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The songs of Lenin, Trotsky, Grimm and co. and the tranquil setting of Zimmerwald

Leading socialist revolutionaries from across Europe gathered for a secret conference in Zimmerwald in 1915. The villagers were outraged when they belatedly discovered what was going on.

MARC LETTAU

In autumn 1915 the terrible sound of gunfire was heard in many parts of Europe. However, in the peaks of Längenberg, near to Berne, the First World War was a long way off. The twitter of birds was the backdrop to everyday life here. The ornithologists from all over the world who set off from Berne on 5 September 1915 on four horse-drawn carts, crossing the meadow landscape of Längenberg to arrive in Zimmerwald in the evening blended in well with the local setting. Their declared objective was to hold an ornithological conference in Zimmerwald's Hotel Beau Séjour and in the adjacent guest house. There was a lack of hotel beds because while Zimmerwald wanted to become a tourist destination it was not one really. Some of the guests were put up by the vet and the village postman.

The rest of the story is quickly told. The thirty-odd guests were not bird-watchers at all. It was in fact the socialist elite from 12 countries who gathered here – at the invitation of Swiss social democrat Robert Grimm – to ponder how Europe's working class could be mobilised to oppose the war machine. Much time was spent honing a wake-up call – the “Zimmerwald Manifesto”: “Proletarians! Since the outbreak of war you have put your efforts, courage and endurance at the disposal of the ruling classes. Now it is time to take a stand [...] for the deliverance of the down-trodden classes.” The Zimmerwald Conference incidentally also became the founding moment of the Soviet Union. In any event it was here that the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov, alias Lenin, outlined



HÔTEL ET PENSION BEAU-SÉJOUR, ZIMMERWALD
TENU PAR
SAM GERSTER.

how he intended to bring about upheaval in his homeland.

Revelling socialists

So, from the perspective of the time, highly subversive figures had gathered in Zimmerwald. The conference nevertheless escaped the attention of the law enforcement agencies. County constable Meier did show up and fine the landlord. But he was not punished for the revolutionary plans hatched in the hotel. What was not acceptable as far as the police were concerned was that the drinking, dancing and singing at the Beau Séjour had been allowed to go on for too long.

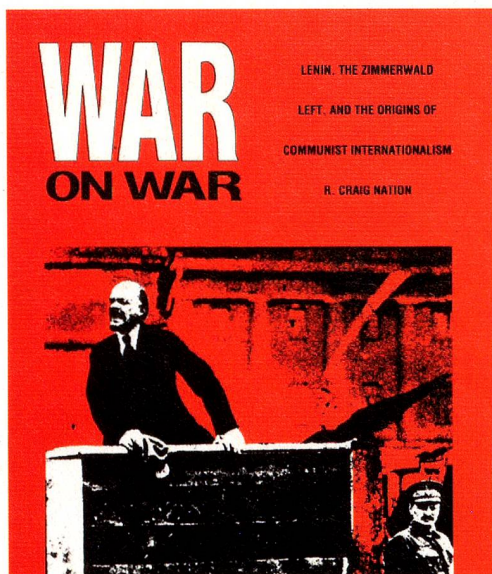
The actual drama began belatedly for the villagers. When they became aware how the “red menace” had infiltrated them undetected, there was outrage. There was also a sense of shame as the consequences of the

conference became evident. In 1917, the world was dumbstruck by the October Revolution initiated by Lenin. In 1918, the national strike brought Switzerland to the verge of collapse. Workers' leader and conference organiser Robert Grimm was at the forefront of the strike action.

Zimmerwald exuded an appeal without wishing to. It became world famous, at least in socialist circles. Even in the Putzger historical atlas, an innocuous German standard reference work, only one single Swiss location of historical significance appeared on the maps relating to the period of the First World War – Zimmerwald.

“The name Zimmerwald took on legendary status,” confirmed Julia Richers, professor of history at the University of Berne. Fears grew in Zimmerwald about becoming a pilgrimage destination for communists. Letters in fact arrived addressed to

The socialists posing as ornithologists met here



Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

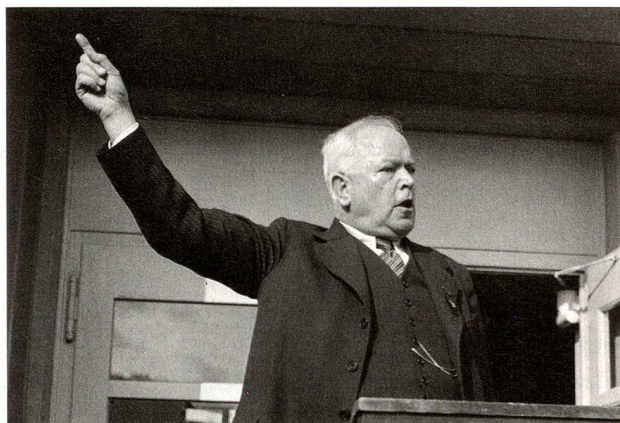
Grimm and Lenin in Zimmerwald

World history was written in the small farming village of Zimmerwald from 5 to 9 September 1915 with the secret socialist conference. Representatives from 12 countries – including Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Karl Radek and the Swiss social democrat Robert Grimm – drew up a manifesto here against the backdrop of the bloody chaos of war in which they called upon the international labour force to oppose the rationale of war. In the view of those gathered in Zimmerwald, the conduct of those social democrats and socialists in Europe who supported the war efforts of their governments because of nationalist considerations and thereby abandoned their pacifist and class war demands was unacceptable. Grimm, in particular, sought to realign the socialist forces of Europe in opposition to war. Translated into the rhetoric of the Zimmerwald Conference, this meant: “The international labour force was reminded of its duty of irreconcilable, proletarian class war.” The rationale was that only the reawakening of class war would enable comprehensive peace initiatives to be introduced.

Zimmerwald nevertheless also represents to a certain extent the division of the workers’ movement into social democrats and communists. Lenin made clear in Zimmerwald that he hoped for more than just Grimm’s anti-war politics. As the representative of a radical, revolutionary minority, the “Zimmerwald leftists”, Lenin said that complete upheaval had to be brought about through the armed uprising of the workers. Because he outlined these views, which ultimately led to the Bolshevik Revolution and the foundation of the Soviet Union, in Zimmerwald, the farming village acquired the involuntary status of the legendary cradle of the USSR. (mul)



Leon Trotsky



Robert Grimm

the “Director of the Lenin Museum”. School classes from the Soviet Union sent postcards. The communal authority usually answered queries very matter-of-factly but sometimes even impolitely. Mail from Leningrad to “Lenin village” marred Zimmerwald’s rustic self-perception.

Ban on memorials

Zimmerwald finally even undertook a legal battle to enable the event to be forgotten. In 1962, memorial sites and plaques of any kind were banned. To spoil the pilgrimage mood of left-wing revolutionaries marking the 50th anniversary of the conference, dyed-in-the-wool opponents of communism organised a counter-conference in 1965. In 1971, Zimmerwald went one step further and had the guest house where Lenin had stayed demolished.

But in 1975 an incredible event occurred – an Apollo spacecraft and a Soyuz space capsule coupled up in outer space. The two major opposing

superpowers, the USA and USSR, circumnavigated Earth together. The people of the world marvelled at this technological, pacifist propaganda mission. The event shifted perceptions of the world. A few months later Zimmerwald also capitulated. The memorial ban was lifted in the same year.

A Lenin at the village festival

When the village celebrated its 700-year anniversary in 1996, fears subsided further. Dozens of decorated vehicles paraded through the village illustrating rural life and its Celtic pre-history – the procession included a gentleman sporting a goatee beard dressed as Lenin. The village realised that it could not rid itself of the episode. What is more, at that very festival, the jazz band “Hot Lenin”, an ensemble of musicians from the village who wanted to spice up Zimmerwald’s folksy music scene with bossa nova, swing, Latin and funk, was formed.



The report in the local newspaper of the Social Democratic Party



The current head of the communal authority Fritz Brönnimann adopts a very pragmatic approach to the Zimmerwald Conference. He sees it as an “historic fact” which does not have to be celebrated but does not need to be suppressed either as the village did not play an active role: “We were just the site of the event.” Is everyone as relaxed about it today? “Hot Lenin” drummer Konrad Burri says that the conference is still not “an issue for village gossip”. But the past is not a problem either. So would they be able to play the “Internationale” at their next gig? Burri flinches: “Are you serious?” That would be somewhat contentious and unlikely. The band is much more comfortable with innocuous classic tracks like “Fly me to the moon”.

5 September 2015 will be the 100th anniversary of the Zimmerwald Conference. The commune, which fought against any memorial for decades, is now organising circumspect commemorations itself. The head of the communal authority and a team have been involved for months in prepara-

tions for the memorial event. The region’s museum is focussing entirely on the socialist peace conference. That is also a positive step according to its curator Urs Rohrbach: “The exhibition does not celebrate socialism. But we look at the momentous history of the event.” Rohrbach does not see anything wrong with the growing interest: “Anyone who takes a closer look will realise that Zimmerwald was not simply Lenin’s thing but above all the work of Grimm.”

Teacher without a definitive answer

The teacher Caspar Bieler, who lives in Zimmerwald and plays the violin with “Hot Lenin” in his spare time, holds a similar view. Despite teaching history, he is unable to pinpoint exactly what Zimmerwald can learn from the whole episode: “I don’t have any highly intelligent answer to that question.” Research into the historical event has nevertheless revealed that the “Zimmerwald Conference was ultimately intended as a peace

conference”. It is good that a hundred years on the emphasis is being placed on the search for peace at that time. And it does not do any harm to point out that the conference was “also attended by men who fought a long battle for the eight-hour day and female suffrage”.

The new relaxed mood has its limits. For the forthcoming commemorative event “Hot Lenin” initially received an invitation only for it then to be withdrawn. A communications consultant advised the organisers to refrain from involving the band who have such a casual attitude towards the name Lenin. The story draws a neat line here. County constable Meier also deemed it important to temper the noisy goings-on in Zimmerwald in 1915.

Zimmerwald in the centre of Switzerland: from the German historical atlas of the time

Exhibition

The exhibition at the Schwarzwasser regional museum in Schwarzenburg runs until 22 November on Sundays and public holidays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Special guided tours can be arranged upon request. www.regionalmuseum.com

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