo Noske were potential in the composition of the German Social-Democracy as far back as the nineties. The theoretical divisions which arose in and around Bernstein's "Revisionism" were things which we were wont to treat as merely incidental to the dialectical development of the Marxian philosophy. Price (in the almost perfect concluding section of his book) shows that they were the objective expression of fundamental social divisions—that the adoption of the common denomination of "Marxist" served only to embitter to the point of slaughter the fundamental class-antagonisms that the policy of Social-Pacifism sought always to explain out of existence.

The British Labour Party so far as it has any theoretical unity at all is chiefly anti-Marxist and pro-Revisionist. It is overwhelmingly Social-Pacifist—angry to the point of fury at the suggestion of "class-war." Its sympathies are thus bespoken in advance for Ebert, Schiedemann, Noske, Wels and Co. How little this is likely to save them and their followers from manhandling at the hands of a British *Fascisti* after a prolonged and scientific sabotage from the Federation of British Industries can be imagined best by those who have studied (with Philips Price's invaluable aid) the procedure of the Coal and Iron Kings of Germany and the rise and progress of the German *Fascisti*.

The famished and tortured German proletariat—whose anguish drives them towards the gun and the barricade with a force almost exactly balanced by the hunger-debility that robs them of the strength to struggle—stand before us more as a warning than an appeal. Heresy hunting is a depraved and degrading pursuit at the best of times, but we must not let our appreciation of that fact blind us to the need for extending and intensifying among the rank-and-file of the Labour Party as much as possible of a general understanding of the proved laws of social development. It is these rank-and-file

masses who will bear the brunt, and they have a right to be warned of the dangers ahead.

The least dramatic among us could be forgiven for being alarmed at the prospect. The incurable romanticism which clings to the belief in the saving grace of sweet reasonableness as a means of making expropriation at once pleasant to the expropriated and profitable to the expropriator is entrenched upon the Treasury Bench. The repudiation of Marxism and "class-war dogma" may have been at one time a harmless (if unimpressive) pose. It may become (let the battered corpses of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg bear witness) the most brutal and demoralising of creeds. When, years ago, Bernard Shaw spoke of "that inferior variety of Lloyd-Georgism known as German Social-Democracy" we were horrified. We knew only that those he slighted gave outward reverence to the name of Marx and we took the rest on trust. To take such things on trust nowadays is criminal.

It is not enough to wag our heads gravely in the direction of Eccleston Square and to mutter "fie ! fie !" as knight succeeds unto baron in the Labour hierarchy and minor lights intrigue for the posts of Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household and the reversion to the hereditary Wardship of the Kitchen Fire-irons. Are we of the Left Wing adequate to the task of compelling an amendment ? Does even the quality of our Marxism leave nothing to seek ?

It is melancholy to reflect that almost every reader of Price's book will gain his first knowledge of Rosa Luxemburg's contributions to the development of the theory of Marxism from his pages. Why have these things never been translated into English ?

I fear there is only one answer—we have been accustomed to using Marx as a decorative badge to wear ; we have yet to acquire the will to use him as an instrument for producing definite social and political results. It would be a wonderful thing, and practical beyond praise, could we compel an adjournment of the House of Commons until the whole of the 192 Labour Members had read and marked, not to say inwardly digested, the analyses given by Price of the economic interests that in their totality constitute the entities we know as "France" and "Germany" and of the whole aftermath of the German Revolution of 1918. It could not fail to have some effect. But it would and will be ten thousand times more important to get the facts he sets out known and appreciated at their worth by the widest possible mass of the British workers.

Here is work that Plebs can and must do. Arm-chairs have a fascination few can resist ; but with a Mill's bomb under the seat they lose much if not all of their charm. It is not enough for us to understand history better than anybody else. We have Marx's own warrant for saying that "*the important thing is to change it.*" And

THE PLEBS

99

unless every ounce of energy be devoted to the task, and that speedily, there is grave reason to fear that the fate of the Commune of '71 will overtake the Proletarian Revolution that began in Russia in 1917 and whose second chapter has left the German workers prostrate and all but destroyed.

We will have to write the third chapter whether we will it or no. How are we going to write it?

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