Revolutionary to His Majesty

Lenin wanted to overthrow the Tsar; Kaiser Wilhelm II wanted to secure a victory on the Eastern Front. Previously unknown documents now reveal the full extent of their secret collaboration during the First World War. For years, the German Empire supported the Bolsheviks with millions and logistics.

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The best-kept secret of the First World War ends on 4 November 1918 with a farce. On instructions from the very top, Berlin policemen smuggle revolutionary leaflets into a crate of Soviet diplomatic baggage. When a courier at Friedrichstrasse station tries to take the utensils up in the lift, the crate breaks. A flood of propaganda material with headlines like “Beat the Junkers to death!” pours out onto the platform. Moscow’s ambassador, Adolf Abramovich Joffe, immediately protests to the Foreign Office about the staged provocation. In vain – the State Secretary of the Foreign Office (as the German foreign minister is called) coolly informs Joffe that he and his diplomats must leave Germany by the following evening at the latest. For the Soviets, it comes “like a bolt from the blue,” according to one of Joffe’s staff.

Two days after the incident, the residence “Unter den Linden” of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR), the forerunner of the Soviet Union, is closed.

The general public was little surprised by the severing of diplomatic relations. Since the October Revolution the previous year, Russia had been ruled by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known as Lenin. And the radical leader of the Bolsheviks left no doubt that he was aiming for world revolution and intended to push Kaiser Wilhelm II from his throne.

Secretly, of course – and only a handful of insiders knew it – the severance of relations also ended the most curious political alliance of convenience of the 20th century: between the Russian revolutionaries around Lenin and the German imperialists around Wilhelm of the House of Hohenzollern.

It was a complicity of ideological mortal enemies, conducted with all manner of cunning and intriguing sophistication. The conspirators wrote world history: without Wilhelm II’s help for Lenin, the October Revolution 90 years ago would not have happened as it did.

More than that: without German support, Lenin's Bolsheviks would hardly have survived that decisive first year in power.

There would probably have been no Soviet Union, no rise of communism, and the millions of Gulag dead would likely not have been mourned.

The unholy German-Russian alliance was held together by common enemies, in accordance with the age-old maxim of realpolitik that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. A convenient logic that usually serves to mask one's own failings – as in the First World War. For if the Germans had revised their megalomaniacal war aims in the East, Lenin's services would not have been necessary.

As it was, the Reich conspired with the leader of the Bolsheviks against Tsar Nicholas II, the ally of France and Great Britain. After all, the Romanov stood in the way of a German negotiated peace just as much as he stood in the way of Lenin's seizure of power.

For four years, Berlin supported the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries in Russia with marks, ammunition and weapons, thus contributing to the end of the Tsarist monarchy. At least 26 million marks – around €75 million in today's money – was spent on this by the Foreign Office alone by the end of 1917.

When Tsar Nicholas finally fell in the February Revolution of 1917 and Lenin was stuck in exile in Switzerland, the imperial authorities enabled him to return to his homeland in the middle of the world war. "Lenin's entry into Russia successful. He is working entirely as desired," the head of the German intelligence service in Stockholm telegraphed the General Staff in Berlin on 17 April 1917. Because now the target was the Provisional Government then in office in Petrograd.

Half a year later, Lenin seized power in the October Revolution, also with German help. Soon afterwards, the newly founded Soviet state concluded a peace with the Reich that gave the Germans peace on the Eastern Front and a gigantic sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Mission accomplished – for the time being, at least.

Wilhelm even dreamed of "a kind of alliance or friendly relationship" – together against the West, just as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin would do two decades later.

That they actually wished each other at the gallows was never forgotten by the two allies, despite all their agreements. The seemingly paradoxical consequence: Lenin, sponsored by the Kaiser, helped German comrades prepare a revolution of their own

against the monarchy. And Wilhelm II, for his part, supported not only the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War but also their opponents.

Today, the world-historical alliance between sickle and crown is almost completely forgotten, even though excellent studies on the subject appeared decades ago. *****

However, questions remain, particularly regarding the extent of German support for the Bolsheviks. Because in the Foreign Office, receipts for payments made were destroyed after auditing. Much can only be proven circumstantially, and for that one must search in unusual places.

DER SPIEGEL has done so, and in research in more than a dozen archives across Europe has come across previously unknown or unevaluated material: analyses and papers from the security authorities of Sweden, Switzerland and Great Britain; documents of the Prussian police; notes in the Foreign Office archive and in Russian archives; bank statements from Swiss banks.

The details thus found make it possible to shed more light on the shadow world into which the diplomats of the German Empire entered when they banked on revolutionising Russia.

It all began with the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914. Although Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II were cousins, their empires belonged to different blocs: on one side the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary and the German Reich; on the other the Entente of the French Republic, the constitutional British monarchy and Russia's autocracy – a strange alliance held together only by fear of German hegemony in Europe.

It soon became clear that this armed conflict would be different from all before. Armies of millions clashed; for the first time, generals brought the full force of industrial dynamism to bear on killing people – and with that, the classic separation between front and home front collapsed. No wonder that the strategists sought not only to defeat the enemy in the trenches but also to weaken him from within. The use of "any means suitable for harming the enemy" was a duty, noted Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the German General Staff.

The Reich Treasury Office (as the finance ministry was then called) therefore made available hundreds of millions of marks to incite Moroccans, Indians and other peoples

of the colonial empires against Paris and London, while the latter fomented unrest in the Habsburg and Ottoman empires.

The backward Tsarist Empire also offered points of attack for a "disintegration of the enemy country from within" (Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg). Before the war, famines had repeatedly driven peasants to revolt. In Russian cities, people lived in miserable conditions; the introduction of the 79-hour week was considered progress. As early as 1905, a revolution had broken out, which the Tsar had bloodily suppressed.

Among the more than one hundred nationalities and ethnic groups of the Tsarist multinational empire, discontent continued to simmer. Poles, Ukrainians, Estonians, Finns and other minorities dreamed of their own states – which suited the Germans just fine. Wilhelm II pursued the so-called orange-peel strategy: like the peel from the fruit, the non-Russian peripheral regions were to be separated from core Russia. The Kaiser wanted to place the newly emerging states under German tutelage – a step on the road to world power.

Thus a shower of money rained down on the numerous political adventurers who contacted German authorities after the outbreak of war. Alleged and actual opponents of the Tsar boasted that they could incite mutinies in the Russian Black Sea Fleet, trigger uprisings in Ukraine or stir up social unrest.

It was a lucrative business even for possible charlatans. In September 1914, the Foreign Office paid two men of supposedly "great influence" 50,000 marks in gold for a "general revolution against Russia". Another 2 million in cash were to follow once the uprising occurred – to this day no one knows who received the money. Later the premiums rose even higher; German diplomats and intelligence officers offered millions for a rebellion in just a single province of the Tsarist Empire.

Because it had become tight for Wilhelm II and Co.: His Majesty's generals had assumed a lightning victory in the West that would spare them a two-front war. When the triumph over France failed to materialise, the Kaiser and his ministers tried to make the Tsar compliant through unrest; at first, however, the overthrow of the monarchy was not on the agenda.

Thus it was rather by chance that in the autumn of 1914 the German revolutionary strategists became aware of the professional revolutionary (and lawyer) Lenin. The small man with the reddish fringe of hair had lived mostly in western exile since the turn of the century; when war broke out, he moved from Austria to neutral Switzerland, to Bern.

Lenin, a well-read and sharp-tongued Marxist, stood at the head of a left-radical splinter group that called itself – despite its actual size – the Bolsheviks (majoritarians). In the Russian parliament, they had only a handful of deputies, which did not bother Lenin. He wanted to come to power not through elections but through a revolution.

That he subordinated everything to this goal made him attractive to the Germans. Above all, however, unlike many other socialists, Lenin had not allowed himself to be infected by the national frenzy that gripped people everywhere in the summer of 1914. Instead, he beat the drum for the defeat of the Romanov Tsar. After the fall of Nicholas II, world revolution (and he would not settle for anything less) would be set in motion automatically.

The tip about Lenin came from Alexander Kesküla, a former Bolshevik from Estonia and one of the many figures in the grey zone between revolutionary Russians and the Germans. Kesküla offered his services to the German legation in Bern as a propagandist for the Kaiser's cause. He hoped that the Germans would push for the annexation of Russian-ruled Estonia to Sweden.

However, Kesküla wavered in his judgment of Lenin. Sometimes he complained that Lenin was doing too little for the revolution in the Tsarist Empire. Then again he beat the drum for "immediately coming to the aid of the Leninist tendency in Russia", and raved to the German diplomats that the Bolshevik enjoyed "the greatest prestige" among revolutionaries in Petrograd and Moscow. He was "unscrupulous" and possessed "the most brutal and ruthless energy".

Later, when Kesküla realised that the Germans had their own interests in the Baltic, he switched to the Entente side and warned them against Lenin – with the same arguments, as shown by previously unknown British files. For his services, Kesküla received a total of 250,000 marks; only a small part of that demonstrably ended up with the Bolsheviks.

That Berlin did not employ Kesküla on a large scale to support Lenin had a simple reason, as German documents show. Despite his Bolshevik past, Kesküla was a theoretical mind. For the logistics of the revolution, the Germans needed experts of a different calibre. And in January 1915, such a man presented himself: Alexander Helphand, one of the most important political adventurers of the 20th century.

The man with the powerful head and the "stature of a Michelangelo slave with legs a little too short" (biographer Winfried Scharlau) lived as a wealthy businessman in Constantinople at the outbreak of war, apparently enriched by the help he had given the

crumbling Ottoman Empire in preparing for war. The Sultan had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers in November 1914.

Helphand's past spoke for the revolutionary qualities of the salon socialist. As a youth, the Jew born near Minsk in 1867 had already dedicated himself to overthrowing the then Tsar, because his regime oppressed people of the Mosaic faith. Helphand discovered Marxism in Switzerland, where he studied like many other oppositional Russians of his generation. In 1891 he moved to Germany and joined the SPD, which at that time was admired worldwide by socialists for its political successes – German was the *lingua franca* among revolutionaries of many countries.

Helphand quickly attracted attention with radical and powerful articles that earned him a reputation as a possible second Karl Marx. In ironic allusion to his considerable girth, he was called "Parvus" ("the little one").

The politically motivated persecution by the German police soon forced Helphand into a vagabond life; he was expelled from several federal states, as previously unknown documents of the Prussian police in the Berlin State Archive prove. In Munich at the turn of the century, he met Lenin, who was three years younger, for the first time; in Helphand's apartment Lenin met Rosa Luxemburg, a study friend of Helphand. The printing press for the party newspaper that Lenin published was also kept in the apartment for a time.

However, Lenin's vision of a tightly organised cadre party of professional revolutionaries who alone should possess ideological interpretive authority remained foreign to Helphand throughout his life. He preferred to team up with Leo Bronstein, nom de guerre Trotsky, from near Kherson in what is now Ukraine – the brilliant organiser and later father of the Bolsheviks' victory in the Russian Civil War. Trotsky learned from Helphand that the proletariat's seizure of power was not an "astronomical final goal" but "a practical task of our time".

When the revolution broke out in Russia in 1905, both rushed to the old homeland; Trotsky placed himself at the head of the St. Petersburg Soviet, and Helphand took over part of the press. He wanted to "clear the way for the revolutionary proletariat in Russia in order to strengthen the revolutionary energy of the proletariat in the West". At that time, however, there were only about two million industrial workers in all of vast Russia.

A photograph shows Helphand and Trotsky in the prison of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, where they were held after the uprising was crushed.

Helphand was exiled to Siberia, but managed to escape and reappeared in Germany in the winter of 1906/07.

Helphand never had many friends in the SPD. The German comrades were disturbed by his radical views, his weakness for women, and his ruthlessness towards his own children, from whom he withheld maintenance payments. When he also had to face a party disciplinary proceeding because the writer Maxim Gorky accused him of embezzling royalties, Helphand left the Reich and went to Constantinople. There he probably wanted to "study polygamy at its best source," the comrades sneered.

Helphand's hatred of the Tsarist Empire must have become overwhelming during his years on the Bosphorus, because although he remained persona non grata in Germany, he sided with the Central Powers when war broke out in 1914. Helphand proposed an alliance of convenience to the German ambassador in Constantinople: "The interests of the German government are identical with those of the Russian revolutionaries." The diplomat secured Helphand an entrance to the Foreign Office in Berlin.

Nothing is known about the course of the talks there at the end of February 1915, but the 23-page plan for overthrowing the Tsar through mass strikes that the revolutionary expert presented on the Wilhelmstrasse has survived.

He had thought of almost everything: agitation among workers in industrial regions, links to potential strike committees, incitement of national minorities. He wanted to blow up important bridges, set fire to the oil wells at Baku, free political prisoners in Siberia, have leaflets and brochures printed abroad and organise their transport to Russia. Helphand even demanded "comprehensible instructions on the handling" of explosives.

The document ended with a list of the most important tasks; at the top was: "Financial support for the Social Democratic Russian majority faction (that is, the Bolsheviks – Ed.) … The leaders are to be contacted in Switzerland."

The plan must have immediately convinced the rather cautious Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow and his experts, for only a few weeks later Helphand received the explosives he had demanded, a German police pass to facilitate his travel, and ample money: one million marks.

There must have been further sums, because a previously unknown handwritten note from the Foreign Office dated the end of 1915 mentions several "payments" to

Helphand. This is consistent with the Reich Treasury Office having approved millions for the revolutionising of Russia to the Foreign Office in the spring and summer of 1915.

The money transfers – sometimes in cash, sometimes by wire – went through an office on Berlin's Wilhelmstrasse, a kind of central agency for unofficial employees of the Foreign Office. The General Staff had founded it for intelligence operations that were to be carried out "privately, but with the support of all competent authorities".

Nobody in the government centre seems to have thought that the overthrow of the Tsar might also have repercussions on the German monarchy, whose democratisation was long overdue. Rather, the envoy in Copenhagen, Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, noted with an eye on the workforce that once the empire had emerged victorious from the world war, it would be possible "to bring those elements to cooperate and rally around the throne" that had previously stood aloof – Lenin as a substitute for reform.

Brockdorff-Rantzau, of old nobility and never without his signet ring, later even became foreign minister in the Weimar Republic.

At the end of May 1915, Helphand arrived in Bern to speak with Lenin, as announced. He appeared in one of the city's Russian restaurants that the Bolshevik also frequented and had himself led to Lenin's table. Together they then went to Lenin's apartment. Both later reported that they had been unable to agree in their one-on-one conversation.

Helphand claimed that he had urged Lenin to push the revolution in Russia forward, but the Bolshevik "dreamed of publishing a communist journal, with which he believed he could instantly drive the European proletariat out of the trenches and into the revolution".

Lenin, for his part, claims to have berated the visitor as a German social chauvinist and shown him the door "with his tail between his legs".

But is that true?

The Bolshevik had reason to deny any connection with Helphand. Among comrades, Helphand was considered a speculator and swindler; Rosa Luxemburg had already ended her friendship with him, as had Trotsky. Rumours swirled that he was a German agent, and no Russian politician could afford the suspicion of working for the German side.

Some evidence does speak for Lenin's version. After the meeting, he continued to live modestly; lack of money was a constant theme in his letters. And Helphand, for his part, explained to his German principals that support for Lenin would only be possible once "the existing tension between them has been resolved".

In all probability, Helphand invested part of the money from the Foreign Office in securities rather than spending it on the revolution – this conclusion is suggested by account documents in the Swiss Federal Archives in Bern. The Swiss police had confiscated them in 1919.

On the other hand, these records show that there were indeed Bolsheviks who took money from Helphand – though only a few thousand Swiss francs. Also, in retrospect, Walter Nicolai, the German intelligence chief, wrote that Lenin had "supplied my intelligence service with valuable information about conditions in … Tsarist Russia".

Above all, the network that Helphand set up after his conversation with Lenin argues against the thesis of Bolshevik innocence. Because at the key nodes we repeatedly find leading revolutionaries of Lenin's party. Moissei Uritsky, for example, after the October Revolution chief of the Petrograd secret police (Cheka), worked for Helphand; likewise Jakob Fürstenberg, one of Lenin's closest confidants and after the October Revolution head of the Soviet state bank, or the discreet lawyer Mieczyslaw Kozlowski, who co-founded the Cheka. They knew each other and Parvus from their exile days, were often related to one another, which further strengthened their willingness to be loyal and discreet.

Helphand chose Copenhagen as his base, but also operated from Stockholm, because both Denmark and Sweden remained neutral during the First World War, and Sweden still shared a border with Russia at the time. From here, the revolution could be advanced more easily.

As early as August 1915, a Foreign Office employee raved about the "ingenious manner" in which Helphand approached his task. In agreement with the diplomats, he founded an export company intended to exploit the collapse of East-West trade as a result of the war: the "Handels- og Exportkompaniet A/S". Helphand's partner became a Berlin merchant who was in the pay of the German intelligence service; and Lenin's confidant Fürstenberg, a polyglot financial acrobat of great discretion, took over management.

For the German revolution experts, this was not an unusual arrangement. They often hid party donations behind commercial activities. Another comrade was bought the patent for a sterilisation apparatus so that he could explain his sudden wealth, which he used for the cause of socialism.

Great expectations were attached to Helphand's ventures, as the envoy Brockdorff-Rantzau noted in Copenhagen: "Victory and with it the prize of first place in the world is ours, if we succeed in revolutionising Russia in time and thereby breaking up the coalition." Berlin no longer only relied on putting pressure on the Tsar through unrest, but now also accepted his overthrow.

Helphand established connections to the USA, the Netherlands, Great Britain and of course Russia. Partly legally, partly with the help of false declarations and smuggling, he imported and exported non-ferrous metals and chemicals, used cars and fishing vessels, medicines, condoms, cognac, caviar, pencils, grain, whale oil and much more to and from the Tsarist Empire.

And everywhere you come across Bolsheviks: the company that sold the goods across the Russian border on the black market employed the lawyer Kozlowski as legal counsel. The accountant who transferred the proceeds to Copenhagen or Stockholm was related to Fürstenberg. In the banks through which the financial transactions ran, Bolsheviks sat in high positions.

It is hardly conceivable that Lenin did not use this network to have money brought to Petrograd or to channel part of the proceeds earned in Russia into the party coffers. Tellingly, the company address of Helphand's enterprise was later found in Lenin's slim address book. And managing director Fürstenberg – as emerges from Swedish investigative files – travelled regularly to Russia.

What is certain is that the Bolsheviks needed money for revolutionary work.

Like an ugly scar, the Eastern Front then stretched from the Baltic across Europe to the Mediterranean. The revolutionaries had to travel a good 1,000 kilometres north from Stockholm to Haparanda, a small town on the Swedish-Russian border, near the Arctic Circle.

Today a boring backwater, during the First World War Haparanda was a Dorado for smugglers and agents – Russia's only open connection to the West and the main transshipment point for goods and news.

A well-guarded wooden footbridge, open only during the day, crossed the sometimes raging border river Torneälv, which was also crossed by ferries. Russian officials had to be bribed, outwitted with false papers or otherwise hoodwinked. Lenin's letters were hidden in specially prepared shoes or in corsets. Large quantities of propaganda literature were entrusted by the Bolsheviks to a shoemaker in Haparanda, who together with local comrades smuggled the books and magazines through the river delta. In winter, sledges carried the revolutionary freight across the ice. "I bring greetings from Olga" was the password among initiates.

Beyond the border, the route then led another 1,000 kilometres through the Russian Grand Duchy of Finland southwards to Petrograd.

Later, Soviet propaganda transfigured the Bolsheviks into super-revolutionaries – something cold warriors in the West were happy to believe. But observers not ideologically suspect reported corruption among the comrades. Deliveries of leaflets and books were lost; one of the couriers took out everything he thought were military secrets on his own initiative so as not to endanger naive party comrades on the Finnish-Russian side.

Also, the Tsarist secret police proved astonishingly well informed, as shown by documents discovered in Moscow by the publicist Elisabeth Heresch **. Among historians, therefore, the extent to which German payments to the Bolsheviks destabilised the Tsarist Empire is disputed.

Even Helphand suffered setbacks. The fat merchant, now in his late forties and already somewhat short of breath, had announced to his financiers that the storm would break in January 1916, the anniversary of the 1905 revolution. His revolutionary organisation was capable of mobilising "at least 100,000 workers within 24 hours" in Petrograd. For a complete revolution he budgeted 20 million rubles (approximately €134 million) and first had a million in cash brought to Copenhagen by military couriers. But the date passed, and the great rebellion failed to materialise.

On the other hand, it is striking that some points of Helphand's grand plan became reality: he had proposed using sabotage squads to cut off Allied supplies to Russia. Indeed, ships blew up in Arkhangelsk, and fires broke out in the harbour. Investigators believed German agents were behind the act.

Moreover, Helphand had promised political strikes at the Putilov factories in Petrograd and work stoppages in Nikolayev; German money was to flow into the strike fund here

and elsewhere. And indeed, in both places workers took to the streets. Here too, Tsarist officials suspected German masterminds. The payment of strike funds over weeks could also explain where some of the millions Helphand pocketed ended up.

After the Tsar abdicated following the February Revolution of 1917, the envoy Brockdorff-Rantzau praised Helphand for having "worked as one of the first for the success that has now been achieved".

The most significant German contribution to the end of Nicholas II, however, was delivered not by agents but by the military. In the autumn of 1916, the German army stood deep inside Tsarist territory. Hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers had fallen. And under the sustained pressure of the war, the Russian economy collapsed.

By the end of 1916, factories had to halt production because of a lack of raw materials and fuel. In the countryside, there was a shortage of peasants and horses. In Petrograd and Moscow, flour supplies were running low.

First the workers demonstrated; on 8 March 1917 – International Women's Day – thousands of women queuing in front of food shops joined them in Petrograd. That was, according to historian Heiko Haumann, "the breakthrough to the revolution". Like a steppe fire, the protest spread across the entire empire. The completely overwhelmed Tsar was forced to abdicate.

The Romanovs were replaced by a dual power structure: the moderately conservative Provisional Government, which controlled the state apparatus, and the left-leaning Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. In the latter, the Bolsheviks initially played only a minor role.

The new rulers established the most liberal regime Russia had ever had: with coalition, assembly and press freedoms. The empire was "on the best path to a democratic form of government," judges historian Manfred Hildermeier. However, they were not willing to end the war as long as the price would be German hegemony in Eastern Europe.

For Lenin, the whole development came as a surprise. At the beginning of 1917, the 46-year-old had still declared that his generation would probably not live to see the revolution. Now – after the fall of the Tsar – he was stuck in Switzerland, "corked up like in a bottle" (Helphand).

A return via France or England was out of the question; the Entente powers had no interest in allowing Lenin, of all people, to go to Russia, since he demanded his country's immediate withdrawal from the war. Apart from that, Lenin and his comrades feared being accidentally torpedoed by German U-boats when travelling across the North and Baltic Seas.

At one point Lenin considered posing as a deaf-mute Swede and travelling incognito through Germany; at another, flying secretly over the Eastern Front in an aeroplane. In the end, he followed the proposal of other left-wing emigrants from Russia and Poland, who argued for travelling by train through Germany and Scandinavia. A risky undertaking, because this step could only be taken with the consent of the imperial authorities, and Lenin and the others feared being compromised.

Some therefore wanted to wait until the Provisional Government in Petrograd agreed. Lenin did not. He asked the Swiss socialist Fritz Platten to travel with him and to hand over his conditions to the German envoy in Bern beforehand. The most important points were:

- "Platten alone shall have dealings with German authorities; without his permission, no person may enter the permanently sealed carriage."
- "The carriage shall be granted the right of extraterritoriality."
- "Platten shall buy the tickets for the travellers at the normal rates."

Thus Lenin could claim that he had spoken to no German and had paid for the journey out of his own pocket.

No one in Berlin's leadership raised any objection – neither Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg nor Paul von Hindenburg, chief of the Supreme Army Command, whose approval the Foreign Office needed for logistical reasons anyway.

It was known that the Western powers, for their part, were using millions to strengthen those political parties that wanted to continue the war. Hindenburg's Major General Max Hoffmann later wrote: "Just as I fire shells at the enemy trench, just as I discharge poison gas at him, as an enemy I have the right to use the means of propaganda against his occupation."

And Wilhelm II? He learned of the journey from the press and – as always egocentric and naive – promptly suggested giving the revolutionaries one of his speeches and other

propaganda material “so that they may have an enlightening effect in their homeland”. It never happened.

In the end, Lenin set off with 31 people, including several members of other left-wing splinter groups and family members.

The departure was actually supposed to happen quietly, but at Zurich station it got lively, as the German military attaché observed. About a hundred Russians had gathered, some “swearing like sparrows, shouting that the travellers were all German spies and provocateurs, or ‘they will hang you all, you Jew-baiters’.” One young Russian particularly distinguished himself, repeatedly yelling “Provocateurs, scum, pigs.” As the train pulled out, however, Lenin’s party comrades on the platform sang the “Internationale”.

The route then went via Berlin to Sassnitz on Rügen, where the ferry to Trelleborg, the Swedish port, departed. The journey to the Baltic island took two days.

Later it was said that the probably most famous train in world history had been sealed – which led Winston Churchill to quip that Lenin had been transported “like a plague bacillus”. But that is not true. Three doors of the carriage were indeed sealed, but the fourth was used by Platten and the two accompanying German officers to accept milk for the children or to buy newspapers. A chalk line on the floor marked the separation between the “extraterritorial” compartments of the Russians and those of the Germans.

The travellers passed the time by singing French revolutionary songs, which Platten finally forbade because he feared trouble with the Germans. Meanwhile, Lenin practised planned economy. Since the smokers among the travellers kept blocking the toilet, he cut ration cards. Only with a smoker’s card were you allowed to smoke in the cubbyhole.

As early as 1961, Fritz Fischer pointed out in his classic *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Germany’s Aims in the First World War) that the Germans could have concluded a peace with the Provisional Government as well. Out of well-considered self-interest: the entry of the United States into the war was imminent; a peace on the Eastern Front was needed immediately. And a peace that did not need to be secured militarily because it granted the Germans almost all of Eastern Europe. For such a peace – without annexations – the German leadership would have had to abandon the dream of world power, and it was not prepared to do so. Instead, Berlin continued to choose the easy path: the alliance with the enemy of its enemy.

Jakob Fürstenberg – Helphand's business partner and a confidant of Lenin – received the group in Trelleborg. After a few days in Stockholm, the journey continued by train via the border town of Haparanda to Russia; contrary to all fears, the Provisional Government allowed it. On the evening of 16 April around 11 p.m., Lenin arrived in Petrograd.

The Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and Lenin's party comrades gave him a grand reception: red flags, brass bands, a guard of honour of workers and soldiers on the decorated platform.

During the journey, Lenin had learned from the party newspaper *Pravda* that the Petrograd Bolsheviks wanted to continue the war and support the Provisional Government because they did not think Russia was yet ripe for socialism.

That same night, Lenin proclaimed a new course: defence of the fatherland was "petty bourgeois" and "a deception of the masses by the bourgeoisie". No to war, no to the Provisional Government, continuation of the revolution. Once the dictatorship of the proletariat was established in Russia, Lenin believed, world revolution would follow. A month later, he had brought his party into line.

For Helphand, the change of direction must have been a belated triumph, because with the demand to place power immediately "in the hands of the proletariat", Lenin adopted a position that Helphand had once taught Trotsky.

From the German perspective, the transfer of Lenin proved to be probably the most important revolutionary measure. It alone justifies the thesis that the Bolsheviks would not have come to power in the autumn of 1917 without German help. For the party leader grasped faster than all rivals that the disintegration of Russian society could not be stopped if one postponed the great questions: land reform, the settlement of the nationality problem, the question of peace.

Signs of anarchy were already unmistakable. Reports of murdered landowners and gruesome cases of lynching accumulated in despatches from the Foreign Office. At the beginning of July, German diplomats in Stockholm noted what they had learned about the situation in Petrograd: "Business is in a very bad state, and the city is facing bankruptcy. Food conditions have worsened more and more, the queues in front of shops are getting longer."

The bread ration was 200 grams per day; at the same time industrial production collapsed and prices exploded. At the front, the soldiers – mostly peasants – took their fate into their own hands. Worn down by hunger and trench warfare, hundreds of thousands deserted, often lured by news that land was being distributed back home.

The Berlin government noted with satisfaction that Lenin's demands for peace and land distribution were attracting great support. "Lenin's propaganda is of the kind that proves most effective with the masses," says a situation report dated 5 July 1917. A few days later, the envoy in Stockholm noted that according to reports coming in from Russia, "the time is not far off when the Lenin group will come to power and with it peace would be here".

It is not surprising that Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and Field Marshal Hindenburg vigorously supported the disintegration process. They allowed further trains from Switzerland carrying hundreds of revolutionaries to pass and stepped up propaganda, as the German files show. The Reich Treasury Office had approved another five million marks for the Foreign Office shortly before Lenin's return.

Foreign Secretary Richard von Kühlmann later noted that the funds had reached the Bolsheviks "through various channels". Helphand's network was probably one of them. Helphand's managing director Fürstenberg meanwhile belonged to the central foreign representation of the Bolsheviks based in Stockholm. Another channel likely ran through the historian and long-time editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Gustav Mayer, who was staying in the Swedish capital on behalf of the Foreign Office. Mayer had researched the history of the labour movement and also knew Karl Radek, head of the Bolshevik foreign representation. Radek even allowed Mayer to attend a meeting of the comrades in Stockholm.

Secretary Kühlmann boasted to Hindenburg and the Kaiser that without the "constant, extensive support" of the Foreign Office, the Bolshevik movement would "never have been able to assume the scope and win the influence that it possesses today". Only German money had "enabled the Bolsheviks to expand *Pravda*, conduct lively agitation and broaden the initially narrow base of their party".

That was not quite the case. The Provisional Government, led by Alexander Kerensky (like Lenin a lawyer, though he died only in 1970 in American exile), had in mid-July swung the big bat against the Bolsheviks after militant party activists had attempted a

coup. Leading Bolsheviks were arrested, newspapers banned, dozens of people interrogated. The issue of German money also came up.

Both from the amount of paper consumed and the printer's invoices, it appears that the circulation of *Pravda* in the spring of 1917 was relatively constant at about 80,000 copies per day – whereas the German foreign secretary assumed 300,000.

However, the documents also show that propaganda was cheap. For example, printing half a million leaflets cost only 1,153 rubles, the equivalent of about 2,500 marks (as of 1915). "Even with small subsidies, a lot could be achieved," says Moscow expert Olga Ivantsova.

Regardless of that, Helphand's enterprises generated several million rubles in Russia in 1917, and to this day it has not been clarified what share went to the Bolsheviks.

According to Petrograd police records uncovered by the publicist Heresch, Lenin used part of the money rather crudely. A nurse testified to investigators that she had seen Bolsheviks handing out ruble coins to passers-by to win them over for a demonstration. People were then handed placards with slogans like "Down with the Provisional Government!"

However, many Russians did not need to be paid to be mobilised against the Provisional Government. Because the latter piled mistake upon mistake. It put off the election of the Constituent Assembly, which was supposed to address the great questions, again and again. Under pressure from its French ally, it even attempted a new offensive, which had to be abandoned after three days because the soldiers refused.

Since the Bolsheviks seemed to bear the least responsibility for the chaos, their position in the Soviets and among the soldiers grew stronger and stronger. At the end of September, Lenin urged the hesitant comrades to launch an armed uprising. In Leon Trotsky (whom his rival Stalin had killed with an ice axe in 1940) he found a talented military leader.

Around this time, the Germans also received a vague hint. Lenin's foreign chief Radek told a German liaison man that autumn was near: "Whoever knows Russia knows that great events are likely to unfold in this period. We Bolsheviks are also preparing for them."

The party leadership still wanted to wait, but when the soldiers of the capital's garrison swung behind Lenin's line, he prevailed – perhaps even in agreement with the Germans. At any rate, one of the Berlin revolution experts broke off a business trip "because of the impending Bolshevik revolution," as he later confided to his diary.

On the night of 7 November – 25 October by the Russian calendar – the garrison regiments and the Red Guards, no more than 20,000 men all told, occupied the strategically important points at 2 a.m.; resistance was slight, and the question of power was decided. With the arrest of the Provisional Government's ministers in the Winter Palace the following night, the so-called October Revolution came to an end.

Lenin became head of a government that called itself the "Council of People's Commissars".

For Russia, this began what was probably the most terrible chapter in its history, which only ended in 1991 after unspeakable suffering. For the Germans, by contrast, the alliance with Lenin seemed to have paid off. At the beginning of December 1917, both sides were already negotiating an armistice.

"The Bolsheviks are great fellows and have done everything very nicely and obediently so far," wrote diplomat Kurt Riezler, who by then was largely in charge of Russia policy. But everything depended on Lenin staying in power. And for that, His Majesty's ministers were ready to reach deep into their pockets once again.

Klaus Wiegrefe, Florian Altenhöner, Georg Bönisch, Heiko Buschke, Wladimir Pyljow, Anika Zeller

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***** Troops of the Provisional Government fire on Bolsheviks in July 1917