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Our History

Leon Trotsky – 75 Years Since His Assassination – The Legacy

- Features -

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Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary, was murdered seventy-five years ago today—on August 21, 1940—by Ramón Mercader, an agent of Joseph Stalin, Trotsky's former comrade in the Communist Party and then the ruler of the Soviet Union. Stalin feared that Trotsky might organize a movement to overthrow the new ruling elite in the Soviet Union and that Trotsky's followers might challenge the leading role of the parties of the Communist International active in working-class movements around the world. So Stalin had Trotsky murdered. The occasion of the anniversary of Trotsky's assassination provides a moment to reflect on his significance both during his lifetime and for today.

For some on the left, Trotsky is—after Vladimir Lenin—the world's greatest revolutionary. His career was certainly remarkable: the president of the Petrograd Soviet in the failed Revolution of 1905, a leader of the Revolution of October 1917, Soviet Russia's leading negotiator at the Brest-Litovsk negotiations from December 1918 to February 1919, the founder and leader of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War from November 1917 to October 1922, a leading figure in the first four congresses of the Communist International (1919-1922), leader of the Left Opposition to Stalin, Cassandra-like critic of Communist policy in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, analyst and critic of the role of the left in the Spanish Civil War, author of a critical analysis of Stalinism in *The Revolution Betrayed* and of the great *History of the Russian Revolution*, and finally founder of the Fourth International, a new revolutionary international that challenged the Stalinized Communist International.

Certainly Trotsky's achievements as a writer, an intellectual, and as an organizer—and he was also a great orator—vie with those of any other figure of the twentieth century. Even his greatest failure, the loss of his leadership of the Russian Revolution to Joseph Stalin, leading to a counterrevolution and eventually to his own death, has an admirable if tragic quality about it. Many on the left in his own time and later in the 1960s and 70s saw Trotsky as an iconic figure, emblematic of the struggle for socialism.

Still, we have to wonder what we in the twenty-first century can take from Trotsky's life and work. Do we take his body of work as a doctrine? Or do we take key elements of his thought as a method? Or do we pick and choose from Trotsky's various analyses? Or, finally, are there within Trotsky's ideas and actions, elements that should lead us to reject the notion that he can serve us as any sort of a model today?

Rethinking Trotskyism

There are some who hold that Trotsky's ideas constitute an integrated whole that can be called "Trotskyism," a doctrine—in many cases a dogma—which explains events and serves as a guide to action today. For these "Trotskyists," Trotsky—at least after he became a belated Bolshevik in 1917—was virtually never wrong. The starting point of all discussions is to be found in the texts of Lenin and Trotsky. We have come over the years to refer to these true believers as "orthodox Trotskyists" because of the quasi-religious character of their adulation of Trotsky's words. As with all religious thinkers, there is no arguing with these apostles of Trotskyism; one must wait for them to recognize the cult-like character of their organizations and credos. We need not name these groups, but anyone who has met them will know them and recognize the type.

Another group emphasizes Trotsky's method as seen in his theoretical works and believes that this method has the consistency of a sort of general field theory of revolution. So for them, the theory of permanent revolution laid out in *Results and Prospects*, the analysis of the rise of Stalinism in *The Revolution Betrayed*, the critique of the German Communist Party in the years before the triumph of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, the analysis of world capitalism in the first four congresses of the Communist International, the documents justifying the creation of the Fourth International and its Transitional Program of 1938 can be seen as the heart of "Trotskyism." Some would argue that, conceived in

this way, Trotskyism puts the working class at the center of all analyses. But does it?

The Theory of Permanent Revolution

While this approach to Trotsky has a certain attractiveness to those inclined to desire a general theory, the issue is that there are many problems with the individual parts of the theory. For example, Trotsky theory of permanent revolution developed in the first few years of the twentieth century argued that in late-developing capitalist societies—such as Russia—the bourgeoisie could not undertake to overthrow the aristocratic order. Therefore, the working class would have to both undertake the bourgeois-democratic revolution while at the same time carrying out a socialist and international revolution.

The Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917 seemed to vindicate his theory, as the Bolshevik Party led the Russian working class to overthrow the Czarist autocracy; and when the bourgeoisie failed to carry out a bourgeois-democratic revolution, the Russian working class acted to attempt to create a democratic workers state that would lay the foundations for socialist society in the relatively near future. The failure of that project by the 1930s does not vitiate the insights of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

The problem for the theory, however, was that by the mid-twentieth century other phenomena unforeseen by Trotsky were taking place. World War II led to an international decolonization movement, the result of the United States becoming hegemonic at the expense of Britain, France, the Netherlands and other European powers and of nationalist movements within the colonies themselves. New capitalist states, some calling themselves “socialist,” arose, often without significant working-class intervention or leadership, from Africa and Asia to Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Asia, the Communist Parties, which were not working-class parties but rather political armies, led revolutions of national liberation to victory in China, North Korea, and Vietnam installing bureaucratic governments that had nothing to do with either democracy or socialism. Later in the twentieth century, capitalists succeeded in carrying out bourgeois revolutions in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and North Korea; more authoritarian than democratic to be sure, but bourgeois revolutions nonetheless.

Similarly, a guerrilla group, with none of the characteristics of a working-class movement and party, carried out a revolution in Cuba, and soon became a bureaucratic ruling class, however fine its education and health system and however much it claimed to role on behalf of the working class. The capitalist class also proved capable of carrying out revolutions that overturned old criollo elites and landed interests in countries as different as Bolivia, Mexico, Brazil, and throughout Central America and the Caribbean.

The theory of permanent revolution—the idea that a national working class with an international revolutionary perspective would have to accomplish the bourgeois revolution in late developing capitalist countries—proved by the mid-twentieth century to no longer hold true. The attempts by orthodox Trotskyists to squeeze the various and contradictory experiences of twentieth century national revolutions into Trotsky's original theory became positively Ptolemaic.

What was and remains useful in Trotsky's theory, however, was the attempt to place national political economic developments and class struggles into the international context—but since globalization and the neoliberal counter-revolution, that has become a quite common approach. In that sense, perhaps we are all Trotskyists now, though I am sure the Trotskyists will not like that idea.

The Nature of the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties

Or let us take Trotsky's book *The Revolution Betrayed* and his other writings on the rise of the Stalinist ruling group in the Soviet Union. Trotsky's view on this phenomenon no longer compels many people, and not because of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and 1990. The problem is that Trotsky clearly misunderstood the nature of Stalin's counter-revolution, believing that although Stalin and the bureaucracy controlled the government, Russia, because of the nationalization of finance and industry, remained "a workers' state," albeit "a degenerated workers state." A workers' state where workers' labor unions had been turned into labor fronts to increase productivity, where the workers' councils (soviets) had ceased to function, where the bureaucracy's Communist Party was the only party and workers had none of their own? A workers' state where the government killed tens of thousands of peasants, workers, old Bolshevik leaders, and its political opponents until the numbers mounted into the millions?

After World War II, Trotsky's followers extended this analysis, claiming that the Soviet Red Army's conquest of Eastern Europe and imposition of Communist Party governments in the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, and East Germany had created "deformed workers' states" there. Trotsky himself, I think, would never have arrived at such a preposterous conclusion. Clearly, the argument that Trotskyism is a theory that puts workers at the center of the analysis didn't hold up for his analysis of the Soviet Union where his fixation of the nationalization of property obscured his understanding of the role of the workers themselves.

Trotsky's analysis of Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in particular his critique of the German Communist Party for its failure to create a united front with the Social Democratic Party, remains one of his most brilliant pieces of writing. Whether or not a discussion of the strategy of the united front rises to the level of theory is debatable as is the question of whether the united front of working class parties is particularly Trotskyist, as opposed to Leninist, or simply part of the working class arsenal of strategies and tactics.

Where Trotsky proved to be absolutely wrong about the Communist Parties was in his argument that they had become social democratic, reformist parties that blocked the way to revolution. Already in Spain in the late 1930s it was clear that the Communists would attempt to push aside other parties in order to seize state power and reorganize it along Stalinist lines—though this was only adumbrated in Spain. At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union's Red Army moved through Eastern Europe overturning capitalist governments and putting Communist Parties in power, carrying out a full scale revolution that replaced capitalism and liberal states with Communist regimes.

In Albania and Yugoslavia the Communist Parties proved capable of leading national revolutions, while in Czechoslovakia the Communists combined the threat of the Red Army, an alliance with a wing of the Social Democratic Party, and the political leadership of mass strikes to take power there. And as we have already mentioned, the core of a bureaucratic ruling class leading peasant armies was able to take power in China, Vietnam, and North Korea. The Communist Parties proved to be really revolutionary—only the anti-capitalist revolution they fought for and achieved had nothing to do with socialism.

But weren't things different in Western Europe? The French and Italian Communist parties that might have led a revolution in those societies did not, but not because they were reformist. They had been ordered by Stalin to restrain and to disarm the working class, to prevent revolution because he had made a deal with Britain and the United States to divide Europe. If Stalin had given the order, the French and Italian parties would have attempted revolution in those countries, as would Communists in any other, but Stalin wanted to honor the deal had had made divvying up Europe with Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. a deal that recognized Soviet control of Eastern Europe. Later in the heyday of Eurocommunism in the 1980s, the Communist Parties would become social democratic, but they were not in Trotsky's time.

The Fourth International

What about the analysis that justified the establishment of the Fourth International in 1938? Trotsky argued that since the Communist International had failed the test of resisting the rise of the Nazis – principally because of Stalin’s rejection of the strategy of the united front in the early 1930s – that it was necessary to create a new international revolutionary organization. We see here a method that Trotsky’s followers (and other leftists) have sometimes applied to other situations, the notion that the objective situation necessitated revolutionaries to do something, however unfeasible the project might be.

Trotsky’s call for a Fourth International was based on his assessment – one shared by many other leftists at the time – that there would be a second world war and that it would be followed by a revolutionary upheaval throughout capitalist Europe. After all, the First World War had led to the overthrow of the governments of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The Communist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, Trotsky believed, would be swept away by revolution.

So, convinced that the Communist International was incapable of leading the working class, Trotsky, with only a handful of followers in just a few countries, launched the Fourth International hoping to gain the forces to contest with the Stalinist Communist leadership of the working class on a world scale. Trotsky dismissed those who questioned the founding of the FI as “pedants,” arguing that struggle was increasing and would lead to revolutionary regroupment and a growing revolutionary international. Trotsky’s prediction of the post-war European revolution and the instability of Stalinism proved to be wrong.

While the notion of maintaining a revolutionary alternative to Stalinist Communism and Social Democracy was certainly admirable, the Fourth International failed to grow and prosper as Trotsky had hoped. At the same time, the establishment of the Fourth International on such a weak basis tended to make Trotsky the Pope – and nothing creates schisms like a Pope. The small – sometimes tiny – Trotskyist groups were riven with factionalism, while at the same time Trotsky sought to keep out of the FI leaders of other Marxist groups who did not adhere to every jot and tittle of his views. Consequently Trotsky had no rivals of stature in the Fourth International and little base in the working class. Effectively isolated and defeated by Stalin, his sphere of political activity reduced to the small world of the Fourth International, his son and other friends and colleagues murdered by Stalin’s agents, his own organization riddled with spies, Trotsky’s role as undisputed leader of the FI tended to bring out the worst of his arrogant personality, offending many of his longtime friends and allies.

In retrospect it seems that the establishment of the FI – the attempt to create world party of revolution – was the wrong project, however objectively necessary it might have appeared to Trotsky. Perhaps what was needed was a broad front for the defense of democratic socialist principles and against the dictatorships in Germany and Russia, though that too would have been a difficult task.

Despite the fundamental flaws in the project, the founding of the Fourth International provided the opportunity for Trotsky to write his brilliant “The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism.” In this essay, surveying the world scene as he had done in the early 1920s, Trotsky summed up the situation facing workers in many countries and offered them “a bridge between the present demand the socialist program of the revolution.” As workers fought for the program’s transitional demands they would come to see the need for a socialist revolution. While the Fourth International’s member sections were too small to have much impact at the time, the program embodied a method that would be taken up by others in the future.

Revolutionary Democrat?

Early in his revolutionary career, Trotsky had been a scathing critic of Lenin and his Bolshevik theory of the disciplined party. He argued that Lenin's conception of the party of professional revolutionaries would lead to the party substituting itself for the working class. As he famously said in 1904, "Lenin's methods lead to this: the party organization [the caucus] at first substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organization; and finally a single 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee..." He argued that instead, "The party must seek the guarantee of its stability in its own base, in an active and self-reliant proletariat, and not in its top caucus, which the revolution...may suddenly sweep away with its wing..."

In this way Trotsky excluded himself from Lenin's Bolsheviks, but neither did he join the Mensheviks. Trotsky spent the years between 1903 and 1917 attempting to convince Lenin's Bolsheviks and Martov's Mensheviks that they should reconcile their differences. Only in April of 1917, when it seemed that the Bolsheviks were preparing to take power, did Trotsky join Lenin's Bolsheviks, quickly becoming second in the party only to Lenin himself. From that time on Trotsky called himself a Leninist and a Bolshevik, though he failed to convince many of the Old Bolsheviks that he really was what he said he was.

Personality is frequently aligned with political predilections. Trotsky had since he was a youth been capable and confident, but also often arrogant; he believed he was right and fought hard for his views. His experience as head of the Red Army may have amplified his authoritarian tendencies, perhaps accounting for his advocacy of such policies as the militarization of labor at the Ninth Bolshevik Party Congress of 1920.

Trotsky had been put in charge of the Soviet Union's transportation system; that is, of its railroads and their difficult and demoralized workforce. Trotsky wanted the unions to help him make the railroads run more efficiently, but to do so, he wanted the unions to function like the military. Workers should be treated, he said, like soldiers in the army; those who deserted should go to punitive labor battalions or to concentration camps. Lenin opposed him on the issue, which failed to pass the congress, but one sees here Trotsky's weaknesses.

At the Tenth Party Congress in 1921, when the Bolsheviks were challenged by the Workers' Opposition, Trotsky wrote,

"It is necessary to create among us the awareness of the revolutionary historical birthright of the party. The party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of the temporary wavering in the spontaneous moods of the masses, regardless of the temporary vacillations even even in the working class. This awareness is for us the indispensable unifying element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of workers democracy, although the workers democracy is, of course, the only method by which the masses can be drawn more and more into political life." [1]

The idea of the "birthright" of the revolutionary party represents the extreme of Trotsky's authoritarianism.

After Lenin's death in 1924, Trotsky fought only on "Leninist" terms—that is, within the party. When in the mid-1920s various factions arose to challenge the rise of Stalinism, Trotsky refused to support them or align himself with them, arguing that the fight against Stalin could only be carried out within the party, which contained the most revolutionary elements of the working class. Trotsky put his faith in the party, not in the broader working class that he viewed as far less politically conscious than the Communist Party members. While there were many opposed to Stalin and the state bureaucracy's growing power who came from a variety of socialist tendencies, Trotsky disdained to work with them because they stood outside of his specific wing of the Communist Party.

Trotsky fought for democracy within the Communist Party, or more exactly within the leadership of the party, but in the 1920s he had no desire to fight for democracy in Russian society at large. In truth, he only explicitly became an

advocate of multi-party democracy in the Soviet Union in 1936. One wonders if Trotsky's conversion to "Leninism" hadn't convinced him that the primary struggle is always one for leadership, leading him to neglect the struggle for power by the working-class rank-and-file over their own institutions.

Yet in the late-1920s and into the 1930s, Trotsky would become the leading figure in the opposition, advocating greater democracy against the developing dictatorship of Stalin and the party-state bureaucracy. He continued throughout his exile in Turkey, France, Norway, and Mexico to analyze every step of the process of Stalin's rise to power while demanding greater internal democracy in order to chart a new course for the party.

The Legacy

What is Trotsky's legacy, then? Trotsky was a central figure in the Russian Revolution, the only working-class revolution thatâ€”excepting the Paris Communeâ€”we have seen. When the revolution had clearly begun to degenerate, he opposed the tendencies toward nationalism, bureaucracy, and the cohering of a new ruling elite led by Stalin.

Trotsky became the leading oppositionist, dedicating himself to analyzing and attempting to understand the impact of the counter-revolution in Russia on the frustrated European revolution, most fundamentally the failure of the German Revolution (1918-23) followed by the rise of Nazism and then the left's defeat in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). At the same time, he attempted through his writing to offer correctives to the Communist policy, providing an alternative strategy for building a united front and within it a revolutionary party. He never rested from his political work until the moment that he was killed.

While some of his theories failed to hold up over time, and though the Fourth International failed to become a significant revolutionary force, many of Trotsky's insights into the dynamics of revolutionary movements in Russia, Germany, and Spain and his analysis of the Soviet Unionâ€”however flawedâ€”contributed enormously to the democratic socialist left's understanding. While one may not agree with everything he wrote, almost nothing he wrote can be ignored and much of it remains critically important to our understanding of the history of socialism.

The left in the last 75 years has, in large part because of his writing, put a greater emphasis on the dangers of a revolutionary party and state transforming themselves into a new ruling elite capable of interrupting and subverting the struggle for socialism. Even if Trotsky was not always the most consistent exponent of democracy, his work has made us more aware of the centrality of democracy to socialism.

[1] Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, pp. 508-09.