

# **Trotsky and Trotskyism**

*Internationalist Communist Tendency  
2000*

This is a pamphlet of the Internationalist Communist Tendency, available at their website at <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2000-10-01/trotsky-and-trotskyism>. Slight fixes were made to typos and formatting.

## **Introduction**

### **Preface**

The disappearance of the Russian bloc at the end of the 1980s, culminating in the collapse of the Moscow regime and the disintegration of the USSR, marked a turning point in the history of the world. More specifically it marked a turning point in the history of capitalism in its imperialist phase.

The underlying global relationships which had crystallised in the years following the Second World War ceased to exist as one of the two competing imperialist blocs collapsed. In place of global competition between blocs led respectively by the USA and USSR, a far more complex series of relationships has developed. The old alliances have been replaced. The USA's former allies, particularly Germany and Japan, have struggled to assert their independence and forge new alignments against the backdrop of a world capitalism which stumbles from one crisis to another with each turn meaning more misery for the working class.

As the 1990s moved towards their close the ideological gurus of Western imperialism's boasts that the Russian collapse had marked the end of history was exposed as a total nonsense. Indeed it would be a laughable nonsense, except that its falsehood is borne out by the increasing impoverishment and barbarism imposed on workers across the globe. The certainties of late imperialism have collapsed with a great rapidity. The experience of the "tiger economies" of the western Pacific rim proved the impossibility of sustained capitalist growth in the current epoch as debt-strangled states attack wage levels and social provision in an attempt to shore up profitability.

In Europe a series of barbaric episodes have engulfed a whole area of the continent as the global powers seek to carve out and defend spheres of influence. Meanwhile imperialist competition, and its twin sibling, trade war continues apace. The struggles around renewing the GATT agreements and then the World Trade Organisation are reflections of the same process which in turn has led to the competing powers developing their own local trading arrangements: NAFTA dominated by the USA and the German dominated "Euroland". The experience of imperialism throughout the twentieth century shows that trade wars and the construction of trading blocs during economic crisis is merely one step along the road to full-scale military conflict the final and most complete expression of imperialism.

Marxism explains the necessity of proletarian revolution as the path to the liberation of humanity. A key task for Marxists is to understand the historical process and to interpret and explain the unfoldings of the class struggle. Nothing can be more harmful to communism than a political method which dresses itself in shreds of Marxist terminology only to mislead workers in general (not to mention its own followers) with confusing and confused interpretations on key questions of the day.

For more than half a century the Trotskyist movement has acted as “critical” apologist for, and supporter of, both Stalinism in the East and Social Democracy in the West. The mainstream of capitalism has ditched both those sets of structures as it seeks to grapple with unmanageable crisis. Today those Trotskyists who have not disappeared from sight present themselves as shifty salesmen, trying to peddle the cast-off, out-of-date ideological products left over from world capitalism’s post-war boom. A root and branch re-evaluation of Trotskyist theory is a necessary preparation for any confused elements wishing to move to consistent internationalist communist politics. This pamphlet serves as a tool for those wishing to achieve that clarification.

### Synopsis

The pamphlet comprises three main parts.

The first is an analysis of Trotsky and Trotskyism from 1917 until 1940. This, in turn, can be broken down into three main components.

The first of these deals with the positions taken by Trotsky and his followers during the 1920s as the proletariat in Russia lost political power. The Russian state, now acting on behalf of capital, continued to claim the mantle of Lenin and even maintained the existence of Soviets. However, by now, the “Soviets” of the Russian state were the antithesis of the revolutionary workers’ councils which had been the key tool for the proletariat in struggle.

The article serves to debunk a number of myths which today’s Trotskyists peddle about the positions of their predecessors during the 1920s. In particular the article deals with the oft-repeated lie that the Trotskyists were the only, or at least the most consistent, opposition to those in the party and state machine who were rehabilitating capitalism. This is shown in two ways.

Firstly, by tracking the factional manoeuvres which Trotsky undertook it is clear that, until forced out of power in the mid-1920s, his role was that of a faction leader within the Russian party and state, initially against Zinoviev but then with Zinoviev and Kamenev against Stalin. The second key point which helps to debunk the Trotskyist mythology is the highlighting of the role of the Italian Communist Left in opposing the degeneration of the Comintern and the loss of the heritage of the Russian revolution. We should also not forget the history of the non-Trotskyist Left Communist elements in Russia who took up the struggle against the degenerating Soviet state far earlier and more thoroughly than Trotsky. The struggle of those comrades – valiant strugglers for proletarian revolution in the most difficult and confusing circumstances – has been airbrushed from history by both Stalinists and Trotskyists alike. Trotsky’s own quote about the role of the Democratic Centralists, reproduced in the pamphlet, is part of the reply to the distorters of revolutionary history. We hope in future to build on the work of other communists to rectify this historical crime.

The second key element of the analysis deals with the feature which was identified earlier as Trotskyism’s core confusion – the nature of the degenerated Soviet state. From the 1920s until his murder by their agents in 1940 Trotsky maintained that the group around Stalin somehow defended “the gains of October”. For Trotsky the nationalised

industry of the Stalinist monstrosity was a historic gain for the working class. From the mid 1930s the confusion of the Trotskyist movement was complete as it combined this claim with the argument that the Stalinist bureaucracy could not be reformed and thus there had to be a "social revolution". (In fact during the 1990s many Stalinists succeeded in reinventing their role and holding on to power when the capital which had only recently been held by the state became more or less transformed into private capital.)

In summarising the roots of Trotsky's confusion the first document observes that:

Trotsky .... could not recognise that it [the Soviet bureaucracy] represented a new ruling class in the making who collectively disposed of the surplus product created by the working class.

The document goes on to the key clarification necessary to understand the class nature of Stalinist Russia.

The ineluctable need to serve in the process of the accumulation of capital, the iron necessity imposed by world capital, determined the objective role of the new strata, who were class functionaries by virtue of their relation to reified capital.

The third key element of Part One deals with Trotskyism during the final years of Trotsky's life and the political and organisational collapse of the Trotskyist movement during the Second World War.

The second part of the pamphlet contrasts Trotskyist opportunism and desperate search for a mass base at a time of counter-revolution with the resolute defence of proletarian autonomy and internationalist principles of the International Communist Left. Although we cannot go into a detailed history of the Communist Left here, this part is included in order to show that there were proletarian forces at that time, which not only defended many of the positions we defend today, but also made the critique of the degeneration of Trotskyism as it was happening.

Part Three goes on to analyse some of the more significant splits and developments of the myriad Trotskyist groups since 1945. This part underlines that the fundamentally social democratic basis of Trotskyism, despite all its revolutionary rhetoric, has completely prevented this movement being the basis for proletarian freedom. None of the Trotskyists groups has ever stopped to enquire why there have been so many splits based on minute tactical differences. As we try to show here, the real problem lies in the framework and methodology which Trotskyism adopted in the 1930s. This pamphlet isn't simply dedicated to an abstract ideological critique. To arrive at a classless, moneyless, stateless society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the development of all" the working class has to reject the counter-revolutionary contortions of Trotskyism.

*Communist Workers Organisation, October 2000.*

### **Trotsky and the origins of Trotskyism**

#### **The Origins of Trotskyism**

We begin by examining the basis of the myths manufactured by the Trotskyist movement and its supporters. Their glowing claims have *bona fide* roots in the prestige Trotsky gained as chair of the 1905 St. Petersburg Soviet, as leader of the Red Army, and as a martyr to Stalinism in 1940.

A valid criticism of Trotskyism has nothing in common with the Stalinist method of unearthing his Menshevik past prior to 1917, nor does it deny the contribution he made,

both in theory and practice to the Russian Revolution itself. Indeed Trotsky's analysis of the 1905 Revolution and the appearance of Soviets allowed him to foresee the possibilities for proletarian revolution with a clarity which was to converge with Lenin's understanding during 1917.

But Trotskyism as a political movement, despite any roots that coincide with the period of revolution, is essentially a product of a later period: the period of counter-revolution of which it became an integral part.

The movement inside Russia associated with Trotsky arose while the revolution in Europe was in the process of being defeated. White Terror raged in Hungary, the Fascists were in the act of taking power in Italy and the last independent efforts of a section of the German working class to overthrow the bourgeoisie had ended in defeat in March 1921. Though outbursts of working class resistance occurred after this (e.g. Germany 1923, Britain in 1926, China in 1927) they were isolated and fragmented. Inside Russia itself four years of isolation and civil war had led to the virtual elimination of the old revolutionary working class. The introduction of NEP, the Communist International's adoption of the tactic of the "united front" with Social Democracy as well as the series of political/military alliances with capitalist states (e.g. the Rapallo Treaty of 1922 with Germany) all showed that the failure of the European revolution was leading to counter-revolution in Russia just as night follows day<sup>1</sup>.

Trotsky might be excused for failing to notice this process of degeneration but he was, in fact, one of its principle architects. It was he who, having organised the victory of the Red Army in 1920, then concluded that some form of "militarisation of labour" could be extended to the entire working class in order to discipline it for the reconstruction of Russia. It was he who presented the case against the Workers' Opposition at the 10th Party Congress (March 1921) which resulted in the banning of all factions in the Party. It was also Trotsky who engineered the secret military alliance with German imperialism in 1922. Had the subsequent development of Trotsky's theory and practice entailed a break with this sorry past the fight for communism may have taken a different course. In reality, from 1923 on, Trotsky not only failed to recognise these errors, but even turned them into the very framework of his subsequent ideas, as an analysis of his "opposition" to Stalinism shows.

### **The Left Opposition and the United Opposition**

The so-called Left Opposition which arose late in 1923 was only indirectly connected with Trotsky, who did not at the time identify with it, though the Oppositionists welcomed Trotsky's New Course which had just appeared. Contrary to mythology, this Opposition was in no way connected with the idea of opposition to "socialism in one country" for the simple reason that it ended before the theory was announced. The Left Opposition arose during the "scissors crisis" of 1923, when rising industrial and falling agricultural prices caused economic dislocation. The Opposition contended that the bureaucratic leadership of the Party (at this time Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin and Bukharin) was incapable of solving the crisis – which it then promptly did! According to the Oppositionists, a little planning had to be added to the market economy of the NEP, allowing slow industrialisation through taxation of the peasantry. For Trotsky, this meant the need to,

... develop state industry as the keystone of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the basis of socialism. - *New Course*, p. 120

---

<sup>1</sup> Here we cannot go into the whole process of the decline of the Russian revolution but readers can refer to our next pamphlet *Russia 1917-24 Revolution and Counter-revolution*.

Naturally, since it did not control the apparatus, the Opposition called for "democracy" inside the Party but apart from industrialisation gave no indication as to what this democracy would serve as a vehicle for. The Opposition was unconcerned with foreign affairs and criticised none of the policies since 1921 (united fronts or rapprochements with capitalist states). Trotsky did write on these matters but, as an endorser of the united front and National Bolshevism in Germany, was regarded abroad as on the right of the Party. Meanwhile the "left wing" in the German Party (Maslow, Fischer and Thälmann) had Zinoviev and Stalin as their allies!

Trotsky's ventures into foreign policy such as the *Lessons of October* (1924), were concerned to show that just as they had failed to perceive it in 1917, Zinoviev and Kamenev had failed to seize the revolutionary opportunity in Germany in 1923. Slowly being squeezed from power, Trotsky seized on the failure of the united front government of Saxony and Thuringia to make a revolution as a stick to beat Zinoviev with. At this time Trotsky saw Zinoviev as the main enemy rather than Stalin. But Trotsky had approved of the political manoeuvre (the united front) which had set these governments up so his polemic lacked force. Earlier in the summer when there had been a genuine class movement in Germany, following the collapse of the currency, Trotsky had come out against any attempt to overthrow the government,

We do not regard the French invasion of the Ruhr as a revolutionary stimulus... it is not at all in our interests that the revolution should take place in a Europe drained of blood... [We are] vitally interested in the preservation of peace<sup>2</sup>.

What was the reason for this? At this time Trotsky was the chief mediator in the alliance between Germany and Russia against the Entente (France and Britain). Such a policy meant an alliance with the right wing in Germany, and with the forces of fascism and nationalism against the French occupation of the Ruhr. This was called "National Bolshevism", the brainchild of Radek, one of the Left Opposition leaders. It was his own gradual slide from power, plus the emergence of a pro-Entente regime in Germany, that was to convert Trotsky into a "revolutionary".

In parallel with the poverty, indeed virtual non-existence, of a political programme, the Left Opposition was devoid of working class support. This in itself is not a definitive factor; at certain moments real proletarian organisations can find themselves with little proletarian support but most of the Opposition were noted for anti-working class positions on the question of "labour discipline", and had denounced the mass strike wave which broke out in 1923 over the continued deterioration in living standards. The appeal of the Opposition was to Party bureaucrats and industrial managers, rather than to the working class:

The section of the rank and file of the Party whom the opposition at this time was least successful in rallying to its side was the industrial working class. Nothing in either its economics or its political platform was likely to catch the imagination of the worker<sup>3</sup>.

The bureaucracy made a few concessions to the Left Opposition's demands but it was condemned at the 13th Congress, and faded away early in 1924. Such an opposition merits the epithet "left" no more than it merits the term 'opposition' at all. But let us leave the final word to the Russian worker who said of the struggle between the bureaucracy and the opposition in 1923:

---

<sup>2</sup> Trotsky, quoted in E.H. Carr *The Interregnum* p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Carr op. cit. pp. 326-7.

The workers will ask me what your fundamental differences are; to speak frankly I do not know how to answer<sup>4</sup>.

This single proletarian sentence sums up the nature of the Left Opposition.

After this, manoeuvrings in the Party took on (in light of later events) some weird contours. Stalin allied with Zinoviev against Trotsky in 1923, and later when Stalin and Bukharin moved against Zinoviev, Trotsky entered into a tacit alliance with Stalin, since Zinoviev was still the main enemy. Later, in January 1925, when the Politburo removed Trotsky from his post as Commissar for War, Stalin repaid Trotsky's earlier favour by blocking Zinoviev's demand to have Trotsky expelled from the Party altogether. This was at a time when Stalin had already advanced the theory of "socialism in one country". So much for Trotsky's struggle against it. By 1925 this famous struggle had not even begun since Trotsky's main enemy up to then had not been Stalin but Zinoviev, the leader of the bureaucratic degeneration.

Gradually, as it became clear that the Stalin-Bukharin group was coming out on top in the power struggle, Zinoviev and Kamenev moved to form the Leningrad Opposition. Trotsky at first remained aloof but soon allied himself with the Zinoviev group. In July 1926 he joined Kamenev, Zinoviev and Krupskaya to sign the "declaration of the thirteen" (Central Committee members). This publicly signalled the formation of the United Opposition which functioned until December 1927. The United Opposition took up the call for planning and industrialisation, and for a struggle against the "Nepmen and kulaks". They also called for the restoration of the Party democracy they had all been instrumental in suppressing since the 10th Congress in 1921. If the claim that the United Opposition expressed the real interests of the working class is legitimate then so too was the policy adopted by Stalin from 1929 to 1934, which took up most of the positions of the Opposition. This conclusion is not simply deduced from hindsight. The bulk of the Oppositionists who had not already done so capitulated willingly to Stalin after 1929, and even Preobrazhensky announced that the continuing opposition of Trotsky was not justified<sup>5</sup>.

Once again the Opposition had failed to gain a significant working class following. Once again its main strength lay in the bureaucracy which it criticised but whose rule it did not question. The final destructive blow belonged to Trotsky himself. Stalin's "left turn" brought him into conflict with Bukharin's Right and it was the latter who now joined the chorus for inner party democracy, offering alliances to Trotsky on this basis in 1928. Trotsky, who had often "critically supported" the centrist Stalin against the Right of Bukharin, now shocked his supporters by accepting this opportunist offer. It is impossible to gauge the effect of this on the Opposition since Trotsky was exiled by Stalin in January 1929 and an era of myth-building began in earnest.

### **Socialism in One Country**

It will be conceded by many of his supporters that Trotsky's opposition was a loyal one, internal to the bureaucracy from which he sprang, but that his real saving grace lies in his opposition to "socialism in one country" (first coherently advanced by Stalin in December 1924) and the supposed abandoning of internationalism which such a theory implied. No other single issue has spawned so many myths and mystifications as this one.

Before 1917 the possibility of a single nation state moving toward socialism on its own had never before been posed by history itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, Marx's own comments on this question are vague. The predominant view of the Second International, founded in 1889, was that within each bourgeois nation state there would be a

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in the Trotskyite academic journal *Critique* 4 p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> R.V. Daniels *The Conscience of the Revolution* pp. 374-5.

peaceful transition to socialism, and that each new socialist state would federate with the others into a socialist commonwealth. Though the left wing of the International rejected the idea of a peaceful transition to socialism they never rejected the idea that, in the advanced countries at least, such a transition could be undertaken within national boundaries. In these states the material prerequisites for such a transformation were believed to exist. Lenin, at the height of the imperialist war wrote:

[The United States of Europe slogan] may be interpreted to mean that the victory of socialism in one country is impossible... Uneven political and economic development is an absolute law of capitalism, hence the victory of socialism is possible, first in several, or even one capitalist country taken singly. The proletariat of that country, having expropriated the capitalists and organised its own socialist production, would stand up against the rest of the world<sup>6</sup>.

The main area of controversy was Russia itself, and here the discussion was rooted in the specific question of Russian backwardness. Lenin, and most of the Bolsheviks, felt until very late in the day that the bourgeois revolution was still on the agenda in Russia, even if it had to be brought to its conclusion by the proletariat<sup>7</sup>.

Trotsky, with his theory of "permanent revolution" on the other hand, claimed that if the Russian revolution occurred at the same time as one in Western Europe, this backwardness would be overcome, and the revolution could proceed to its socialist phases. Lenin independently came to similar conclusions in the *April Theses* of 1917.

From then on the Bolsheviks had few reservations; they were out to build socialism in Russia ("Let us proceed to build the socialist order" - Lenin, November 7th, 1917), and to spread the world revolution. It was not, of course, assumed that a socialist state would turn its back on the world revolution. In fact, building socialism at home and spreading revolution abroad were considered synonymous. When it became clear that NEP Russia was in fact isolated the reservations expressed by some of the Party leaders were not that it would be impossible to build socialism in one country. What they felt was that a socialist state would probably not survive in a hostile capitalist world due to military attack by the capitalists. Intervention in the Civil War had been the supreme example of this, and in the 1920s CPSU leaders, first amongst them Trotsky, remained haunted by fears of a united imperialist front that would invade Russia in order to effect a bourgeois restoration. Once the Soviet state had shown its ability to survive in the capitalist world (mainly by a slow process of capitulation to it), the theory of a possible isolated socialist regime in Russia emerged as Stalin's "socialism in one country".

Stalin stood on the right of the Party, along with Bukharin and others who saw the NEP as a long term concession to the peasantry. At this point he admitted the bourgeois nature of the Russian economy. In *Foundations of Leninism* of 1924 he repudiated the idea that socialism could be built in Russia, though his Report on the Political Activity of the Central Committee to the 14th Congress of the CPSU was very similar to Trotsky's view:

One can however say that our regime is neither capitalist nor socialist. It represents a transition from capitalism to socialism... If one takes into account the bureaucratic survivals which we have in the management of our enterprises, one cannot yet say that we've reached socialism. This is true but it

<sup>6</sup> Lenin, quoted in R.V. Daniels *A Documentary History of Bolshevism*.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller explanation of the "democratic revolution" position of Lenin see *Revolutionary Perspectives* 20, "The Democratic Revolution - A Programme for the Past" and *Revolutionary Perspectives* 21 "Lenin's Political Theory" (review).

doesn't contradict the fact that state industry is a type of socialist production.

Stalin thus felt that as long as the *smytchka* (alliance between workers and peasants) could be maintained, socialism could be built in Russia. At this time Trotsky was unconcerned with Stalin's innovations. Indeed, his own writings of the period explicitly accept the possibility of socialism in one country, even a backward one:

It is clear that under the conditions of a capitalist rebirth in Europe and the whole world, possibly enduring for many years, socialism in a backward country would find itself eye to eye with colossal dangers<sup>8</sup>.

In fact it was the Leningrad Opposition of Zinoviev and Kamenev which emerged as the first opponent of socialism in one country at the 14th Party Congress. As we have seen, Trotsky, who saw Stalin as the lesser danger at this point, remained silent. His later alliance with the Leningrad Opposition in the United Opposition was a result of the conversion of Zinoviev and Kamenev to the need for industrialisation in Russia as the best path to socialism there.

Thus in the whole debate over "socialism in one country" there were only differences of emphasis. Whilst Stalin believed with Bukharin that under NEP Russia was slowly "riding to socialism on a peasants nag", Trotsky stressed the need for a more dynamic industrialisation, not that the whole thing was impossible in isolation. As he put it in *Toward Socialism or Capitalism*,

Unless the productive forces grow, there can be no question of socialism<sup>9</sup>.

Thus Trotsky's attack on "socialism in one country" in 1926 was far from the stout defence of internationalism that his *post hoc* rationalisation later maintained. In international terms all Trotsky called for was a diversification of foreign trade relations in order to take advantage of the world market, in contrast to Stalin's belief in autarky and accumulation in isolation. In a letter from exile to the remnants of the Russian Opposition Trotsky recommended the use of the growth of unemployment, especially in Britain and Germany, to acquire credits for agricultural equipment, machinery etc. in exchange for the produce of collectivised labour. Stalin continued to ignore foreign trade as a means to initiate industrialisation, especially after the terms of trade turned sharply against the USSR after 1929<sup>10</sup>.

Trotsky, on the other hand, urged Moscow to enhance its trading position by appealing to the millions of unemployed workers of the West to raise a clamour for trade with Russia, to assist it with export credits and so, at the same time to help alleviate unemployment. Trotsky's "internationalism" then was not entirely abstract. As a call for capitalist stabilisation it would have done credit to any free-trader of the nineteenth century! Indeed Trotsky had forged his United Opposition with Zinoviev only through tacit agreement to jettison his idea of "permanent revolution" with its connotation of support for world revolution<sup>11</sup>.

In fact it was the Stalin faction which, before 1934, put out more ritual calls for world revolution – especially after the "left turn" of Stalin's so-called "Third Period" robbed the Opposition of its Platform. As one of Trotsky's supporters, Victor Serge, put it:

<sup>8</sup> Trotsky *Challenge of the Left Opposition* p. 295.

<sup>9</sup> *Challenge of the Left Opposition* p. 295.

<sup>10</sup> The value of Soviet exports shrank to one third and that of imports to a quarter between 1930 and 1935. For further details see "Theories of State Capitalism" in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 19.

<sup>11</sup> This concept has not been dealt with in detail here since, for all the noise made about it by Trotskyists, it actually plays little part in his political analysis.

From 1928-29 onwards the Politburo turned to its own use the fundamental ideas of the newly-expelled opposition (excepting, of course, working class democracy) and implemented them with ruthless violence. We had proposed a tax on the rich peasants – they were actually liquidated! We had proposed limitations and reforms of the NEP – it was actually abolished! We had proposed industrialisation – it was done on a colossal scale which we “super-industrialisers” as we were dubbed, had never dreamed of... - *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 252

By becoming a super-industrialiser himself Stalin did more than rob the Opposition of its programme, he destroyed the whole basis of their critique since it was assumed by all the Communist Party oppositions that the bureaucracy could never carry out their demands. As they all had their roots in that same bureaucracy they could never challenge its social basis, even though – as we shall see – Trotsky, and others, glimpsed that it was a new class in the making.

## The Nature of the USSR

### The Economy

Once in exile in Turkey Trotsky might have begun an examination of his experiences and, like the hounded Left of the Italian Communist Party, could have tried to draw up a balance sheet (*bilan*) of the process which had seen revolutionaries driven into exile or imprisoned by fascism. But Trotsky saw no reason to enquire more deeply into the process behind the degeneration of proletarian power in Russia. Essentially this was because he himself was so bound up with that process. Even those who supported Stalin in the 1920s saw Trotsky as “a man of the State, not of the Party” whilst his own role in abolishing factions in the CPSU and in advocating labour discipline hardly made him the unsullied champion of proletarian democracy and workers’ control that his present day followers assume. Had Trotsky been able to detach himself from this past he may have been able to provide the critique of social relations in Russia which was necessary in order to furnish the basis of a revolutionary understanding of the nature of Russia. His failure to do so ultimately led to him abandoning Marxist method.

The problem of what had happened in Russia was in any terms enormous. As already noted, Marxist theory could not, and did not provide in advance for a situation in which “a proletarian bastion” (Lenin) was isolated for any length of time in a hostile capitalist world. After 4 years of isolation Russia had lost 8 millions of her people, including the cream of the revolutionary proletariat. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Russian communists saw defeat only in terms of a military victory by the capitalist powers. By 1921 such a threat had passed but so too had the main thrust of the revolutionary upsurge of the European and world proletariat. What was to happen to an isolated proletarian bastion in such circumstances? As we have seen, it was in this context that all factions of the CPSU agreed on the need to build socialism in Russia alone. Thus, in 1926 Trotsky praised the development of state industry after 5 years of GOSPLAN as the “marvellous historic music of growing socialism” and anticipated what the Stalinist planners would intone to the erection of “real socialism”- the frenzied exploitation of the proletariat in the 1930s. The common view they shared was the fiction that state planning and state ownership of the means of production are the essential bases of socialism. This was despite the fact that Lenin and Bukharin had already identified the growth of state capitalism as one of the main features of capitalism in its imperialist epoch. In *Imperialism and World Economy* (1915) Bukharin commented on the changing nature of capitalism as follows:

The capitalist mode of production is based on the monopoly of the means of production in the hands of the capitalists within the general framework of commodity exchange. There is no difference in principle whether the state power is a direct monopoly or whether the monopoly is privately organised. In either case there remains commodity economy (in the first place the world market) and, what is more important, the class relations between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. - op. cit., p. 157.

In writing this Bukharin was only echoing Engels' observations of the 1880s,

... Just as at first the capitalist mode of production displaced the workers, so now it displaces the capitalists, relegating them ... to the superfluous population even if not in the first instance to the industrial reserve army ... Neither the conversion into joint stock companies nor into state property deprives the productive forces of their character as capital ... The modern state, whatever its form, is then the state of the capitalists, the ideal collective body of all the capitalists. The more productive forces it takes over as its property, the more it becomes the real collective body of the capitalists, the more citizens it exploits. The workers remain wage-earners, proletarians. The capitalist relationship isn't abolished; it is rather pushed to the extreme... - *Anti-Dühring*, pp. 329-330.

And this capital relationship, which is so basic to the Marxist definition of capitalism, is that between capital and wage labour. Trotsky could talk of the bureaucracy as a "parasitic caste" but he could not recognise that it represented a new ruling class in the making who collectively disposed of the surplus product created by the working class. For him Russia was basically socialist because:

The nationalisation of the land, the means of industrial production, transport and exchange, together with the monopoly of foreign trade, constitute the basis of the Soviet social structure. Through these relations, established by a proletarian state revolution, the nature of the Soviet Union as a proletarian state is for us basically defined. - *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 235.

Trotsky's attempt to square the circle of a workers' state that was run by a "parasitic caste" resulted in the theory of the degenerated workers' state. Lauded by Deutscher as "a creative restatement of classical Marxist views", it is really a complete rupture with Marxism as a critique of political economy. The starting point of this concept is the external characteristics of the social structure of classical capitalism which had frozen in the mind of Trotsky – individual ownership of the means of production, the juridical inalienability of private property, the right of inheritance, etc. This is in keeping with bourgeois economists – from Ricardo down to Mandel – who assume that the relations of distribution can be transformed without questioning the relations of production. But for a Marxist it is the relations of production which determine the nature of the mode of production and of circulation; they cannot be dissociated from each other. Capitalist distribution cannot be destroyed without destroying the basis of that distribution: the relations of production. Thus production determines the essence of distribution and the ideological forms that justify it.

For Trotsky, obsessed with state planning, the extension of nationalisations, etc., this primary consideration was turned on its head to conjure up the following absurdity: "the coexistence of a socialist mode of production with a bourgeois mode of distribution". This is simply nonsense from a Marxist standpoint which holds that:

The relations and modes of distribution thus appear merely as the obverse of the relations of production. The structure of distribution is completely determined by the structure of production. - Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 95.

Having ignored this fundamental tenet of Marxist political economy, Trotsky diverged even further with his argument that the Stalinist superstructure was in contradiction to the proletarian infrastructure of the economy. He maintained that the bureaucracy was preventing the transition to socialism in order to maintain its privileges. The fact that it was precisely this “proto-capitalist bureaucracy” which was introducing the nationalisation and industrialisation measures which Trotsky imagined gave Russia its socialist basis was never explained. Such absurd conclusions only illustrate the contradictory economic premises on which the whole so-called theory of the “degenerate workers’ state” was erected.

But Trotsky’s desperate attempt to find something to defend in the wreckage of Stalin’s Russia was not only revising Marxist method to cover his past, he was prevented from seeing that the victory of the working class did not simply mean the “expropriation of the bourgeoisie” as he put it in his *Transitional Programme*. Without the abolition of wage labour there can be no talk of socialism. Capital is not merely, in itself, a mass of machines or means of production, the nature of which miraculously changes by virtue of it being pronounced the “property of the masses” after the political abolition of an avaricious or “parasitic” elite of state officials. Capital is a specific historical and social relationship based on the deprivation and separation of labour from all property in the means of production, so making labour power a commodity to be sold in exchange for a wage.

This social relationship leads to antagonism between producers and *de facto* proprietors (irrespective of Soviet legal forms), between those who control the means of production, distribution and the state (bourgeoisie) and those who have no alternative but to work for a wage (proletariat), and bestows on the totality of society’s productive forces the character of capital.

The road to communism is the struggle against the totality of capital for the abolition of its state, private property, its law of value, merchandise and wage labour.

### **The Political Revolution**

So what did Trotsky give us instead as the road to communism in Russia? He preached a “political not social revolution”, a revolution that would overthrow the existing Stalinist system of government but which would leave existing property relations untouched. Indeed, the defence of the “proletarian basis of the state” was the cardinal point of Trotsky’s political credo until his death and, as we will see repeatedly, was at the root of all his political errors.

It is fundamental to Marxism that the state is not society though the state has its basis in society. Every society with a state must be a class society where the state acts in the interest of the ruling class to safeguard its exploitation of the dominated class. When trying to establish the class nature of any society Marxists therefore don’t begin by examining the juridical or legal forms of the State in order to reach the conclusion that they constitute “the proletarian basis of the state.” Thus, though scores of Trotsky’s texts testify to the changing class composition of the CPSU (part of the process which saw all the Oppositions annihilated), and despite recognising the “parasitic” nature of the bureaucracy would require a “political revolution” he still maintained that a regime which

... preserves expropriated and nationalised property against imperialism – that, independent of political forms is the dictatorship of the proletariat. - *In Defence of Marxism*.

But if there already existed a “dictatorship of the proletariat” what need was there for “a political revolution” or for an injection of “soviet democracy”. The contradiction only arises because Trotsky did not deduce the nature of the Russian state from its relations of production. By ceasing to define social classes in terms of their antagonistic practices in the productive process Trotsky robbed himself of the only possibility of a clear analysis of the real nature of the USSR.

The autarky of the era of the Five Year Plans in the 1930s was at bottom a form of competition which necessitated a ferocious intensification of exploitation. More bitter competition on the international level meant the use of Taylorism and the new techniques of management of alienated labour to increase its productivity to the upmost. The Party's administrative control of the relations of production in the USSR had generated a bureaucracy which, with its establishment of political independence, acquired the attributes of a motor force in the development of the national capital, essentially the same as that of the classic private bourgeoisie. To myopically treat the state-bureaucratic echelons as merely a privileged “caste”, as a “parasitic outgrowth”, was to fundamentally miss its basic class function. The ineluctable need to serve in the process of the accumulation of capital, the iron necessity imposed by world capital, determined the objective role of the new strata, who were class functionaries by virtue of their relation to reified capital and not as a result of their greed (Trotsky said they consumed too much of the social product), authoritarian arrogance or other socio-psychological characteristics. The contradiction between the social nature of production and the alienation of the social product of that labour by an exploiting class underlines the domination of the law of value in the USSR's economy<sup>12</sup>.

It also undermines Trotsky's self-contradictory theory of a “degenerated workers state”. At the time of its conception, and even more so after World War Two, manifestations of the capitalist nature of Soviet society have been obvious – the existence of wage labour, the production of merchandise for exchange, the domination of the planners by the ineluctable law of value. The theorisation of the existence of a workers' state in the USSR, however “deformed” it might be, was to become a central element in the Trotskyist platform which, as we shall see below, was to lead inevitably to their abandonment of revolutionary defeatism and participation in the Second World War in defence of both Soviet and Western imperialism.

### **The Transitional Programme and the Fourth International**

Trotsky's conception of Russia as a workers' state which, after a purely political revolution, could become socialist, reveals not only that he had understood nothing about the nature of capitalism, but that he also had no conception of socialism in the Marxist sense. This became even more clear in 1938 when he published the programme of his Fourth International, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* or, as it is more commonly known, the *Transitional Programme*. In dealing with this programme we must first start with a question of method. Present-day Trotskyists claim, usually on the basis of a cursory reading of Deutscher, that Trotsky was Lenin's political heir<sup>13</sup>.

Unlike Lenin however, Trotsky tended to analyse historical situations and capitalism in terms of categories which he never questioned. When fresh events contradicted his analysis, instead of mercilessly re-examining them on the basis of Marxist principles and revising the categories accordingly, he distorted them to fit the conclusions he had already decided on. We have already seen this method at work in regard to his analysis of

---

<sup>12</sup> See *Revolutionary Perspectives* 19 loc. cit. where there is an extended analysis devoted to Trotsky's view on Russia.

<sup>13</sup> See *Revolutionary Perspectives* 21 for a brief explanation of this in “Lenin's Political Thought”.

the Russian economy. It must be remembered that he argued initially that Russia was a workers' state because the proletariat held power, and that only when this argument became too embarrassing to maintain was the economic one about socialist property relations concocted.

After the Second World War, when Russian imperialism brought the countries of Eastern Europe under its domination, Trotsky's epigones in the Fourth International (Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel, Ted Grant, James Cannon etc.), in the best tradition of their mentor, decided that these countries must also be workers' states, despite the fact that the working class had never held power there and their regimes were the pure creation of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Hence they concluded that the "reactionary proto-capitalist bureaucracy" was also progressive and able to create workers' states! Thus, in order to maintain the fiction of Russia as a workers' state, a consistent travesty of the facts and of Marxism was perpetrated. The 'permanent revolution', which held that the workers and peasants in the backward countries must carry out the tasks of the national bourgeoisie because the latter were too feeble, was similarly defended, as was the theory of permanent crisis. These theories formed the pillars of Trotsky's analytical framework, and were simply assumed to be valid. Instead of letting these theories collapse under the weight of their own contradictions, Trotsky methodically shored them up, but at the expense of abandoning the political terrain of the working class.

What Trotsky gave us instead were the assertions of "permanent crisis" and "permanent revolution" which became facile slogans that failed to conceal his inability to examine the fundamental social relations of modern capitalism and the political tasks of the new period. Thus in his *Transitional Programme* the correct recognition that capitalism's historic mission has been completed is completely obscured by the economic illiteracy and political immediacy of its perspectives which, politically speaking, take us back to the programme of social democracy. The most glaring example of this illiteracy is in the economic field. Trotsky tells us that capitalism is ripe for revolution because "Mankind's productive forces stagnate" (*Transitional Programme*, p. 11, WRP pamphlet). This might have been true for the 1930s but it can be dispelled today by a single statistic. Since it was written the Gross National Product of the United States (not to mention Western capitalism as a whole) has increased several times over. The empirical evidence alone is enough to destroy the validity of that statement but more seriously is the failure of his method to comprehend the real movement of capital. Capitalism, as Marx wrote on many occasions:

cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production. -  
*Communist Manifesto*.

The epoch of imperialism, the era of decline of capitalism doesn't change this essential element<sup>14</sup>.

Nor does it end the capitalist cycle of accumulation which is periodically punctuated by "commercial crises". The difference in the imperialist epoch is that the bourgeois resolution of those crises is no longer a simple matter of a few bankruptcies which allow the survivors to renew the cycle. This renewal now only comes via the massive destruction of capital on a global basis that is the product of an imperialist war. Thus the nineteenth century cycle has in our epoch become one of boom-slump-war-reconstruction-boom etc. It is not "stagnation of the productive forces" which explains for Marxists the present decay of the system but the fact that although it can still increase production, the costs of this (perpetual famine in the Southern hemisphere, periodic war throughout the planet, etc.) no longer serve the interests of humanity in any sense. The fetters of the

---

<sup>14</sup> A forthcoming pamphlet on the economics of capitalist decadence will explain the concept more fully.

bourgeoisie's relations of production and its law of value have to be broken and destroyed before the productive forces can be set to work for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

The failure to spell out the nature of capitalism in the era of imperialism and state capitalism is in fact what wipes out the *Transitional Programme* as the basis of the struggle for socialism. By simply defining capitalism as a system in its death agony, not as a system based on the law of value which exists only through the extraction of surplus value from wage labour, Trotsky's *Transitional Programme* only gave an immediate picture of a single phase of the capitalist cycle – its slump. But having decided in 1938 that capitalism was in its "death agony", Trotsky had to find some explanation for the failure of the proletariat to destroy it and provide a prescription to overcome this failure. It is here that Trotsky returned to social democracy.

### **The Transitional Programme and the Party**

Having failed to grasp the inner dynamic of capitalism the *Transitional Programme* has a purely voluntarist solution to the problems of proletarian organisation. Correctly, it states that:

The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be achieved under capitalism. - loc. cit.

In 1938 this was still true but why then, if the objective conditions were present did the proletariat still submit to the capitalist yoke? Trotsky bluntly answered that this was because:

The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.

In the sense that it lacked communist leadership this was true, but Trotsky did not mean this. In the past quarter of a century the working class had seen their organisations go over to the political support of the bourgeoisie. First the Second International parties, with their mass organisations, the trade unions, had come out in support of their own governments and had helped the war effort of every imperialism. After the First World War these parties divided themselves from the workers' cause by rivers of blood when they assisted or even, as in Germany, organised the massacre of class conscious proletarians. The most notable opponent of the imperialist order in 1914 was the Bolshevik Party which, theoretically armed with Lenin's slogan of "Turn the imperialist war into a civil war", successfully led the Russian proletariat's seizure of state power. When in 1919 it founded the Communist International it was the vanguard of the entire world proletariat. But, as we explained earlier, a process of decline set in, a process which was much more insidious than the overnight betrayals of social democracy. The Communist International's adoption of the united front in 1922 was obviously a critical moment in its decline, as was its expulsion of any opposition by 1926 and its disastrous policy in China in 1927. By 1938 even Trotsky could see that:

the passing over of the Comintern to the side of bourgeoisie had occurred.  
And yet by that curious twist of logic which has remained the hallmark of Trotskyism he still saw the parties of the Second and Third Internationals as the proletariat's **own** [our emphasis] conservative bureaucratic machines.

In other words, despite a history of betrayal and massacre, these organisations could be won for revolution if only their leaderships could be changed. This was entirely consistent with his support for united fronts and for entryism into social democracy in 1935 in order

to gain its leadership. Orthodox Trotskyism has still failed to recognise the ideological defeat which accompanied the physical defeat of the revolutionary organisations. Today these social democratic bodies (Socialist and Labour Parties and their trade unions), though they often enlist masses of workers and win electoral support of millions, are in fact nothing but agents of the bourgeoisie and their class system. Their reason for existence is to defend capitalism by channelling the class struggle onto the safe grounds of elections or economic strikes isolated in one industry or factory.

Thus the extremely facile nature of Trotsky's analysis of the political weakness of the proletariat in the Thirties prevented him from seeing the fact that the crisis of proletarian leadership arose because the proletariat had no political party which defended its class independence and revolutionary aspirations. And failing to understand this, as well as failing to understand the nature of capitalist relations in the imperialist epoch, meant that the Fourth International itself was from its foundation not only ill-equipped to be a class party, but was actually a stumbling block to its formation since it too operated on the terrain of the bourgeoisie. What was needed was a pitiless struggle against the social conservation of the old Socialist and Communist Parties. Today Trotskyism still talks only of "betrayals" by these unions and parties and therefore is incapable of exposing the real role they play inside the working class. As the International Communist Left (the Italian Fraction) argued at the time, the Fourth International had no claim to be the party of the proletariat, since it had not carried out the necessary work of political clarification following the defeat of the revolutionary wave of the 1920s. Such a clarification, which Trotsky studiously avoided, was the essential step to the revival of the revolutionary party of the proletariat and the reconstitution of a communist programme which took account of the lessons learned. There could be no class party in 1938 because there was no independent class movement. Part of the cause was the fact that the proletariat as a whole still believed in the proletarian nature of "its" organisations. Trotsky thought the mere declaration of the Fourth International would solve the problem by a simple effort of will.

But the non-existence of the class party is not only the result of a lack of will. Whilst the indispensable necessity of the party in its role as centraliser, leader and guide of the class in action cannot be questioned, the founding of the Fourth International took place without the followers of Trotsky having carried out a serious examination of the experience of revolution and counter-revolution.

The party cannot simply create itself from nothing, regardless of time or place. The absence of a class party is not simply the result of a "crisis of the revolutionary leadership" even if such a deficiency was historically an objective factor in the reversal of the fortunes of the proletariat, as in Germany in 1918-1919. According to Trotsky's conception of the party, instead of being a necessary part of the class struggle, it assumes the idealist form of a *deus ex machina* which, by the determination of its members, can and must surmount the historic impasses of humanity<sup>15</sup>.

This becomes even more apparent when we analyse the 'transitional demands' of the programme.

### **The Transitional Programme demands**

In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx maintained that the transition from capitalism to socialism presupposed a dictatorship of the proletariat which would systematically carry out all the measures necessary to destroy capital. "*The Transitional Programme, death agony of capitalism, and the duties of the fourth international – The mobilisation of the masses around the demands of transition as a preparation for the seizure of power*",

---

<sup>15</sup> See "Class Consciousness in the Marxist Perspective" in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 21.

as the title suggests, has little to do with the Marxist conception of transition.

For Trotsky it was obvious that, since capitalism was in its “death agony” the “transitional epoch” was already in existence, even though there had been no revolution in the Thirties. For Marx the transition to socialism does not begin until the proletariat has smashed the bourgeois state (this was, after all, the lesson of the Paris Commune in 1871). Just as he was unable to understand the fundamental framework for socialism in the USSR, Trotsky now revealed that he was moving away from Marxist conceptions of socialism in general. Indeed, Trotsky takes us back to the reformism of the Second International by putting forward minimum demands, with the simple difference that he now believed that even minimum demands could not be met within decaying capitalism.

The present epoch is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried out indissolubly with the actual tasks of revolution.

In short, the old minimum programme of social democracy is now the same as the maximum programme since, for Trotskyists...

not even the most elementary demands can be met without revolutionary expropriation of the capitalist class<sup>16</sup>.

This arrant nonsense can be dispelled by even the most cursory glance at the demands of the *Transitional Programme*.

What Trotsky in fact gives us is a grand plan to reform capitalism by demanding such things as nationalisation of the banks, workers’ control of industry, public works and a sliding scale of wages in advance of the seizure of power by the proletariat. Precisely such “radical” demands were already being advanced by Trotsky’s contemporary, Keynes, as an explicit plan to save capitalism and, in fact, all these measures were adopted by bourgeois states in order to preserve the capitalist order. Nationalisation of the banks in Eastern Europe, workers’ control in Yugoslavia – both of course hailed by modern Trotskyists as “destroying capitalism”; the sliding scale of wages – like the *scala mobile* in Italy or indexing elsewhere; and public works – in virtually every corner of the advanced capitalist world are steps to shore up capital not destroy it.

Thus Trotsky’s failure to understand the nature of the state’s role in Russia had its general corollary in the *Transitional Programme*. Failing to see the state as collective capitalist meant that Trotsky still equated nationalisation with socialisation, still saw the prime task of socialism not as the abolition of wage labour, but as the “expropriation of the bourgeoisie.” In this the *Transitional Programme* is not even an advance on the Erfurt Programme of 1890 since it doesn’t even possess a “maximum” revolutionary part. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” is only mentioned once, and that only incidentally, and there is no statement at all about the nature of socialism. This is what makes the following statement of the purpose of the *Transitional Programme* particularly absurd,

It is necessary to aid the masses in the process of their daily revolutionary struggle to find the bridge between their present demands and the programme of the socialist revolution.

But Trotsky had already indicated that the “present demands” were potentially revolutionary. What was lacking was a party fighting with the masses for the “programme of the socialist revolution.” Trotsky’s abysmal failure was that he hadn’t even begun to elaborate this programme for the present epoch of capitalism.

<sup>16</sup> C. Slaughter in the introduction to the WRP edition of the *Transitional Programme*, p. 10.

Revolutionaries recognise the significance of demands but these are the product of a real, ongoing struggle – not an abstract schema thought up in advance, and which, like the demands of the *Transitional Programme*, are easily recuperable by capitalism. In the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution Marx made it quite clear that each demand formulated by the proletariat must be a direct response to the existing situation of the class struggle.

In the beginning of the movement, the workers will naturally not be able to propose any direct communist measures, however... if the petty bourgeoisie propose to buy out the railroads and factories... the workers must demand that they simply be confiscated by the state without compensation. If the demands propose proportional taxes, they must demand progressive taxes... the rates of which are so steep that capital must soon go to smash as a result; if the Democrats demand the regulation of the State debt, the workers must demand its repudiation. - *Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League*

This dialectical conception is totally divorced from the idea which Trotsky picked up from the lumber-room of the degenerating CI (notably its Third Congress) where it was stated that there were a precise...

set of demands which constitute the stages of the struggle [when the] masses do not as yet consciously stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat. - Quoted in Frank, op. cit., p. 61.

This bears all the hallmarks of Kautskyism which saw the proletariat only as a mindless mass which could be called out by the social democrats in this or that political demonstration to “aid” the parliamentary struggle of the so-called “workers’ representatives”. But the living struggle makes different demands of revolutionaries who, by being present within it, can lead it on to greater unity and therefore greater purpose by defining not only demands to achieve that unity, but the real goal of the struggle – the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is something which the *Transitional Programme* avoids since its starting point is also its finishing point – the immediate level of consciousness of the masses<sup>17</sup>.

Trotsky therefore showed that he had not transcended the weaknesses of the Second, and later the Third, Internationals. Those weaknesses lay not in their ability to fight with the masses, but in their inability to provide a leadership which had a clear conception of communism and of the necessity for the overthrow of the bourgeois state. Instead of criticising these weaknesses Trotsky made a virtue of them. The “conquest of the masses” at a time of proletarian defeat was the centre of his voluntarism and every (failed) tactic to retain the support of the masses, from united front to minimum programmes was revived by Trotsky in a vain effort to win a mass base. Following this logic, he had told his French supporters to “defy reformism within its own stronghold” and to “carry the revolutionary programme to the masses” by joining the SFIO, the French section of the Second International. He was hardly in a position to criticise the Comintern’s adoption of the Popular Front policy in 1935 and his denunciation of the passing of the Communist International “onto the side of the social democracy” is not consistent. Whilst there was a certain counter-revolutionary logic to the CI’s policy (it wanted an alliance with French and British imperialism against the Fascist regimes of central Europe), Trotsky’s entryism into social democracy made no sense at all, especially if – as he proclaimed – revolution was just around the corner.

---

<sup>17</sup> For a further discussion of the issue of demands see *Revolutionary Perspectives* 17 and 20.

we submit: the diagnosis of the Comintern is entirely false. The situation is as revolutionary as it can be, granted the non-revolutionary policies of the working class parties. More exactly the situation is pre-revolutionary. In order to bring the situation to its full maturity, there must be an immediate, vigorous, unremitting mobilisation of the masses, under the slogan of the conquest of power. This is the only way in which a pre-revolutionary situation will be changed into a revolutionary one.

Not recognising the defeat of the working class in the 1920s, Trotsky in 1938 was thus unprepared for imperialist war which the bourgeoisie imposed upon it. It is therefore not surprising that the *Transitional Programme* should finish with an explicit rejection of the cardinal point of Lenin's revolutionary theory in World War One – revolutionary defeatism. This led to Trotskyism participating in the Second Imperialist War on the side of both Russian and Western imperialism.

### The Second Imperialist War

The *Transitional Programme* states clearly that:

in the next period a revolutionary party will depend for success primarily on its policy on the question of war. - p. 31.

It even repeats the basic communist principle that in imperialist war “the chief enemy is in your own country”. However, in the same breath Trotsky soon reveals again that his failure to analyse the nature of the USSR or re-examine the old CI policy of the united front led him to abandon this principle. On the same page of the *Transitional Programme* he tells us that not only are oppressed countries “not imperialist” but also:

the same duty of **support and defence** applies in regard to aiding the USSR or whatever other workers' government might arise...

Thus Trotsky's failure to analyse the relations of production in the USSR disarmed him in the face of Russia's entry into the network of imperialist alliances. Despite the evidence of the 1930s, where Stalin's policy had been to try to win an alliance with Britain and France against Germany; despite the results of this policy in Spain and China<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the Pact Stalin signed with Hitler to attack Poland in 1939 and despite the attack on Finland, Trotsky still clung – until the day of his death – to the fiction that Russia was neither capitalist nor imperialist. True, in his article *The USSR and War*, written in 1939, Trotsky criticised

the politics of Moscow [which] taken as a whole, completely retains its reactionary character...

but once again there was no explanation of why it had a reactionary policy except via the limp argument that the workers' state had been hijacked by a Bonapartist elite. In the same article Trotsky out-Stalinised Stalin in his defence of “socialism” in the USSR as against the interests of the world proletariat.

We must not lose sight for a single moment of the fact that the questioning of the Soviet bureaucracy is for us subordinate to the question of preserving state property in the means of production of the USSR; ... [and] is subordinate for us to the question of world proletarian revolution.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Revolutionary Perspectives* 1 and 15 as well as *Internationalist Communist* 8 and 12 deal with these episodes more fully.

It is not surprising that this led to splits in the Fourth International with CLR James, Burnham and Shachtman all coming up with different analyses of the nature of Russia.

Trotsky's writings in this debate were collected and published under the title *In Defence of Marxism*. Though inappropriately titled they do reveal the crisis of coherence that had now smitten him. His argument in this text – that if the war did not lead to proletarian revolution then Marxism would be refuted and there would never again be the possibility of socialism – was simply a more definite version of what he had already written in *The USSR and Socialism* in 1939.

... if, contrary to all probabilities, the October Revolution [by this he meant the USSR - editor] fails during the course of the present war, or immediately thereafter to find its continuation in any of the advanced countries; and if, on the other contrary the proletariat is thrown back on all fronts – then we should doubtlessly have to pose the question of revising our conceptions of the present epoch and its driving forces.

This was no defence of Marxism but the logic of an analysis not based on Marxist categories. Unable to understand the defeat of the proletariat in the 1920s, he tried to overcome its weakness by an effort of will in 1938 which did credit to idealism but not to Marxism. This was not the end of Trotsky's failures. In the *Defence of Marxism* he had gone even further along the road of support for imperialism in calling not only for the "defence of the USSR" but also for the defence of the "democratic swamp" in general<sup>19</sup>.

This was before Hitler's attack on Russia in 1941 had brought about the alliance of imperialist convenience between the USSR, Britain and the USA. And whilst the US Trotskyists had split over the analysis of Russia the French Trotskyists also split – in defence of both German and Allied imperialism! While the Revolution Francaise of the *Mouvement National Révolutionnaire* called for "collaboration without oppression" with Hitler the "Committees of the 4th International" in *Verite* called for the defence

Of the wealth that generations of French workers and peasants have accumulated. - September 1940<sup>20</sup>

Our survey of the origins of Trotskyism ends with this sorry episode, the first of many unprincipled splits in a movement which, as we have shown here, never held clear "conceptions of the present epoch and its driving forces". However, criticism of Trotsky's failings does not amount to wiping out the history of the struggle for the communist programme and the international communist party. It simply means we must direct our gaze elsewhere.

### **Trotsky and the Internationalist Communist Left**

Our criticisms of Trotsky are not based on abstract moralising with the benefit of hindsight. In the 1920s and 1930s there **was** a revolutionary opposition to the degeneration of the Communist International which based its critique of that degeneration on the methodological premises of Marx and Lenin and which used that method to criticise Trotsky himself. This consisted of founding members of the Italian Communist Party at Livorno in 1921, revolutionary militants who fought inside the Communist International against the policy of making a "united front" with the leaders of the social democratic movement responsible for the murder of workers and revolutionaries; who inside Italy

<sup>19</sup> red texts note: the original text on the ICT's website includes this 21st note but no corresponding endnote. More confusing still, the original text swapped the order of notes 20 and 21, thus making it unclear what endnote 20 actually corresponds to.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *Le Gauche Communiste d'Italie*, pamphlet of the International Communist Current, p. 166.

opposed so-called *bolshevisation* of the Communist Party and ousting of the Left from its leadership despite their representing the majority of the membership; and who, as a result, were eventually removed from their positions by the CI.

Persecuted by the Fascists as well as the Stalinists, they carried on their struggle inside Mussolini's prisons and in exile abroad. In 1928 at Pantin in Paris they formally constituted themselves as the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I). For a decade, until 1938, they uninterruptedly issued *Prometeo* (Prometheus), first in Brussels, then in France. It was by the name of *Prometeo*, their monthly journal that they were often known. Politically they based themselves on the *Platform of the Left* – the theses Amadeo Bordiga had presented in 1926 at the 3rd Congress of the PCd'I and which had been held by force of circumstance outside Italy in Lyons. For the first time the organisational manoeuvres of the "bolshevised" leadership of Gramsci and Togliatti resulted in a vote for Gramsci's "Centre" theses against those of the Left<sup>21</sup>.

At Pantin they passed a resolution which, amongst other things, called for a 6th Congress of the CI with Trotsky as president to reintegrate all the oppositions expelled from the CI.

The Italian Left had already solidarised with the Russian Opposition "in defence of the victorious principles of October" but had underlined that "there exist differences". Trotsky, for his part, warmly welcomed the existence of the Italian Left. In his reply to *Prometeo* of September 25th, 1929 he stated:

The Platform of the Left (1926) produced a great impression on me. I think that it is one of the best documents published by the international Opposition and it preserves its significance in many things to this very day. - *Writings of Leon Trotsky*, 1929, p. 318.

However, he wanted to leave to "time and events" the verification of their mutual understanding. This exchange was a reflection of fundamental differences from the beginning. To start with, the Italian Left recognised that their physical dispersal was a product of the international counter-revolution and saw the need to understand what had happened to the proletariat during this period and to draw up a *bilan* (balance sheet) for the revival of the working class and its party. Thus, though they supported the project of Trotsky for an international centre of all the international oppositions, they could not work directly under the Trotskyist secretariat since it had no platform of political positions based on the lessons of the October Revolution. The negative criteria of anti-Stalinism they saw as an inadequate basis for action. Their attitude was summarized in a letter by Vercesi (at that time one of their leading members and editor of *Prometeo*):

There are many oppositions. That is bad; but there is no other remedy than confrontation with their rival ideologies ... If so many oppositions exist, it is because there are several ideologies whose actual substance must be made clear. And this cannot just be done through simple discussion in a common organisation. Our watchword is to take our efforts to the ultimate conclusions without being derailed into a "solution" that would in reality be a failure. - Letter in *Contre Le Courant* no. 13, August, 1928.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ironically, part of the manoeuvring had involved a vicious campaign against Bordiga who, in the pages of the Party newspaper, *Unita*, was vilified as a Trotskyist throughout 1925-26. In 1930 Bordiga himself was finally expelled from the PCd'I for his supposed Trotskyism. For more information in English about the early struggle of the Italian Left against 'bolshevisation' see the CWO's pamphlet, *Platform of the Committee of Intesa*, 1925 – the start of the Italian Left's fight against Stalinism as Fascism increases its grip. Available from the group address.

The main difference between the positions of Trotsky and those of the Italian Left at this time concerned the united front. In the *Rome Theses* formulated in 1922 by Bordiga for the PCd'I before the left had been ousted from leadership, the Italian Communists first raised their banner against the decline of the Communist International which, at its Fourth Congress of that year, decisively stepped back toward social democracy – a step applauded by Trotsky. The Social Democrats who had led and organised the massacre of the flower of the German working class were now re-baptised as “worker’s parties” and alliance with them against the fascist threat was now sought. In the *Rome Theses* the Italian Communists opposed the tactic of the united front. Though not rejecting the necessity for tactics or for “indirect” methods of struggle when the class was on the defensive the Italian Left rejected the “expedients” and “manoeuvres” which were intended to win mass support but only at the cost of undermining the hard-won political independence of the revolutionary proletariat which the Bolsheviks had struggled for from 1903 to 1922. This was why the Communist Party of Italy under Bordiga applied the tactic of “the united front from below”, i.e. working with workers in the Social Democratic Parties where common struggles were possible, but not with their organisations. This left the Communist Party of Italy free to mercilessly criticise the leadership of Social Democracy for its class collaborationism. This was not, however, how the CI envisaged the united front since they did propose formal alliances with the old anti-working class leaderships of Social Democracy and this led only to further confusion.

For Trotsky, however, the united front was the expression of the highest achievement of the Comintern. He always based his political framework on its first four congresses whilst the Italian Left based itself on the first two. The gulf that was to open up between them stemmed from Trotsky's view that social democracy was essentially proletarian because it organised a section of the working class. The Communist Left however recognised that to use this criterion could baptise any counter-revolutionary force as proletarian. The task of communists is to fight to make the principles of communism clear to the working class. The gulf between the Italian Left and Trotsky now became a chasm. In 1933, with Trotsky still refusing to see the need for any more than organisational consolidation of all the oppositions under his leadership, the Italian Fraction decided they would have to do the work of political clarification on their own. In November the first issue of *Bilan* was published.

After 1933 Trotsky firmed up his strategic approach which set his supporters' attention firmly towards seeking accommodation with anti-proletarian forces rather than a realignment with the remaining revolutionary fractions.

Three particular decisions show that the implications of that approach had already led the Trotskyists out of the proletarian camp prior to the publication of their *Transitional Programme* in 1938. The three defining points, to be dealt with in turn, are the entry of the Trotskyists into Second International organisations; their support for the Spanish anti-fascist forces during the Civil War and their interpretations of anti-imperialism in the wars in China and Abyssinia/Ethiopia.

### **The “French turn” of 1934**

In 1934 the Trotskyist movement, then known as the International Communist League, took what Trotsky described as “the most serious turn in its whole history”. Starting with his French section, Trotsky urged his followers to join the parties of the Second International and other equivalent organisations *en bloc*. Trotsky's solution to the failure of Stalinism was to go back to social democracy. This was a rupture with everything the working class had fought for in the period between 1914 and 1926. It meant going back to supporting imperialist factions, back to the old trades unions who had supported

imperialist war, back to those who had actively led the murder of communists and workers during the revolutionary period after 1917. Nevertheless the tactic soon spread to other sections, notably in Britain, USA and Spain. The idea of Trotskyist "entryism" by which generations of Trotskyists have reinforced social-democratic political organisations was thus apparently born with "the French turn".

The French Trotskyist organisation made its decision to take "the decisive turn" in the summer of 1934 after heavy political pressure from Trotsky, then resident in France. A year before, the comrades of the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy had been bureaucratically squeezed out of discussion by the Trotskyists. They had anticipated, and argued against, the trajectory of Trotsky and his followers. In the journal *Bilan* (the balance-sheet) our comrades argued that the Trotskyist strategy was an essentially reactionary substitute for efforts to draw together an analysis of the decline of the proletarian revolutionary wave. Writing in August 1933 they assessed the approaches of Trotsky to the left-wing Social Democrats as being a move "Towards the Two and Three-Quarters International". They argued that:

Trotsky is committing a colossal error in advocating common work with the left socialists with the aim of building a new communist party.

The contrasting approach of the Left Fraction as against the Trotskyists was precisely around the question of the need for analysis and understanding of the nature of the period rather than to engage in organisational manoeuvres to try to create a mass party when there was no material possibility to do so.

The proletariat suffered in 1927 a terrible defeat in not succeeding in countering the counter-revolutionary success of Centrism. [Stalinism would be a more normal shorthand today although many riders would need to be added to stress that the historic process can not be dictated by an individual within the communist parties, ed.]

To state today that we wish to establish new parties upon the basis of the first four congresses of the International is to command history to pedal backwards ten years. It is to abstain from the understanding of events taking place after these congresses and **it is eventually to wish to place new parties in an historic setting not their own**. The setting in which we would wish the new parties to be placed tomorrow is already defined by the experience gained from the exercise of proletarian power and by all the experience of the world communist movement. The first four congresses were, in this work, an object of study which must be submitted to the most intense examination and critique. If we were to accept them evangelistically we would come to the following conclusion: the death of Lenin, or the removal of Trotsky, were the causes of the victory of capitalism in a number of countries and the success of Centrism in the USSR and the International.

The writers of *Bilan*, however, understood that the Trotskyist attempts to woo Social Democracy would only end in ignominious failure. They correctly forecast the point at which the Trotskyists would find themselves in 1938:

The immaturity of the situation [i.e. the lack of an understanding of the historical epoch] gives us an inkling of the strong probability that the currently gestating "two and three quarters" International" will be reduced to nothing more than a simple change to the label of the ILO [the Trotskyists International Left Opposition, ed.].

For Trotsky and his followers the “French turn” and the reorientation towards Second Internationalist and other parties of capital was a further practical application of the policy of the “United Front” which had developed as Comintern policy during the decline of the revolutionary wave (1920-22). During the 1930s, both Stalinists and Trotskyists alike were to draw out counter-revolutionary conclusions from that position.

At this point Trotsky, and Trotskyism ceased to be a proletarian current for the Italian Left (as it was now to be known). It announced that now

... it is necessary to lead an unpitying and merciless struggle against him and his partisans who have crossed the Rubicon and rejoined social democracy. - *Bilan*.

A year earlier Stalin had formally taken the USSR back into the theatre of competing imperialism's by joining that “den of robbers” (Lenin), the League of Nations. His aim was simple. Hitler's aim of a “Drang nach Osten” (Drive to the East) was obvious to all. Stalin realised that an attack on the USSR was inevitable, and thus he tried to win an alliance with France and Britain. The Comintern's role in this was to come at the 7th Congress in 1935 and relegated its temporary radicalism (since 1928) against social democracy to the history books. It not only baptised the socialists as friends of democracy but also every Liberal, Radical or otherwise anti-fascist party in Western Europe. The united front had now reached its apogee in the Popular Front. The response of the Italian Fraction was to disown any links – even remotely oppositional ones – with the Comintern and to state that the 7th Congress had placed a tombstone on the existing CPs. Meanwhile, Trotsky denounced the Popular Front as a perversion of the united front but his criticism lacked force since he accepted the essential rationale of the Popular Front – defence of the USSR from the fascist menace. And yet the forces which had “laid the bed for fascism” in the revolutionary upheaval after World War One were precisely the organisations Trotsky had encouraged his followers to enter – the Socialist parties.

After the rise of Hitler anti-fascism – i.e. opposition to a particular aspect of capitalist imperialism, meant increasing support for its other aspect – capitalist democracy. This expressed itself in Spain, in China and ultimately worldwide in World War Two. It was the ideology which masked the traditional appetites of the capitalist powers and which enabled them to dragoon millions of proletarians into their armies. As we have seen, Trotsky also called for support for this crusade in terms of the defence of the USSR. A year after his murder the USSR finally achieved what it sought – an alliance with the Western imperialist powers, including the USA “in defence of democracy”.

### The Spanish Civil War

The first step in legitimising anti-fascism as a motive for defending Western and Stalinist imperialism came in Spain.

As we have already seen, Trotsky had specifically declined invitations from leaders of the Italian Communist Left to re-examine the degeneration of the Russian revolution within the context of the overall reflux of the revolutionary wave. Trotsky's refusal to come to terms with the extent of that reflux allowed him to misunderstand the nature of events and consequently what the Marxist response to them should be. In April, 1936 he wrote that:

The situation in Spain has again become revolutionary<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, Leon Trotsky, (1973), Pathfinder Press, p. 211.

In fact, within months his own supporters, far from seeking independent proletarian positions – the most basic prerequisite to recover after fifteen years of defeat, were being urged to fight for the Spanish bourgeois democracy against Franco's army.

Modern day Trotskyists try to muddy the positions that were taken so let there be no confusion. In February 1937 Trotsky wrote,

Only cowards, traitors or agents of fascism can renounce aid to the Spanish republican armies. The elementary duty of every revolutionist is to struggle against the bands of Franco, Mussolini and Hitler<sup>23</sup>.

Again, in September of the same year,

Everywhere and always, wherever and whenever revolutionary workers are not powerful enough immediately to overthrow the bourgeois regime, they defend even rotten bourgeois democracy from fascism<sup>24</sup>.

Later in the same article he dealt with a possible objection:

... during a war between two bourgeois states, the revolutionary proletariat .... must take the position that 'the defeat of our own government is the lesser evil.' Is this rule not applicable also to the civil war in which two bourgeois governments are fighting against one another? It is not applicable .... In the Spanish civil war, the question is: democracy or fascism ... the revolutionaries can be successful by dealing military blows to the number one foe: fascism<sup>25</sup>.

### **China and Abyssinia**

Having touched on the early Trotskyist adaptations to social democracy and anti-fascism, the cases of China and Abyssinia provide further evidence of the Trotskyist support for "the lesser evil" in times of imperialist war.

A series of quotes from 1937 serve to show the extent and thoroughness with which Trotsky urged his followers to take part in the Sino-Japanese wars. Many of the articles from which the quotations are drawn were, at least in part, polemics against non-Trotskyist Left Communist oppositionists who correctly argued against such concessions to "defencism".

... the duty of all the workers' organisations of China was to participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan...<sup>26</sup>.

... we must carefully distinguish between the imperialist countries and the backward countries, colonial and semi-colonial. The attitude of the working class organisations cannot be the same. The present war between China and Japan is a classic example ... Only conscious or unconscious agents of Japanese imperialism can put the two countries on the same plane.<sup>27</sup>.

A Japanese victory will serve reaction. A Chinese victory would have a progressive character. That is why the working class of the world supports by all

<sup>23</sup> op. cit. p. 242.

<sup>24</sup> op. cit. p. 282.

<sup>25</sup> op. cit. p. 283.

<sup>26</sup> *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1937-38)*, (1970), Pathfinder Press, p. 107.

<sup>27</sup> op. cit. p. 109.

means China against Japan.<sup>28</sup>

In the case of Abyssinia, a different source shows an exactly parallel stance being taken by Trotskyists in Britain. C.L.R. James, then (1936) an entryist in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) argued,

... that the I.L.P., in its obligation to the colonial peoples must assist them in their struggle against Italian Fascism<sup>29</sup>.

James made the position even clearer. He replied to a taunt that:

you [James and the Trotskyists, ed.] support war by the use of Abyssinian lives and refuse to use your own bodies for the war which you back,

by volunteering to take service under Haile Selassie<sup>30</sup>.

These examples illustrate the process by which the Trotskyists left the proletarian camp in the 1930s. They are not produced to detract from the heroism of the Trotskyists who were slaughtered in Siberia (along with members of the Russian Communist Left) during the late 1930s. Neither do we seek to suggest that Trotsky himself was ever a conscious agent of imperialism. What we are trying to show is that the positions taken up by later Trotskyists are not aberrations. They are part of the methodology of Trotsky and Trotskyism. The move to counter-revolutionary positions was prepared and completed during Trotsky's lifetime.

### The Internationalist Communist Party since World War Two

Whilst Trotsky was developing his own small contribution to the defence of capitalism the International Communist Left was at first reduced to small scattered groups, its members dispersed or imprisoned. However, with the first stirrings of the proletariat against the war in Italy in 1942-43 it was able to reconstitute itself into a party, the Internationalist Communist Party. This has continued to exist to the present-day holding fast to the basic revolutionary principles of the Communist International's first two Congresses. Defending a revolutionary defeatist position toward fascist and anti-fascist alike, it was the only political party thrown up by World War Two to do so, both in theory and in practice<sup>31</sup>.

It won away many young militants from the ranks of the Stalinist partisans and for a time led thousands of workers in struggle in post-war Italy. The restrictions of this struggle to Italy and the capitalist recovery after World War Two ensured that the new party did not exist outside Italy after 1952<sup>32</sup>.

In this year the PCInt produced a platform which was at the time the clearest expression of the revolutionary methods and goals of the October Revolution.

---

<sup>28</sup> op. cit p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Against the Stream*, Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, (1986), Socialist Platform, p. 183.

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit. p. 186.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the early years of the PCInt., see the series in *Workers Voice* nos. 73-74 and no. 78. Back issues available from CWO address.

<sup>32</sup> By this time the PCInt had survived the crisis of the return of Bordiga to revolutionary activity after 20 years away from politics. Like Trotsky he brought enormous prestige to revolutionary politics in view of his past contribution – but he also brought with him the baggage of the past. Unable to comprehend the real nature of the USSR, vacillating on the necessity of the Party in this period, incapable of seeing that the progressive era of national struggles was over and failing to understand the nature of the trade unions as bulwarks of capitalism in the imperialist epoch, he threatened to overturn the patient work of theoretical appraisal by the Italian Left over two decades. Bordiga never joined the PCInt. but his reappearance cost it many cadres and it was not until 1952 that his opposition was finally overcome.

In 1977 it made a significant contribution to the growth of a future world party of the proletariat by initiating the series of international conferences of groups of the Communist Left and since 1983 has inspired the formation of the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party to which the CWO adheres. With the formation of this Bureau a new stage in the process towards the reformation of the Party, based on the lessons of proletarian revolutionary experience began. In contrast to this work of reconstruction, Trotskyism, with its myriads of splits (at least 20 in Britain since 1945), goes from crisis to crisis in which “purer” Trotskyisms succeed one another at a dizzy rate. Trotskyism is a cul-de-sac for state capitalists, those critical supporters of the former USSR and of imperialist war, who are running round in circles trying to find a way forward.

The profusion of Trotskyist sects in existence today is witness to the mass of contradictions which make up the elements of Trotskyism, and objectively these groupings represent the left wing of the bourgeoisie's political apparatus. They stand, not for the emancipation of the proletariat, but for a state capitalist order in which they will be the new bosses. Objectively they function as the left wing of the social democratic or Stalinist parties, providing these parties with cover from attacks by revolutionary political positions and most importantly giving them credibility in the eyes of the working class. By sticking slavishly to the formula that the proletariat has only a crisis of leadership they fail to recognise the real conditions for the revival of the revolutionary party. These lie in the objective need to struggle of the mass of the proletariat and the party's own programmatic clarity. Unable to perceive these basic conditions, the Trotskyists cannot escape from their historical cul-de-sac without retracing the road back to the revolutionary lessons of the proletariat has taken. In doing this they would, of course, cease to be Trotskyists since they would not only have to abandon their fundamental confusions but would also have to recognise the bourgeois, anti-revolutionary nature of Trotskyism itself.

### **Trotskyism after Trotsky**

#### **The crisis of Trotskyist analysis since 1989**

By the end of the 1960s the boom years of capitalism which followed the mass destruction of the Second World War were giving way to the accumulation crisis which continues to plague the world economy today. Since that time forces of consistent Marxist internationalism have revived and strengthened themselves, seeking to maintain and defend the programme of proletarian revolution and take that programme back into the heart of the working class. In opposition to this process, varieties of leftism have proliferated in different parts of the world. Each of the variants have acted as a roadblock to a coherent revolutionary *praxis*. Each has also served the bourgeoisie by reinforcing the left wing of capitalism and leaving those layers attracted to them as further sources of confusion and disillusion for anyone groping towards revolutionary clarity.

Particularly after the collapse of the USSR, certain currents of leftism – especially those emanating from Western academia whose pseudo-marxist careers had also shattered – have explicitly abandoned the Marxist project. They now join in the general bourgeois chorus of denouncing the past struggles of the working class (particularly the revolutionary wave around the end of the First World War) and declaring that the proletariat is no longer the force for social change and future human progress.

More confusingly for aspiring revolutionaries, tendencies have developed and thrived who deny the central role of the working class in the revolutionary process but who lay claim to the heritage of Marxism and even to be the heirs of the forces which gave birth to the Communist International in 1919. One of these trends was Maoism. But Maoism had nothing to do with either marxism or the working class. The Mao faction only took over

the Chinese Communist Party after the massacres of the workers in Shanghai and Canton in 1926-7.

Mao based the CCP on the “bloc of four classes” and his takeover of China in October 1949 was not a proletarian revolution. What Mao did was copy the brutal planning aspects of Stalinist state capitalism and institute an arbitrary regime which resulted in the massacre of millions. (Over 30 million died in the “Great Leap Forward” of 1958 alone.)

From the late Sixties on Maoism claimed to be a Marxist current and made some inroads into the petty bourgeois student milieu in the metropoles. Both here and in capitalism’s periphery the Maoists encouraged their followers to act as cheerleaders for the Chinese ruling class as they struggled to establish their place in the imperialist order. In Asia, Africa and South America their adherents joined armed factions supporting national liberationist and/or left democratic warlords as factions of the bourgeoisie struggled to carve up the capitalist cake. Luckily, the twists and turns of the Chinese rulers have meant that they and their followers have become less and less credible in their efforts to present their political positions as stemming from a Marxist understanding.

Trotskyism, having experienced a renaissance during the ideological disruptions at the end of the 1960s, has proved to be a more robust phenomenon. Unlike the Maoists, the Trotskyists were without their “own” state power to look towards and attempt to justify and follow. This has allowed latter-day Trotskyists to adopt chameleon-like positions, adapting to this or that bourgeois faction or ideological trend. This section will give some examples of that behaviour.

The Trotskyists’ willingness to assimilate elements of politics from other tendencies in order to patch together an eclectic and kaleidoscopic programme is not accidental. The first part of this pamphlet helps to uncover the roots of these politics and reveal that they are not aberrations from a revolutionary norm but are actually a consistent extension of the theory and practice codified in the Trotskyist programme of 1938. That programme in turn reflected a method which failed to recognise the implications of an epoch in which capitalism had exhausted all its progressive possibilities and in which the task of revolutionists was not to link to “progressive” factions of the enemy class (democratic, anti-fascist or those supporting state capital against private capital) but to develop a programme in remorseless opposition to all such elements.

### **Trotskyism’s core confusion**

The rotten core at the centre of Trotskyism is the refusal of that tendency, or family of tendencies to adopt a rigorous analysis of the failure of the revolutionary wave at the end of the First World War and its consequent impact on the isolated Soviet power in Russia. Clinging to their erroneous analysis of the Soviet Union which marked it as having non-capitalist economic foundations, Trotskyists<sup>33</sup> urged their followers to support the Stalinist

---

<sup>33</sup> Certain elements have reassessed Trotsky’s description of the Stalinist formations. Two of the main tendencies to do so have their origins in the 1940s crisis of the Trotskyist movement. The first was grouped around Max Shachtman, an American Trotskyist whose Workers’ Party broke away from official Trotskyism in 1940 and defined the Soviet Union as an expression of “bureaucratic collectivism”. [Comments on latter-day Shachtmanites can be found in *Internationalist Communist* 17]. Faced with the spread of Stalinism at the end of the Second World War others developed Shachtman’s positions. C.L.R. James, who later moved to positions which he called “Marxist Humanism” published his booklet on *The Invading Socialist Society* and the British-based Trotskyist, Tony Cliff, published *Russia – A Marxist Analysis* shortly afterwards. Cliff, not wishing to be branded a Shachtmanite, adopted the label of “state capitalism” without abandoning any of the features of the Trotskyist method. He and his followers, now the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain, continued to call for state ownership as opposed to private capital and continue to portray the “labour movement” (Labour Party, trade unions, etc.) as a progressive force. They also, of course, adhere to other Trotskyist confusions and adaptations of national liberationism and other bourgeois tendencies. The “Lutte Ouvrière” group in France hold similar political positions to the SWP but with a stronger element of independent electoral activity (as against the SWP’s tradi-

states against their other imperialist rivals.

Struggling to deal with the reality of the reactionary transformation of Russian society in the 1920s, Russian Communists in opposition to the official party/state machine explored analogies with the years following the 1789 French Revolution.

In February, 1935 Trotsky wrote about that discussion,

"It would be no easy task today to establish who resorted first to the historical analogy of Thermidor. In any case, the positions on this issue in 1926 were approximately as follows: the group of "Democratic Centralism"<sup>34</sup> (V.M. Smirnov, Sapronov and others who were hounded to death in exile by Stalin) declared, "Thermidor is an accomplished fact!". The adherents to the platform of the Left Oppositionist, the Bolshevik-Leninists [i.e. the Trotskyists] categorically denied this assertion"<sup>35</sup>.

Without accepting the Thermidorian analogy, that quote shows very clearly that Russian Oppositionists outside Trotsky's group had an earlier and clearer view of the extent of the reaction than Trotsky and his followers.

In the same article Trotsky belatedly comes to the same conclusion,

The Thermidor of the Great Russian Revolution is not before us but very far behind. The Thermidoreans can celebrate, approximately, the tenth anniversary of their victory<sup>36</sup>.

However, instead of having used the intervening years to refine and develop Sapronov's position, Trotsky departs from basic and essential Marxist understandings. For him, Russia remained a workers' state and the Stalinist counter-revolutionaries were its defenders,

The present political regime in the USSR is the regime of "Soviet" (or anti-Soviet) Bonapartism... In its social foundation and economic tendencies, the USSR still remains a workers' state"<sup>37</sup>.

Trotsky went on to develop the same analysis at greater length in *Revolution Betrayed* published in 1936.

Since Trotsky's death the strange confusion whereby the nationalised Russian economy was somehow a gain for the working class has expanded into an even bigger methodological nonsense. During the post-war economic expansion, with the adoption of extensive state capitalist measures throughout the world, the Trotskyists came to identify any or all state intervention, ownership or delivery of welfare and other services as being progressive. (If not explicitly "socialist"!)

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the poisonous culmination of the Trotskyist analysis and misrepresentations has tragically, but appropriately, been shown in all its counter-revolutionary implications in Russia. The various groups, including the International Committee of the Fourth International led by David North's Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the USA, the British SWP, and the Committee for a Workers International headed by the British Socialist Party (ex-Militant tendency) have competed to spawn their

---

tional cheer-leading for the British Labour Party). They added another element to the kaleidoscope of confusion by combining the orthodox Trotskyist "degenerated workers' state" label for the Soviet Union with Cliff's version of "state capitalism" for the rest of the pre-1989 Russian bloc in Eastern Europe.

<sup>34</sup> A group of non-Trotskyist Left Communists.

<sup>35</sup> *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934-35)*, 2nd Edition (1974), Pathfinder Press, p. 167.

<sup>36</sup> op.cit. p. 182.

<sup>37</sup> op.cit. p. 182.

own organisations in Russia. In a series of conferences the Trotskyists, including the followers of Hillel Ticktin's non-orthodox Trotskyist *Critique*, have provided platforms for all manner of supporters of state-based solutions, ranging from Social Democrats to former leaders of Zhyuganov's party. All of them share with the Trotskyists an inability to understand the reactionary nature of any form of "state socialism" in the imperialist epoch.

At these conferences the leading speakers systematically hide the contribution of non-Trotskyist oppositions to an understanding of and resistance to the Russian Revolution's degeneration – and in the case of Ticktin, have gratuitously slandered Rosa Luxemburg for good measure. The worst aspects of Trotskyism have thus returned to the land of its origin to play a reactionary and confusing role.

### **As unchanging as a chameleon, as consistent as a kaleidoscope**

One of the features of Trotskyist political practice is its tendency, helped by the movement's split into numerous factions and tendencies, to adapt its politics to different and diverse anti-revolutionary interests and trends.

As will be seen later, the Trotskyist movement lost its connections with the proletarian revolutionary movement during the 1930s. Following Trotsky's death and the political disappearance of his Fourth International as a coherent force during the Second World War, the stage was set for post-war Trotskyism to set a pattern of adopting and adapting to bourgeois movements and simultaneously generating scores of rival tendencies, fractions and organisations – some nationally-based, many claiming to be yet another incarnation of the Fourth International.

A short overview such as this pamphlet does not provide enough scope to fully detail the bourgeois movements to which the Trotskyists have adapted. A few examples will, however, serve to illustrate the range of those developments.

In the second half of the 1940s, as the Soviet Union became the second pillar of worldwide imperialist domination, the Trotskyists struggled to assimilate that reality to their view that the statified Russian economy remained a "gain for the working class". By the end of the decade the majority of Trotskyists had decided that the satellite states in Eastern Europe and (subsequently) Mao's China were likewise states in which the nationalised economy was "progressive" and worthy of support. This depiction implied that significant parts of the world had experienced the end of capitalist property relations courtesy of the post-war imperialist settlement and Mao's victory in the war against Chiang Kai-Shek's KuoMinTang .

The gross departure from Marxism expressed in that confusion laid the basis for decades of calling for support for the Moscow-centred bloc against the U.S. dominated bloc during the Cold War. Within that trend another tendency appeared as the Trotskyists threw their propaganda support behind Stalinist forces who tactically expressed independence from Moscow from time to time. The first example was when the Trotskyist movement adopted Tito as an "unconscious Trotskyist" when he led his Yugoslav state away from direct economic, political and military control by Moscow. Later, differing factions were to repeat similar tragi-comic confusion with other national Stalinist leaderships, notably the Cuban, Chinese and Vietnamese<sup>38</sup>.

Other national leaderships were similarly applauded to a greater or lesser extent. During the 1970s and 80s a variety of governments were awarded the Trotskyist stamp of approval. These included the military regime in Ethiopia, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua

---

<sup>38</sup> The followers of Ted Grant's RSL, later the "Militant" tendency managed to reach new heights of theoretical idiocy when they discovered in the 1960s and 1970s that states such as Syria and Burma were "deformed workers states" because of the percentage of the national economy which was nationalised.

and the New Jewel Movement in Grenada. The support and applause for such governments or oppositions overlapped very clearly with another Trotskyist anti-proletarian position – support for National Liberationism.

Trotskyists take their inspiration from the weaknesses of the positions adopted between 1920 and 1922 by the Communist International as the Revolutionary wave ebbed away. In parallel with their general united frontist approach they offer their support to “oppressed” capitalist states against their (equally capitalist) “oppressors”. This practice was sanctified by the Trotskyists during the 1930s when they supported Abyssinia/Ethiopia against Italy and China against Japan. Trotsky and his followers failed, and continue to fail, to recognise the fundamental nature of the imperialist epoch – that national bourgeoisies, and aspiring national bourgeoisies, can only survive as part of, and are entirely dependent on, the worldwide imperialist nexus. That failure has led them to act as cheerleaders for anti-proletarian national liberation factions and figureheads, ranging from the Algerian FLN, to Nkrumah’s pan-Africanism, the bourgeois-led Fretilin movement struggling for an independent East Timorese state and, of course, the forces who now run the governments in all the major Southern African states.

Nearer home the various Trotskyist factions offer, usually vicarious, support to the IRA and other Irish nationalist elements.

Having identified the Trotskyist support for national liberation movements as a feature distinguishing them from the revolutionary camp, it is easy to see how their support for and involvement with other liberal movements marks another point of separation. In their never ending search for “transitional” routes into mainstream bourgeois political life the Trotskyists accommodate themselves to any fashionable reformist trend the liberal bourgeoisie happen to throw up.

This is most obvious in two examples from the periphery of capitalism. In 1951 in Bolivia the POR (Workers Revolutionary Party, led by Guillermo Lora and part of the Pabloite International Secretariat) took up support for the newly elected, and US-backed, Movement of National Resistance government of Paz Estenssoro. For the US Government the reformist programme of the MNR was the only way to “prevent the rise of communism and chaos”. The POR was a large party but having degenerated alongside other Trotskyist organisations could only manage to cheer on the bourgeois nationalist MNR’s programme of nationalisation of the tin mines and redivision of the land. It also called for such radical things as ministerial posts for the corrupt COB trades union confederation leaders. In 1954 this trajectory was complete when the majority of the POR took up membership of the MNR. Thus, they wiped out any pretence at having an independent class agenda and paved the way for the military coup of 1964. If there was a “crisis of leadership” in the trades unions then the Trotskyists were part of it.

Similarly, in the 50s and 60s the LSSP of Sri Lanka made its social democratic credentials both concrete and obvious by their electoralism and trades union aspirations. After the front with the Stalinists and others in 1963 it finally went into the Bandaranaike government in 1964. Again, the result was to persuade workers that the democratic system had something to offer them or could be reformed to improve their conditions of life. It did nothing to provide a basis for understanding the capitalist relations which perpetuated their misery, much less organise independently against the state.

With their resurgence, particularly in North America and Europe, at the end of the 1960s the Trotskyists absorbed many of the political positions of the various “liberation” movements – all of which counterposed themselves to the Marxist project. Prime amongst these are feminism and “black liberation”/anti-racism.

Trotskyism's desire to ingratiate itself with such tendencies has brought a stream of confusing alliances and shared positions. Particularly in their beloved "Labour Movement" (primarily the Labour Party and the Trade Unions – both agents for the preservation of capitalism in the current period) the Trotskyists become cheer-leaders for a radical "equal opportunities" policy, often based around "positive action" or "positive discrimination". With their left Labour movement allies the Trotskyists keep the struggle for equality firmly within a reformist framework. Even where they pay lip service to the indissoluble link between capitalism and chauvinism/discrimination their practice is centred around reformist demands aimed at proving that "liberation" can be achieved via the left of capital. Many who want to destroy oppression end up trapped by the Trotskyists in institutional and political structures which are essential parts of the capitalist framework which is the very source of that oppression.

For many Trotskyists their "anti-racist" antics are linked to positions of united-frontist anti-fascism<sup>39</sup>, the implications of which we will return to shortly. Here, it is worth expanding briefly on the two areas of the "Labour Movement" in which Trotskyism remains trapped and in turn entraps those who encounter it. These are the left of the trade unions together with the Labour Party – or its more recent cheap imitations.

For the vast majority of Trotskyists the trade unions, at all levels, remain a key area to which they send their cadres and contacts. Starting from an inability and unwillingness to recognise the role of the unions in the imperialist epoch the Trotskyists try to get themselves into positions of power and influence up to and including the national leaderships<sup>40</sup>.

In all cases the Trotskyists serve to confuse those they address that the unions can once again become instruments for the working class to defend itself, rather than the instruments of control in the workplace and direct agents of the state and capital, they really are.

The Trotskyists also have consistently put great effort into boosting the credentials and backing their other left reformist friends who seek positions of authority in the trade unions. Such activities, claimed as the high-point of political intervention – all of which served to maintain the grip of the trade unions – included the encouragement of the dockers "blue union" by the (then) Socialist Labour League during the 1960s and the construction of the Rank and File Mobilising Committee (IS/SWP - 1970s) and the Broad Left Organising Committee (1980s - Militant). As the unions continue to divide the working class the Trotskyists continue to try to act as their left wing.

Alongside the unions the other twin pillar of the Trotskyists' Labour Movement (in Britain) has traditionally been the Labour Party. The political origins of the orientation towards Second International-type parties will be shown later in the comments on Trotsky's departure from revolutionary politics during the 1930s.

In Britain the vast majority of Trotskyists were members of the Labour Party from the late 1940s until the radicalisation around 1968. This strategy of "entryism", particularly around the Labour Party's youth wing allowed Gerry Healey's Socialist Labour League (later the Workers Revolutionary Party) to take control of the Labour Party Young Socialists in the early 1960s. Ted Grant's "Militant", refusing to leave their Labour Party haunts during the radicalisation of 1968-74, repeated the feat during the 1970s and early 80s. The latter's persistence also paid off when their Liverpool base, with roots traceable back

<sup>39</sup> The most obvious example of this in Britain is the SWP-inspired Anti-Nazi League which has reappeared to stress the joys of democratic capitalism at various times during the last 20 years.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see the 30th April, 1999 edition of *Socialist* in which pet members of the National Executive Committee of the NUT and UNISON Trade Unions send their May Day greetings.

to the 1930s, was able to politically direct the City Council between 1983 and 1987.

From the mid 1970s until the late 1980s many Trotskyists rediscovered entryism and moved back to operate amongst, and often as, the Labour left. The main exceptions to that rule were Tony Cliff's International Socialists who recreated themselves as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Gerry Healey's WRP, since exploded into numerous fragments, who became mouthpieces for Gaddafi and simultaneously sponsors of a newspaper, the *Labour Herald*, which gave a platform to such worthies of the Labour Left as Ken Livingstone. It needs to be emphasised that even where the fractions organisationally separated from Labour, there was, in general no political reassessment. Both the SWP and the WRP in that period continued to call for electoral support for Labour – except on the very few occasions where they stood their own candidates, achieving negligible impact and number of votes.

Since the late 1980s the Trotskyists have found it more and more difficult to thrive in the left of the Labour Party. This process is driven both by increasing bureaucratic control from a Party machine firmly controlled by the Labour right wing and the increasing refusal of the Party leadership to abide by the traditional Labourist state-interventionist mantras. The result has been an increasing number of Trotskyist organisations outside the Labour Party, a number of splits and realignments<sup>41</sup>, and increasing appearances of Trotskyist candidates standing on left reformist platforms, particularly in elections during 1999<sup>42</sup>.

Perhaps the most nauseating example of the current realignments took place in 1999 when the SWP (the biggest Trotskyist group in Britain) allied itself in a mutual admiration society with the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain (CPB – publishers of the *Morning Star*) and a rag-bag of left Labour MPs such as Tony Benn and Alice Mahon to build a pro-Serbian strand to head off any internationalist opposition to the developing war in the Balkans.

On the other hand, there were many Trotskyists intent on showing their followers that, in war, they can make whatever choice they wish – so long as its in accord with a bourgeois fraction. Groups such as Workers Power, the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) and Socialist Party all supported the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA) and the would-be Kosovar state/protektorate. They prefer the machinations of the pro-German or pro-American Kosovar nationalists to the SWP's Russian-backed Serbian nationalists.

The question of the move towards a Third World War and the role of the Trotskyists is an opportunity to comment not only on their general methodology (select a bourgeois fraction, ignore internationalism) but also to return to their obsessive anti-fascism.

For internationalists, fascism is a product of imperialism. It is part of the price which the proletariat paid as a result of the profound crisis following the defeat of the revolutionary struggles. In no way, however, do we believe that 20th century bourgeois democracy (the preferred form of imperialist domination in the metropolitan countries) is one jot less an imperialist formation. The historic solution to both fascism and the democratic form of imperialism is working class revolution. Not so for the Trotskyists!

Time and again the Trotskyists will highlight the role of the insignificant fascist organisations – ignoring, for example, the fact that far more black people have died or suffered injury at the hands of the democratic British state. The Trotskyists, together with their Stalinist and other leftist allies have fought long and hard to maintain anti-fascism as a

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic transformation has been the moves by the former "Militant" who ditched their long-time guru, Ted Grant, and transformed themselves into the "Socialist Party" – abandoning the Labour Party, standing their own candidates and seeking alliances with other radical interest groups.

<sup>42</sup> "Scottish Socialist" candidate, Tommy Sheridan, attained the dubious distinction of becoming the lone Trotskyist in the British bourgeoisie's latest state institution, the Scottish Parliament.

significant element in their armoury of confusion.

Anti-fascism is not merely one amongst many other bourgeois confusions prevalent amongst the working-class. It was the single strongest ideological tool used to dragoon the working-class into the Second Imperialist War. Having prepared the ground during the Spanish Civil War, the Trotskyists and Stalinists systematically prepared their followers to fight alongside the democratic powers against the German-led Axis. The official “Communist Party” leaderships were to make up for their departure from that line, during the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939-May 1941, with their out and out support for the Anglo-Russian-American imperialist alliance during Stalin’s “Great Patriotic War”.

Anti-fascism remains a significant weapon in the bourgeoisie's ideological armoury. The “struggle against a dictator” was used to generate support for the wars against Iraq. Clinton and Blair's verbal tirades against the Milosevic Serbian government use many features of imperialism's democratic anti-fascist terminology. We have already shown how modern-day Trotskyists elect to support one or other bourgeois fraction, even in time of war. Their use of anti-fascism helps give their bourgeois bigger siblings even more scope to pull workers towards imperialist slaughter.

### **Conclusion**

This short pamphlet has been about Trotsky in the face of the counter-revolution. It might seem ungenerous that we have not dwelled on his activity in 1905 as the second chair of the St. Petersburg Soviet. It might also appear that we have short-changed him by not quoting at length his brilliant writings such as 1905, *The History of the Russian Revolution* or *Results and Prospects*. We might even have credited him with being more far sighted than Lenin on the course of the future Russian Revolution in the years before the First World War. But that was not our focus. We are trying to analyse the last revolutionary wave in order to clarify what our tasks are for the future. The highpoint of Trotsky's legacy is the 1917 Russian Revolution. And here it is no accident that Trotsky's greatest success as a revolutionary was as Commissar for War. His ruthlessness was a significant factor in the creation of the Red Army. But this strength was also a weakness. As a contemporary said “Trotsky was a man of the state not of the party”. This is a telling comment. It underlines that Trotsky after 1918 was less concerned with the question of working class self-activity and more concerned with building a state power. This is why he could advocate the “militarisation of labour” in 1920. It was thinking of this that Lenin, in the very same *Testament* where he called for the removal of Stalin also criticised Trotsky for...

a disposition to be too much attracted by the purely administrative side of affairs.

It was no wonder then that as the Party became the State Trotsky reserved his criticisms to an internal struggle which was both feeble and inconsistent. He confined his fight to a struggle amongst the leadership which both confused and disoriented the young workers who had been educated in the struggle to create the young Soviet republic.

In the final analysis Trotsky himself was the architect of Trotskyism. Had he survived the imperialist war of 1939-45 he might have avoided support for “degenerated workers' states”. He might even have re-assessed the class nature of the Soviet Union. But history is not about what might have happened. It is about what **did** happen. Trotsky left a method which created a counter-revolutionary movement. It was no accident that Trotsky refused to unite with any other Opposition, either inside Russia or inside the International. Radek, a leading Trotskyist, complained in 1928 that many young workers could not understand why Trotsky did not link up with the Democratic Centralists (a Russian

Communist Left-led organisation by V. Smirnov and T. Sapronov) to form a new communist party<sup>43</sup>.

The Trotskyist leaders dismissed the “Decists” as “ultra-left, sectarian and adventurist”. Similarly, Trotsky rejected links with other oppositions such as our political forerunners in the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy, but also with others politically closer to him like the KPO (Communist Party Opposition) and SAP (Socialist Workers’ Party) in Germany.

Why? Because Trotsky was obsessed with what he thought would be “staying in touch with the masses”. And when the masses were defeated and under the control of the counter-revolution, whether in its Stalinist guise in Russia or its Social Democratic guise in the rest of Europe, Trotsky preferred to keep on terms with the counter-revolution. Hence his “French turn” in 1934 when he urged his followers back into Social Democracy. Whether they have espoused entryism or not, every Trotskyist tendency since has been infected with the same methodology. By rejoining Social Democracy they have done their bit to bury the banner of the communist programme. It is the task of the current generation of revolutionaries to once again unfurl that flag of working class independence so that the coming century fulfils the failed promise of freedom and equality offered by the October Revolution.

#### **Appendix A: Natalya Trotsky breaks with the Fourth International**

We reproduce below the statement made by Trotsky’s widow, Natalya, when she broke from the Trotskyist movement. Her reasoning was that their concessions to Stalinism had resulted in their definitive abandonment of proletarian revolution. The two key factors which she refers to are the Trotskyists’ decision to categorise the Moscow-dominated states in Eastern Europe as “deformed workers’ states” and their support for the Russian, Chinese and North Korean Stalinists during the Korean War.

Sedova Trotsky’s letter is based on quite different premises from the tradition of the Internationalist current which the CWO and the IBRP adhere to. Although she correctly argues that “the Stalinist state” is not a workers’ state she fails to trace the roots of this Trotskyist illusion – quite simply because they go back to Trotsky himself. Trotsky’s declaration of support for “the Socialist Fatherland” (sic) in 1927 illustrate the concessions he made to Stalinism early on during the faction fight amongst the leaders of the Russian Communist Party and, of course, the Communist International. Sedova’s implied support for anti-fascism and Trotskyist “united-frontism” during the 1930s clearly also shows that the author had not made a deep enough critique to unearth the roots of Trotskyism’s counter-revolutionary position.

Nevertheless we consider the letter worthy of re-publication in order to add to a historical record which the Trotskyists would prefer to forget and conceal from those coming into contact with them. The document shows conclusively the distance which the Trotskyist movement had travelled away from revolutionary theory and practice. During the half century since the statement was written the Trotskyists have continued further and further along that counter-revolutionary trajectory.

It should be noted that the SWP (the Socialist Workers Party) referred to in the letter is the party in the USA of that name, at that time effectively the US section of the Fourth International although to comply with US law they chose to describe themselves as a sympathising section. During the 1980s they led a further split amongst the Trotskyists to become unashamed cheerleaders for the Castro regime in Cuba. They are not to be

---

<sup>43</sup> See “The Left Communist Opposition in the USSR in the Late 20s” by A.V. Gusev (*Otechestvennaya Istoriiia*, January/February 1996).

confused with the British-based organisation of the same name whose origins were in one of the many splits within the British Trotskyist movement in the years immediately before Sedova Trotsky's statement.

**Letter to the Executive Committee of the Fourth International**

Comrades,

You know quite well that I have not been in political agreement with you for the past five or six years, since the end of the war and even earlier. The position you have taken on the important events of recent times shows me that, instead of correcting your earlier errors, you are persisting in them and deepening them. On the road you have taken, you have reached a point where it is no longer possible for me to remain silent or to confine myself to private protests. I must now express my opinions publicly.

The step which I feel obliged to take has been a grave and difficult one for me, and I can only regret it sincerely. But there is no other way. After a great deal of reflections and hesitations over a problem which pained me deeply, I find that I must tell you that I see no other way than to say openly that our disagreements make it impossible for me to remain any longer in your ranks.

The reasons for this final action on my part are known to most of you. I repeat them here briefly only for those to whom they are not familiar, touching only on our fundamentally important differences and not on the differences over matters of daily policy which are related to them or which follow from them.

Obsessed by old and outlived formulas, you continue to regard the Stalinist state as a workers' state. I cannot and will not follow you in this.

Virtually every year after the beginning of the fight against the usurping Stalinist bureaucracy, L D Trotsky repeated that the regime was moving to the right, under conditions of a lagging world revolution and the seizure of all political positions in Russia by the bureaucracy. Time and again, he pointed out how the consolidation of Stalinism in Russia led to the worsening of the economic, political and social positions of the working class, and the triumph of a tyrannical and privileged aristocracy. If this trend continues, he said, the revolution will be at an end and the restoration of capitalism will be achieved.

That, unfortunately, is what has happened even if in new and unexpected forms. There is hardly a country in the world where the authentic ideas and bearers of socialism are so barbarously hounded. It should be clear to everyone that the revolution has been completely destroyed by Stalinism. Yet you continue to say that under this unspeakable regime, Russia is still a workers' state. I consider this a blow at socialism. Stalinism and the Stalinist state have nothing whatever in common with a workers' state or with socialism. They are the worst and the most dangerous enemies of socialism and the working class.

You now hold that the states of Eastern Europe over which Stalinism established its domination during and after the war, are likewise workers' states. This is equivalent to saying that Stalinism has carried out a revolutionary socialist role. I cannot and will not follow you in this.

After the war and even before it ended, there was a rising revolutionary movement of the masses in these Eastern countries. But it was not these masses that won power and it was not a workers state that was established by their struggle. It was the Stalinist counter-revolution that won power, reducing these lands to vassals of the Kremlin by strangling the working masses, their revolutionary struggles and their revolutionary aspirations.

By considering that the Stalinist bureaucracy established workers' states in these countries, you assign to it a progressive and even revolutionary role. By propagating this monstrous falsehood to the workers' vanguard, you deny to the Fourth International all the basic reasons for existence as the world party of the socialist revolution. In the past, we always considered Stalinism to be a counter-revolutionary force in every sense of the term. You no longer do so. But I continue to do so.

In 1932 and 1933, the Stalinists, in order to justify their shameless capitulation to Hitlerism, declared that it would matter little if the fascists came to power because socialism would come after and through the rule of fascism. Only dehumanised brutes without a shred of socialist thought or spirit could have argued this way. Now, notwithstanding the revolutionary aims which animate you, you maintain that the despotic Stalinist reaction which has triumphed in Europe is one of the roads through which socialism will eventually come. This view marks an irremediable break with the profoundest convictions always held by our movement and which I continue to share.

I find it impossible to follow you in the question of the Tito regime in Yugoslavia. All the sympathy and support of revolutionists and even of all democrats, should go to the Yugoslav people in their determined resistance to the efforts of Moscow to reduce them and their country to vassalage. Every advantage should be taken of the concessions which the Yugoslav regime now finds itself obliged to make to the people. But your entire press is now devoted to an inexcusable idealisation of the Titoist bureaucracy for which no ground exists in the traditions and principles of our movement.

This bureaucracy is only a replica, in a new form, of the old Stalinist bureaucracy. It was trained in the ideas, the politics and morals of the GPU. Its regime differs from Stalin's in no fundamental regard. It is absurd to believe or to teach that the revolutionary leadership of the Yugoslav people will develop out of this bureaucracy or in any way other than in the course of struggle against it.

Most insupportable of all is the position on the war to which you have committed yourselves. The third world war which threatens humanity confronts the revolutionary movement with the most difficult problems, the most complex situations, the gravest decisions. Our position can be taken only after the most earnest and freest discussions. But in the face of all the events of recent years, you continue to advocate, and to pledge the entire movement, to the defence of the Stalinist state. You are even now supporting the armies of Stalinism in the war which is being endured by the anguished Korean people. I cannot and will not follow you in this.

As far back as 1927, Trotsky, in reply to a disloyal question put to him in the Political Bureau by Stalin, stated his views as follows: "For the socialist fatherland, yes! For the Stalinist regime, no!" That was in 1927! Now, twenty-three years later Stalin has left nothing of the Socialist fatherland. It has been replaced by the enslavement and degradation of the people by the Stalinist autocracy. This is the state you propose to defend in the war, which you are already defending in Korea.

I know very well how often you repeat that you are criticising Stalinism and fighting it. But the fact is that your criticism and your fight lose their value and can yield no results because they are determined by and subordinated to your position of defence of the Stalinist state. Whoever defends this regime of barbarous oppression, regardless of the motives, abandons the principles of socialism and internationalism.

In the message sent me from the recent convention of the SWP you write that Trotsky's ideas continue to be your guide. I must tell you that I read these words with great bitterness. As you observe from what I have written above, I do not see his ideas in your politics. I have confidence in these ideas. I remain convinced that the only way out of the

present situation is the social revolution, the self-emancipation of the proletariat of the world.

– Natalya Sedova Trotsky Mexico, D.F. 9 May 1951

#### **Appendix B: Trotsky and Trotskyism: the chronology (1879-1943)**

As can be seen in the pamphlet, our method is not to argue against Trotsky the man. This is not simply because *argumentum ad hominem* is useless as a way to understand revolutionary history but also because we absolutely reject the bourgeois idea that history is really the history of great men. The life of Trotsky (and indeed of Lenin) is adequate testimony to the fact that individuals are not superior to material circumstances. We are aware, therefore, that the case we have presented here requires some understanding of the main historical events surrounding both Trotsky and the workers' movement as a whole. This chronological outline is intended to provide the context for our arguments.

- **1879 October 26th** Lev Davidovich Bronstein, fifth son of Anna and David Leontevich Bronstein born at Yanovka, Southern Ukraine.
- **1881** Assassination of Tsar Alexander II by Populists who believe Russia can avoid an industrial revolution on Western lines if they adopt the peasant *mir* as their social unit. Populism became the most favoured political movement for Russian intellectuals at this period.
- **1883** George Plekhanov with Vera Zazulich and Pavel Axelrod founded the Emancipation of Labour group, the first Russian Marxist organisation.
- **1895** Lenin and Martov founded the League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class. Its leaders were immediately arrested and sent to Siberia.
- **1897** The Southern Russian Workers Union founded by L.D. Bronstein and other former Narodniks (Populists) who now embraced Marxism and began leafleting factories.
- **1898** Bronstein was arrested and moved around several prisons. In Odessa a gaoler, Trotsky, gave him the idea for the pen name by which he will be known.
- **1900** The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party founded. Sentenced to four years in Siberia Trotsky married Alexandra Lvovna Sokolovskaya (who had earlier introduced him to Marxism) so that they could remain together.
- **1902** Lenin wrote *What is to be Done*. Establishment of *Iskra*, for which Trotsky wrote (nicknamed Piero, 'The Pen'). Trotsky's first escape from Siberia.
- **1903** Split in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Trotsky sided with Mensheviks.
- **1904** Trotsky resigned from Menshevik fraction.
- **1905 January 22nd** "Bloody Sunday": Massacre of peaceful demonstration of workers began a year of revolution. Trotsky (with Natalya Sedova) returned to Russia.
- **November** Trotsky became the second Chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet (after the arrest of Khrustalev-Nosar). Lenin wrote *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* in which he advocated "uninterrupted revolution". Trotsky arrested in December when the revolution collapsed.
- **1907** Made his second escape from Siberia and settled in Vienna where he edited *Pravda* which preached re-uniting of the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. Lenin described him as "that windbag Trotsky" at this time.

- **1908** Stuttgart Conference of the Second International passes the motion proposed by Luxemburg, Lenin etc. to call for a general strike in the event of a European war. The Bosnian Crisis nearly led to war between Russia and Austria-Hungary. German support for Austria forced the Russian Empire to back down.
- **1912** Basle Conference of the Second International repeated the same call.
- **1914** Start of First World War. Leaders of Social Democracy ignore the resolutions of the Second International and support “their” own governments. Only the Russian, Bulgarian and Serbian parties oppose the war. Trotsky went to Switzerland and wrote *The War and the International* which condemned the war before moving to France to work with Martov’s anti-war paper, *Golos (The Voice)* and writing for *Kievan Thought*.
- **1915 February** Trotsky denounced Menshevism in *Nashe Slovo*.
- **September** 38 Socialist delegates from eleven countries met at Zimmerwald to oppose the war. Trotsky wrote the Zimmerwald Manifesto against the war but did not join the Left who supported Lenin’s internationalist position calling for “the imperialist war to be turned into a civil war.”
- **1916** The Kienthal Conference confirms the split between the “Left” and the pacifists. The French state prevent Trotsky’s attendance.
- **September** Trotsky expelled from France, arrived in the USA via Spain.
- **1917 March** On hearing of the outbreak of the February Revolution Trotsky headed back to Russia but the steamer docked at Halifax, Nova Scotia so that he British interned him as a prisoner of war with 800 Germans. Trotsky’s speeches to them on the Zimmerwald Conference were halted by the prison authorities.
- **April** Lenin arrived in Petrograd. His *April Theses* called for proletarian revolution, all power to the soviets, a new International and the adoption of the name communist by the Bolsheviks. Many Bolshevik leaders (including Trotsky’s brother in law Kamenev) refused to accept them.
- **May** “The July Days”. Kronstadt sailors under the influence of Bolshevik slogans tried prematurely to get the Bolsheviks to take over from the Provisional Government. Trotsky rescued the leader of the SRs, Victor Chernov, from the angry sailors. The Provisional Government could muster enough military support to gun down the demonstrators and the Bolsheviks were proscribed. Trotsky announced his support for Lenin and was imprisoned.
- **August** The attempted coup d’etat by General Kornilov forces Kerensky to *de facto* re legitimise the Bolsheviks in order to mobilise popular support against his own Chief of Staff.
- **September** Trotsky elected to the Bolshevik Party Central Committee. On 23rd September he was elected Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet.
- **October** Trotsky supported Lenin’s call for the overthrow of the Kerensky Government.
- **October 24th** As Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet (originally set up to organise the fight against Kornilov) Trotsky organised the takeover of power when Kerensky attempted a pre-emptive strike against the working class. Trotsky not only announced the overthrow of Kerensky but also on the 25th pronounced the famous final epitaph on the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries that they now should go to where they belonged “the dustbin of history”.
- **November** Debate in the Bolshevik Central Committee on the nature of the new power had Trotsky turning down Lenin’s proposal that he, as Chair of the Soviets,

should become head of the new government. When discussing what to call the new government Trotsky suggests the name ‘peoples Commissars’ to avoid the capitalist-sounding ‘ministers’. Trotsky was made Commissar for Foreign Affairs. As Commissar for Foreign Affairs Trotsky says he will simply publish the secret treaties between the imperialist Entente powers (Russia, France and Britain) then “shut up shop”. He does publish the treaties demonstrating that the war is also a war of conquest on the Entente side. But he was given the task of negotiating the nature of the peace with the German Imperial High Command.

- **December** Trotsky (with Kamenev and Joffe) arrived in Brest-Litovsk to negotiate the terms of the peace treaty with the German General Staff. The delegation distributed leaflets to the German troops urging them to revolution. Trotsky tried to stall on accepting the German terms. He accepted Lenin’s offer that if he voted for Trotsky’s “neither war nor peace” line then Trotsky would support Lenin’s recognition that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to accept Brest-Litovsk.
- **1918 March 3rd** The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed costing the Soviet Republic Finland, the Ukraine and its best grain lands. By this time Trotsky had resigned. He now became Commissar for War. For the next two and half years he organised the Red Army.
- **August 27th** Trotsky began to live on his famous train which went from front to front rallying the Red Army in the civil war against the Whites. He virtually did not leave it for two years. Trotsky wrote *Terrorism and Communism* in reply to Mensheviks’ criticisms of the Red Terror.
- **1920 December** With three million proletarians dead and famine and apathy now stalking the Soviet republic it was clear that “war communism” would have to be replaced. In the debate on what to replace it with Trotsky proposed “the militarisation of labour”.
- **1921 January** Italian Socialist Party split when Serrati refused to expel reformists. Communist Party of Italy formed with Amadeo Bordiga as leading figure.
- **March** At the Tenth Party Congress the New Economic Policy (NEP) was adopted to replace “war communism”. Factions such as the Workers Opposition were formally banned. Before it had finished the Kronstadt revolt brought the “tragic necessity” (Trotsky) of its suppression by Tukhachevsky. The failure of the March Action in Germany brought an end to the hopes of immediate relief for the beleaguered Soviet Republic.
- **1922 March** Zinoviev proposed Stalin as General Secretary of the Communist Party.
- **1923 February** In Italy Bordiga arrested.
- **May** Lenin’s first stroke. Lenin wrote his *Testament* criticising both Stalin and Trotsky but urging removal of Stalin.
- **June** Third Enlarged Executive of the Comintern installed new, ‘mixed’ leadership in PCd'I.
- **1924 January** The death of Lenin. Trotsky was absent from the funeral after Stalin told him there would not be enough time for him to return to Moscow.
- **May** Gramsci returned to Italy to take up leadership of PCd'I after two years under the tutelage of the Comintern in Moscow.
- **June** Fifth Congress of Communist International called for ‘bolshevisation’ of Communist Parties.

- **November** The KPD led the German working class to defeat for the final time. Publication of Trotsky's *The Lessons of October*.
- **1925** Trotsky removed as Commissar for War.
- **1926** Failure of the General Strike in Britain. Bordiga's last attendance at a Comintern meeting to challenge Stalin about the direction of the USSR.
- **1927** Defeat of the Chinese working class. Trotsky now joined by Zinoviev and Kamenev in the United Opposition. All three expelled from the Party.
- **1928** Trotsky sent to Alma Ata. Stalin now in total control of Party and state in the USSR. The Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy formally reconstituted in Pantin, Paris. *Prometeo* published in Brussels.
- **1929** Trotsky exiled to Prinkipo Island, Turkey. The first issue of the Bulletin of the Opposition issued in Paris. The Wall Street Crash started the Depression.
- **1930** Formal expulsion of Bordiga from the Communist Party of Italy for "Trotskyism".
- **1933** Trotsky's *The Permanent Revolution* completed. Nazism came to power in Germany. Trotsky obtained a visa to France where the International Left Opposition was based. This took the name International Communist League (Bolshevik Leninist). Italian Fraction, after failed discussions with Trotsky, began to publish *Bilan*.
- **1934** Murder of Kirov in Leningrad began the Purges in the USSR. The so-called "French turn" when Trotsky urged his supporters in France to rejoin Social Democracy. Entryism became a Trotskyist trademark.
- **1935** Trotsky moved to Norway. *The Revolution Betrayed* published.
- **1936** The Spanish Civil War began. Trotsky arrived in Mexico.
- **1937** Japan invaded China.
- **1938** Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son, murdered in Paris by Stalin's agents. Trotsky wrote *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (now known as the *Transitional Programme*). James Burnham and Max Shachtman of the Socialist Workers' Party urged Trotsky to abandon the degenerated workers' state formula.
- **1939** The Hitler-Stalin Pact and the invasion of Poland that began the second imperialist war.
- **1940** The murder of Trotsky by a Stalinist agent. The Fourth International continued to defend the USSR as a "degenerated workers' state" even after the invasion of Finland.
- **1943 May** Stalin dissolved the Comintern as part of the imperialist wartime deal with the USA and Britain.
- **July** Mussolini government collapses. Wave of strikes in Italy. The Italian Left, led by Onorato Damen formed the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista) clandestinely in Fascist Italy.
- **November** First issue of revived *Prometeo*.