During the last fifteen to twenty years, especially since the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the economic and also the political literature of the two hemispheres has more and more often adopted the term “imperialism” in order to describe the present era. In 1902, a book by the English economist J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism*, was published in London and New York. This author, whose point of view is that of bourgeois social-reformism and pacifism which, in essence, is identical with the present point of view of the ex-Marxist, Karl Kautsky, gives a very good and comprehensive description of the principal specific economic and political features of imperialism. In 1910, there appeared in Vienna the work of the Austrian Marxist, Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital* (Russian edition, Moscow, 1912). In spite of the mistake the author makes on the theory of money, and in spite of a certain inclination on his part to reconcile Marxism with opportunism, this work gives a very valuable theoretical analysis of “the latest phase of capitalist development”, as the subtitle runs. Indeed, what has been said of imperialism during the last few years, especially in an enormous number of magazine and newspaper articles, and also in the resolutions, for example, of the Chemnitz and Basle congresses which took place in the autumn of 1912, has scarcely gone beyond the ideas expounded, or more exactly, summed up by the two writers mentioned above ...

Later on, I shall try to show briefly, and as simply as possible, the connection and relationships between the principal economic features of imperialism. I shall not be able to deal with the non-economic aspects of the question, however much they deserve to be dealt with. References to literature and other notes which, perhaps, would not interest all readers, are to be found in the footnotes.

I. Concentration of production and monopolies

The enormous growth of industry and the remarkably rapid concentration of production in ever-larger enterprises are one of the most characteristic features of capitalism. Modern production censuses give most complete and most exact data on this process.

In Germany, for example, out of every 1,000 industrial enterprises, large enterprises, i.e., those employing more than 50 workers, numbered three in 1882, six in 1895 and nine in 1907; and out of every 100 workers employed, this group of enterprises employed. 22, 30 and 37, respectively. Concentration of production, however, is much more intense than the concentration of workers, since labour in the large enterprises is much more productive. This is shown by the figures on steam-engines and electric motors. If we take what in Germany is called industry in the broad sense of the term, that is, including commerce, transport, etc, we get the following picture. Large-scale enterprises, 30,588 out of a total of 3,265,623, that is to say, 0.9 percent. These enterprises employ 5,700,000 workers out of a total of 14,400,000, i.e., 39.4 percent; they use 6,600,000 steam horse power out of a total of 8,800,000, i.e, 75.3 percent, and 1,200,000 kilowatts of electricity out of a total of 1,500,000, i.e, 77.2 percent.

Less than one-hundredth of the total number of enterprises utilise *more than three-fourths* of the total amount of steam and electric power! Two million nine hundred and seventy thousand small enterprises (employing up to five workers), constituting 91 percent of the total, utilise only 7 percent of the total amount of
steam and electric power! Tens of thousands of huge enterprises are everything; millions of small ones are nothing.

In 1907, there were in Germany 586 establishments employing one thousand and more workers, nearly one-tenth (1,380,000) of the total number of workers employed in industry, and they consumed almost one-third (32 percent) of the total amount of steam and electric power.\(^1\) As we shall see, money capital and the banks make this superiority of a handful of the largest enterprises still more overwhelming, in the most literal sense of the word, ie, millions of small, medium and even some big "proprietors" are in fact in complete subjection to some hundreds of millionaire financiers.

In another advanced country of modern capitalism, the United States of America, the growth of the concentration of production is still greater. Here statistics single out industry in the narrow sense of the word and classify enterprises according to the value of their annual output. In 1904 large-scale enterprises with an output valued at one million dollars and over, numbered 1,900 (out of 216,180, ie, 0.9 percent). These employed 1,400,000 workers (out of 5,500,000, ie, 25.6 percent) and the value of their output amounted to $5,600,000,000 (out of $14,800,000,000, ie, 38 percent). Five years later, in 1909, the corresponding figures were: 3,060 enterprises (out of 268,491, ie, 1.1 percent) employing 2,000,000 workers (out of 6,800,000, ie, 30.5 percent) with an output valued at $9,000,000,000 (out of $20,700,000,000, ie, 43.8 percent).\(^2\)

Almost half the total production of all the enterprises of the country was carried on by one-hundredth part of these enterprises! These 3,000 giant enterprises embrace 258 branches of industry. From this it can be seen that at a certain stage of its development concentration itself, as it were, leads straight to monopoly, for a score or so of giant enterprises can easily arrive at an agreement, and on the other hand, the hindrance to competition, the tendency towards monopoly, arises from the huge size of the enterprises. This transformation of competition into monopoly is one of the most important – if not the most important – phenomena of modern capitalist economy, and we must deal with it in greater detail. But first we must clear up one possible misunderstanding.

American statistics speak of 3,000 giant enterprises in 250 branches of industry, as if there were only a dozen enterprises of the largest scale for each branch of industry.

But this is not the case. Not in every branch of industry are there large-scale enterprises; and moreover, a very important feature of capitalism in its highest stage of development is so-called combination of production, that is to say, the grouping in a single enterprise of different branches of industry, which either represent the consecutive stages in the processing of raw materials (for example, the smelting of iron ore into pig-iron, the conversion of pig-iron into steel, and then, perhaps, the manufacture of steel goods) – or are auxiliary to one another (for example, the utilisation of scrap, or of by-products, the manufacture of packing materials, etc).

"Combination," writes Hilferding, "levels out the fluctuations of trade and therefore assures to the combined enterprises a more stable rate of profit. Secondly, combination has the effect of eliminating trade. Thirdly, it has the effect of rendering possible technical improvements, and, consequently, the acquisition of superprofits over and above those obtained by the 'pure' (i.e., non-combined) enterprises. Fourthly, it strengthens the position of the combined enterprises relative to the 'pure' enterprises, strengthens them in the competitive struggle in periods of serious depression, when the fall in prices of raw materials does not keep pace with the fall in prices of manufactured goods."\(^3\)

The German bourgeois economist, Heymann, who has written a book especially on "mixed", that is, combined, enterprises in the German iron industry, says: "Pure enterprises perish, they are crushed between the high price of raw material and the low price of the finished product." Thus we get the following picture: "There remain, on the one hand, the big coal companies, producing millions of tons yearly, strongly organised in their coal syndicate, and on the other, the big steel plants, closely allied to the coal mines, having their own steel syndicate. These giant enterprises, producing 400,000 tons of steel per annum, with a tremendous output of ore and coal and producing finished steel goods, employing 10,000 workers quartered in company houses, and sometimes owning their own railways and ports, are the typical representatives of the German iron and steel industry. And concentration goes on further
and further. Individual enterprises are becoming larger and larger. An ever-increasing number of enterprises in one, or in several different industries, join together in giant enterprises, backed up and directed by half a dozen big Berlin banks. In relation to the German mining industry, the truth of the teachings of Karl Marx on concentration is definitely proved; true, this applies to a country where industry is protected by tariffs and freight rates. The German mining industry is ripe for expropriation.”[4]

Such is the conclusion which a bourgeois economist who, by way of exception, is conscientious, had to arrive at. It must be noted that he seems to place Germany in a special category because her industries are protected by higher tariffs. But this is a circumstance which only accelerates concentration and the formation of monopolist manufacturers’ associations, cartels, syndicates, etc. It is extremely important to note that in free-trade Britain, concentration also leads to monopoly, although somewhat later and perhaps in another form. Professor Hermann Levy, in his special work of research entitled Monopolies, Cartels and Trusts, based on data on British economic development, writes as follows:

“In Great Britain it is the size of the enterprise and its high technical level which harbour a monopolist tendency. This, for one thing, is due to the great investment of capital per enterprise, which gives rise to increasing demands for new capital for the new enterprises and thereby renders their launching more difficult. Moreover (and this seems to us to be the more important point), every new enterprise that wants to keep pace with the gigantic enterprises that have been formed by concentration would here produce such an enormous quantity of surplus goods that it could dispose of them only by being able to sell them profitably as a result of an enormous increase in demand; otherwise, this surplus would force prices down to a level that would be unprofitable both for the new enterprise and for the monopoly combines.” Britain differs from other countries where protective tariffs facilitate the formation of cartels in that monopolist manufacturers’ associations, cartels and trusts arise in the majority of cases only when the number of the chief competing enterprises has been reduced to “a couple of dozen or so”. “Here the influence of concentration on the formation of large industrial monopolies in a whole sphere of industry stands out with crystal clarity.”[8]

Half a century ago, when Marx was writing Capital, free competition appeared to the overwhelming majority of economists to be a “natural law”. Official science tried, by a conspiracy of silence, to kill the works of Marx, who by a theoretical and historical analysis of capitalism had proved that free competition gives rise to the concentration of production, which, in turn, at a certain stage of development, leads to monopoly. Today, monopoly has become a fact. Economists are writing mountains of books in which they describe the diverse manifestations of monopoly, and continue to declare in chorus that “Marxism is refuted”. But facts are stubborn things, as the English proverb says, and they have to be reckoned with, whether we like it or not. The facts show that differences between capitalist countries, e.g., in the matter of protection or free trade, only give rise to insignificant variations in the form of monopolies or in the moment of their appearance; and that the rise of monopolies, as the result of the concentration of production, is a general and fundamental law of the present stage of development of capitalism.

For Europe, the time when the new capitalism definitely superseded the old can be established with fair precision; it was the beginning of the twentieth century. In one of the latest compilations on the history of the “formation of monopolies”, we read:

“Isolated examples of capitalist monopoly could be cited from the period preceding 1860; in these could be discerned the embryo of the forms that are so common today; but all this undoubtedly represents the prehistory of the cartels. The real beginning of modern monopoly goes back, at the earliest, to the sixties. The first important period of development of monopoly commenced with the international industrial depression of the seventies and lasted until the beginning of the nineties.” “If we examine the question on a European scale, we will find that the development of free competition reached its apex in the sixties and seventies. It was then that Britain completed the construction of her old-style capitalist organisation. In Germany, this organisation had entered into a fierce struggle with handicraft and domestic industry, and had begun to create for itself its own forms of existence.”

“The great revolution commenced with the crash of 1873, or rather, the depression which followed it and which, with hardly discernible interruptions in the early eighties, and the unusually violent, but short-lived boom round about 1889, marks twenty-two years of European
The cartel movement entered its second epoch: instead of being a transitory phenomenon, the cartels have become one of the foundations of economic life. They are winning one field of industry after another, primarily, the raw materials industry. At the beginning of the nineties the cartel system had already acquired the shape of the coke syndicate on the model of which the coal syndicate was later formed – a cartel technique which has hardly been improved on. For the first time the great boom at the close of the nineteenth century and the crisis of 1900-03 occurred entirely – in the mining and iron industries at least – under the aegis of the cartels. And while at that time it appeared to be something novel, now the general public takes it for granted that large spheres of economic life have been, as a general rule, removed from the realm of free competition.”[6]

Thus, the principal stages in the history of monopolies are the following: (1) 1860-70, the highest stage, the apex of development of free competition; monopoly is in the barely discernible, embryonic stage. (2) After the crisis of 1873, a lengthy period of development of cartels; but they are still the exception. They are not yet durable. They are still a transitory phenomenon. (3) The boom at the end of the nineteenth century and the crisis of 1900-03. Cartels become one of the foundations of the whole of economic life. Capitalism has been transformed into imperialism.

Cartels come to an agreement on the terms of sale, dates of payment, etc. They divide the markets among themselves. They fix the quantity of goods to be produced. They fix prices. They divide the profits among the various enterprises, etc.

The number of cartels in Germany was estimated at about 250 in 1896 and at 385 in 1905, with about 12,000 firms participating.[7] But it is generally recognised that these figures are underestimations. From the statistics of German industry for 1907 we quoted above, it is evident that even these 12,000 very big enterprises probably consume more than half the steam and electric power used in the country. In the United States of America, the number of trusts in 1900 was estimated at 185 and in 1907, 250. American statistics divide all industrial enterprises into those belonging to individuals, to private firms or to corporations. The latter in 1904 comprised 23.6 percent, and in 1909, 25.9 percent, ie, more than one-fourth of the total industrial enterprises in the country. These employed in 1904, 70.6 percent, and in 1909, 75.6 percent, ie, more than three-fourths of the total wage-earners. Their output at these two dates was valued at $10,900,000,000 and $16,300,000,000, ie, 73.7 percent and 79.0 percent of the total, respectively.

At times cartels and trusts concentrate in their hands seven- or eight-tenths of the total output of a given branch of industry. The Rhine-Westphalian Coal Syndicate, at its foundation in 1893, concentrated 86.7 percent of the total coal output of the area, and in 1910 it already concentrated 95.4 percent.[8] The monopoly so created assures enormous profits, and leads to the formation of technical production units of formidable magnitude. The famous Standard Oil Company in the United States was founded in 1900: “It has an authorised capital of $150,000,000. It issued $100,000,000 common and $106,000,000 preferred stock. From 1900 to 1907 the following dividends were paid on the latter: 48, 48, 45, 44, 36, 40, 40, 40 percent in the respective years, ie, in all, $367,000,000. From 1882 to 1907, out of total net profits amounting to $889,000,000, $606,000,000 were distributed in dividends, and the rest went to reserve capital.[9] “In 1907 the various works of the United States Steel Corporation employed no less than 210,180 people. The largest enterprise in the German mining industry, Gelsenkirchner Bergwerksgesellschaft, in 1908 had a staff of 46,048 workers and office employees.”[10]

In 1902, the United States Steel Corporation already produced 9,000,000 tons of steel.[11] Its output constituted in 1901, 66.3 percent, and in 1908, 56.1 percent of the total output of steel in the United States.[12] The output of ore was 43.9 percent and 46.3 percent, respectively.

The report of the American Government Commission on Trusts states: “Their superiority over competitors is due to the magnitude of their enterprises and their
In German large-scale industry, e.g., in the chemical industry, which has developed so enormously during these last few decades, the promotion of technical improvement is organised in the same way. By 1908 the process of concentration of production had already given rise to two main “groups” which, in their way, were also in the nature of monopolies. At first these groups constituted “dual alliances” of two pairs of big factories, each having a capital of from twenty to twenty-one million marks—on the one hand, the former Meister Factory in Hochst and the Casella Factory in Frankfurt am Main; and on the other hand, the aniline and soda factory at Ludwigshafen and the former Bayer Factory at Elberfeld. Then, in 1905, one of these groups, and in 1908 the other group, each concluded an agreement with yet another big factory. The result was the formation of two “triple alliances”, each with a capital of from forty to fifty million marks. And these “alliances” have already begun to “approach” each other, to reach “an understanding” about prices, etc.

Competition becomes transformed into monopoly. The result is immense progress in the socialisation of production. In particular, the process of technical invention and improvement becomes socialised.

This is something quite different from the old free competition between manufacturers, scattered and out of touch with one another, and producing for an unknown market. Concentration has reached the point at which it is possible to make an approximate estimate of all sources of raw materials (for example, the iron ore deposits) of a country and even, as we shall see, of several countries, or of the whole world. Not only are such estimates made, but these sources are captured by gigantic monopolist associations. An approximate estimate of the capacity of markets is also made, and the associations “divide” them up amongst themselves by agreement. Skilled labour is monopolised, the best engineers are engaged; the means of transport are captured – railways in America, shipping companies in Europe and America. Capitalism in its imperialist stage leads directly to the most comprehensive socialisation of production; it, so to speak, drags the capitalists, against their will and consciousness, into some sort of a new social order, a transitional one from complete free competition to complete socialisation.

Production becomes social, but appropriation remains private. The social means of production remain the private property of a few. The general framework of formally recognised free competition remains, and the yoke of a few monopolists on the rest of the population becomes a hundred times heavier, more burdensome and intolerable.

The German economist, Kestner, has written a book especially devoted to “the struggle between the cartels and outsiders”, i.e., the capitalists outside the cartels. He entitled his work Compulsory Organisation, although, in order to present capitalism in its true light, he should, of course, have written about compulsory submission to monopolist associations. It is instructive to glance at least at the list of the methods the monopolist associations resort to in the present-day, the latest, the civilised struggle for “organisation”: (1) stopping supplies of raw materials ... “one of the most important methods of compelling adherence to the cartel”; (2) stopping the supply of labour by means of “alliances” (i.e., of agreements between the capitalists and the trade unions by which the latter permit their members to work only in cartelised enterprises); (3) stopping deliveries; (4) closing trade outlets; (5) agreements with the buyers, by which the latter undertake to trade only with the cartels; (6) systematic price cutting (to ruin “outside” firms, i.e., those which refuse to submit to the monopolists. Millions are spent in order to sell goods for a certain
time below their cost price; there were instances when the price of petrol was thus reduced from 40 to 22 marks, i.e., almost by half!; (7) stopping credits; (8) boycott.

Here we no longer have competition between small and large, between technically developed and backward enterprises. We see here the monopolists throttling those who do not submit to them, to their yoke, to their dictation. This is how this process is reflected in the mind of a bourgeois economist:

“Even in the purely economic sphere,” writes Kestner, “a certain change is taking place from commercial activity in the old sense of the word towards organisational-speculative activity. The greatest success no longer goes to the merchant whose technical and commercial experience enables him best of all to estimate the needs of the buyer, and who is able to discover and, so to speak, ‘awaken’ a latent demand; it goes to the speculative genius [?]! who knows how to estimate, or even only to sense in advance, the organisational development and the possibilities of certain connections between individual enterprises and the banks. . . .”

Translated into ordinary human language this means that the development of capitalism has arrived at a stage when, although commodity production still “reigns” and continues to be regarded as the basis of economic life, it has in reality been undermined and the bulk of the profits go to the “geniuses” of financial manipulation. At the basis of these manipulations and swindles lies socialised production; but the immense progress of mankind, which achieved this socialisation, goes to benefit . . . the speculators. We shall see later how “on these grounds” reactionary, petty-bourgeois critics of capitalist imperialism dream of going back to “free”, “peaceful”, and “honest” competition.

“The prolonged raising of prices which results from the formation of cartels,” says Kestner, “has hitherto been observed only in respect of the most important means of production, particularly coal, iron and potassium, but never in respect of manufactured goods. Similarly, the increase in profits resulting from this raising of prices has been limited only to the industries which produce means of production. To this observation we must add that the industries which process raw materials (and not semi-manufactures) not only secure advantages from the cartel formation in the shape of high profits, to the detriment of the finished goods industry, but have also secured a dominating position over the latter, which did not exist under free competition.”[14]

The words which I have italicised reveal the essence of the case which the bourgeois economists admit so reluctantly and so rarely, and which the present-day defenders of opportunism, led by Kautsky, so zealously try to evade and brush aside. Domination, and the violence that is associated with it, such are the relationships that are typical of the “latest phase of capitalist development”; this is what inevitably had to result, and has resulted, from the formation of all-powerful economic monopolies.

I shall give one more example of the methods employed by the cartels. Where it is possible to capture all or the chief sources of raw materials, the rise of cartels and formation of monopolies is particularly easy. It would be wrong, however, to assume that monopolies do not arise in other industries in which it is impossible to corner the sources of raw materials. The cement industry, for instance, can find its raw materials everywhere. Yet in Germany this industry too is strongly cartelised. The cement manufacturers have formed regional syndicates: South German, Rhine-Westplalian, etc. The prices fixed are monopoly prices: 230 to 280 marks a car-load, when the cost price is 180 marks! The enterprises pay a dividend of from 12 to 16 percent – and it must not be forgotten that the “geniuses” of modern speculation know how to pocket big profits besides what they draw in dividends. In order to prevent competition in such a profitable industry, the monopolists even resort to various stratagems: they spread false rumours about the bad situation in their industry; anonymous warnings are published in the newspapers, like the following: “Capitalists, don’t invest your capital in the cement industry!”; lastly, they buy up “outsiders” (those outside the syndicates) and pay them compensation of 60,000, 80,000 and even 150,000 marks.[17] Monopoly hews a path for itself everywhere without scruple as to the means, from paying a “modest” sum to buy off competitors, to the American device of employing dynamite against them.

The statement that cartels can abolish crises is a fable spread by bourgeois economists who at all costs desire to place capitalism in a favourable light. On the contrary, the monopoly created in certain branches of industry increases and intensifies the anarchy inherent in capitalist production as a whole. The disparity between the development of agriculture and that of industry,
which is characteristic of capitalism in general, is increased. The privileged position of the most highly cartelised, so-called heavy industry, especially coal and iron, causes “a still greater lack of co-ordination” in other branches of industry – as Jeidels, the author of one of the best works on “the relationship of the German big banks to industry”, admits, [18]

“The more developed an economic system is,” writes Liefmann, an unblushing apologist of capitalism, “the more it resorts to risky enterprises, or enterprises in other countries, to those which need a great deal of time to develop, or finally, to those which are only of local importance,” [19] The increased risk is connected in the long run with a prodigious increase of capital, which, as it were, overflows the brim, flows abroad, etc. At the same time the extremely rapid rate of technical progress gives rise to increasing elements of disparity between the various spheres of national economy, to anarchy and crises. Liefmann is obliged to admit that: “In all probability mankind will see further important technical revolutions in the near future which will also affect the organisation of the economic system... electricity and aviation... “As a general rule, in such periods of radical economic change, speculation develops on a large scale.”... [20]

Crises of every kind – economic crises most frequently, but not only these – in their turn increase very considerably the tendency towards concentration and towards monopoly. In this connection, the following reflections of Jeidels on the significance of the crisis of 1900, which, as we have already seen, marked the turning-point in the history of modern monopoly, are exceedingly instructive:

“Side by side with the gigantic plants in the basic industries, the crisis of 1900 still found many plants organised on lines that today would be considered obsolete, the ‘pure’ (non-combined) plants, which were brought into being at the height of the industrial boom. The fall in prices and the falling off in demand put these ‘pure’ enterprises in a precarious position, which did not affect the gigantic combined enterprises at all or only affected them for a very short time. As a consequence of this the crisis of 1900 resulted in a far greater concentration of industry than the crisis of 1873: the latter crisis also produced a sort of selection of the best-equipped enterprises, but owing to the level of technical development at that time, this selection could not place the firms which successfully emerged from the crisis in a position of monopoly. Such a durable monopoly exists to a high degree in the gigantic enterprises in the modern iron and steel and electrical industries owing to their very complicated technique, far-reaching organisation and magnitude of capital, and, to a lesser degree, in the engineering industry, certain branches of the metallurgical industry, transport, etc.” [21]

Monopoly! This is the last word in the “latest phase of capitalist development”. But we shall only have a very insufficient, incomplete, and poor notion of the real power and the significance of modern monopolies if we do not take into consideration the part played by the banks.
Notes

[1] Figures taken from Annalen des deutschen Reichs, 1911, Zahn. – Lenin


[7] Dr. Riesser, Die deutschen Grossbanken und ihre Konzentration im Zusammenhange mit der Entwicklung der Gesamtwirtschaft in Deutschland, 4 Aufl, 1912, S. 149; Robert Liefmann, Kartelle und Trusts und die Weiterbildung der volkswirtschaftlichen Organisation, 2 Aufl 1910, S. 25. – Lenin


[10] Ibid, S. 218. – Lenin


[14] Dr. P. Tafel, ibid, S. 49. – Lenin

[15] Riesser, op cit, third edition, p. 547 et seq. The newspapers (June 1916) report the formation of a new gigantic trust which combines the chemical industry of Germany. – Lenin

[16] Kestner, op cit, S. 254. – Lenin


[19] Liefmann, Beteiligungs- und Finanzierungsgesellschaften, S. 434. – Lenin
