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On Leon Trotsky

Trotsky, a guiding light of the century

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This year we commemorate the deaths of three leading figures of our movement. Daniel Bensaïd Marxist activist and philosopher, emerging from the May 1968 movement in France, who died too early in 2010 after a life as leader of the French section and the Fourth International. Ernest Mandel whose political activity started in resistance to the rise of Nazism, was an outstanding Marxist economist and a central leader of the Fourth International from the postwar period until his death in 1995. Leon Trotsky, leader of the Russian Revolution and of the fight against the counter-revolution, founder of the Fourth International, was assassinated by a Stalinist agent and died on 21 August 1940.

On this sad anniversary we publish an article by Daniel Bensaïd on Trotsky written in 2000.

Why this assassination? Leaving aside Stalin's perverse personality, we have to start again from Trotsky's last combats, that is, the entire Mexican period during which he principally waged three great struggles in a phase of collapse of hope.

First, he wanted to prevent any possible confusion between revolution and counterrevolution, between the initial phase of October 1917 and the Stalinist Thermidor. He did this in particular by organizing, upon his arrival in Mexico (January 1937), during the second Moscow trial, the international commission of inquiry chaired by the American philosopher John Dewey. Five hundred pages of documents dismantling the mechanism of falsification, of political amalgamations. The second struggle involved understanding the steps towards a new war, in a phase in which chauvinism was going to exacerbate and darken class issues. Finally, the third struggle, linked to the previous ones, was for the founding of a new international - proclaimed in 1938, but planned at least five years before, from Hitler's victory in Germany – which he conceived not as a gathering of revolutionary Marxists alone, but as a tool turned towards the tasks of the moment. It was in this work that Trotsky was able, at this time, to be “irreplaceable”.

A time of defeats

He was wrong in his prognosis when he drew a parallel between the events that followed the First World War and those that could result from the Second World War. The error lies in the fact that the workers' movements were in very different situations. In the Second World War, many factors accumulated; but what is key is undoubtedly the bureaucratic counter-revolution in the USSR in the 1930s, with a contaminating effect on the entire workers' movement and its most revolutionary component. There was a sort of misunderstanding, of which the disorientation of many French Communists in the face of the German-Soviet pact is the most perfect illustration. But there were major defeats, such as the victory of Nazism in Germany and fascism in Italy, the defeat of the Spanish Civil War, the crushing of the Second Chinese Revolution. An accumulation of social, moral and even physical defeats, which we find difficult to imagine. But you can never assume that everything is decided in advance.

One of Trotsky's major mistakes was to imagine that war would inevitably mean the fall of Stalinism, just as the Franco-German war of 1870 had meant the death sentence of the Bonapartist regime in France. We were in 1945 at the time of triumphant Stalinism, with its contradictory aspects. All this is very well illustrated in Vassili Grossman's book, “Life and Fate”, concerning the battle of Stalingrad. Through the fighting, we see society awaken, and even partly escape bureaucratic control. We can envisage the hypothesis of a revival of the dynamics of October. The twenty years since the 1920s are a short interval. But what Grossman's book says next is unstoppable. Stalin was saved by victory! We do not ask the winners to account for themselves. This is the big problem for the intelligence of

this time.

The theoretical implications are important. In his critique of bureaucratic totalitarianism, if Trotsky understands very well the part played by police coercion, he underestimates the popular consensus linked to the pharaonic dynamic generated, even at a high price, by the Stalinist regime. This is an overlooked point which deserves to be taken up.

However, after the war there were specific responsibilities of the parties. Within the framework of the division of the world - the famous Stalin-Churchill meeting, where they divided Europe with a blue pencil - there were important social, or pre-revolutionary, surges; in France, but more so in Italy and Greece. And here, we can frankly speak of treason, of the subordination of social movements to the interests of the apparatuses. This does not automatically mean a victorious revolution, but a dynamic of development and a political culture of the workers' movement that are certainly different. Which leaves other possibilities. We must nevertheless recall the famous "you have to know how to end a strike" of PCF general secretary Maurice Thorez, or the attitude of the Italian CP at the time of the attack on Togliatti. But the worst and most tragic was the defeat of the Spanish revolution and the disarmament of the resistance and the Greek revolution. Then, the Stalinist vote on the project of Balkan federation, still the only political solution faced with the question of nationalities in the Balkans.

The necessary and the possible

In sum, Trotsky's tragic fate illustrates the tension between the necessary and the possible. Between social transformation responding to the effects of a decadent capitalism, and immediate possibilities. We can already find this when reading Marx's correspondence. As for the theoretical and strategic contribution, it is considerable. Particularly in the analysis of the combined and uneven development of societies, starting with Russia as early as 1905, or the perception of the current modalities of imperialism. But what is irreplaceable, despite its shortcomings, is in the analysis of the phenomenon, unheard of at the time and difficult to understand, of the Stalinist counterrevolution. From this point of view, Trotsky serves as a guiding light. This does not mean a pious or exclusive reference. On the contrary, our task is to transmit a pluralist memory of the workers' movement and of the strategic debates that have traversed it. But in this landscape and this perilous passage, Trotsky provided an indispensable point of support.

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