

The Question About Parvus

The question I mean is this: why is it that hardly anyone has even heard of Parvus, who was one of the most important men of the 20th century? First, however, since hardly anyone has heard of him, I need to say who he was, and why he ought to be as well-known as (say) Lenin, or at the very least, Trotsky.

"Parvus" was the nom-de-plume of the Russian Marxist revolutionary A. I. Helphand (1867-1924), and was also the name by which Helphand was generally known in his own time. (The "ph" in his name is pronounced as "f".)

When the First World War broke out Parvus realised, long before anyone else, that in Russia for the foreseeable future, the interests of Russian revolutionary socialists were identical with the interests of the German government. Both wanted Russia taken out of the war, its government overthrown, and the country reduced to military insignificance and extreme economic distress. This simple but brilliant idea was put by Parvus before the German Foreign Ministry. They saw its merit at once, and proceeded, as early as February 1915, to act on it. As a result, Parvus became the channel through which the German government poured mountains of money into the hands of the Russian revolutionaries, and after February 1917, into the hands of the Bolsheviks exclusively. Parvus was also both the conceiver and the organiser of the personnel-side of the same policy. In particular it was he who persuaded the German government to give Lenin that famous but ill-

explained free train-ride to Russia which we read of in our youth.

That is Parvus' main claim to fame. And is it not enough to make him one of the most important men of ^{the twentieth} century? Think how much of subsequent [^]history has depended, according to the unanimous judgement of historians, on Lenin's being in Russia from early 1917 on!

But in order to make the figure of Parvus a little less shadowy, I will give a brief account of his whole life. The following two paragraphs are based on a biography of him entitled The Merchant of Revolution, by Z. A. B. Zeman and W. B. Scharlau, (Oxford University Press, 1965), and on Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Lenin in Zurich (1975, English translation by Willetts, The Bodley Head, London, 1976).

Parvus was born in the province of Minsk, to Jewish parents of the lower-middle class. He got his school-education in Odessa. At nineteen he migrated to Switzerland, and in 1891 gained a degree in economics from Basel university. He then went to Germany and quickly established himself as a leading Marxist theorist: combatting in print the revisionism of Bernstein, the facile optimism of Bebel, the compromises of Kautsky, the populism of Rosa Luxemburg, and so forth. He was even more active in practical revolutionary work. Along with Trotsky it was Parvus, far more than Lenin, who led the communist rising in Russia in 1905. When that failed, he served some months in prison and was sentenced to three years in Siberia, but escaped en route and resumed his activities.

Between 1910 and 1915 he served as an economic adviser to both the Turkish and the Bulgarian governments. This was the period when his great idea dawned on him, and began to be implemented. It was also a period when, by shrewd though not always straightforward dealings, he became extremely rich, and was therefore able to indulge for the first time his passion for high life, especially in the form of young blond women. Back in western Europe, he set up an import-export business in Stockholm which, under the cover of its ordinary operations, enabled him to transmit German money to the Petrograd or Moscow Bolsheviks. In 1916, in recognition of his services, he was allowed to become a German citizen. After Lenin's successful coup in October 1917, Parvus asked for permission to re-enter Russia, but Lenin refused the request with contumely. From then on Parvus became progressively more critical, and more frightened, of his former protégés. In 1918, when the Russian Bolsheviks, returning long-standing services, voted two million roubles to support the attempt of German Bolsheviks to overthrow their government, Parvus had had enough. He retired to a palatial lakeside villa at Zurich. But continuing publicity about the sexual orgies there finally moved the Swiss to expel him. He set up a similar establishment on an island in a lake near Berlin, and died there about two years later.

Of course no one can say with certainty that, but for Parvus's great idea and the money which he got the Germans

to put into it, communism would not have triumphed in Russia. Still, that is what it seems reasonable to believe. It is impossible to doubt, either that colossal sums were transmitted through Parvus to the Bolsheviks, or that under Lenin's leadership those sums were effectively applied. And then, in July 1917, the Provisional Government actually charged the Bolshevik leaders with treason, on account of their dependence on German backing; and though events moved too fast, and the accused were never brought to trial, the statements which both Lenin and Parvus made at the time about this accusation were so extraordinarily evasive as to leave little doubt that German money was indeed vital to their cause.

And yet Parvus, ever since his death in 1924, has practically vanished from human ken. I had never heard of him until, about six years ago, I happened to read Lenin in Zurich. At the present time (August 1991), I find that he is still entirely unheard-of by almost everyone I know. How is this fact to be explained?

It should go without saying that every Russian government, beginning with Lenin's, has had a decided interest in Parvus's being forgotten. Likewise, of course, all German governments, beginning with that of Wilhelm II: they do not want the world to know that Germany actually, even if inadvertently, created the communist menace to its east. And those are two very powerful sources of influence, no doubt. Still, they do not seem quite adequate, even together, to explain

the oblivion into which Parvus has fallen. For after all, Zeman and Scharlau were able to publish their excellent biography of Parvus in 1965. One suspects that attempts were probably made to prevent its publication, but if such attempts were made they failed. And again, Solzhenitsyn did manage to publish Lenin in Zurich in 1975.

But the former book, like almost all books by academic historians, has made no impression whatever on the public mind, and the same is true even of Solzhenitsyn's book: a fact which only throws the question about Parvus into sharper relief than ever. No author of the last fifty years, it is safe to say, has commanded a wider or a more attentive audience ^{on these matters} than Solzhenitsyn. When he published the truth about how Stalin ruled Russia, the whole world listened. Yet when he published the truth about how Lenin got control of Russia in the first place, even his voice became for once inaudible. Can anyone explain this mystery?

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My daughter has pointed out the answer to me, & it is so obvious that I'm ashamed not to have thought of it.

In a nutshell: Parvus must be kept in the shade, because Lenin must be kept, at all costs, in a favourable light.