

Foreword to *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*

By David North
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David North's forthcoming book, The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century (416 pages; ISBN 978-1-893638-40-2), is available from Mehring Books. North is chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party.

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There is broad agreement among historians that the twentieth century—as a distinct epoch in politics and culture—began in August 1914 with the outbreak of World War I. But the question of when the century ended—or whether it has ended at all—is the subject of intense controversy. The dispute is not over the formal dating of a given 100-year span of time. Clearly, the 1900s are over and we live in the twenty-first century. And yet, though halfway through the second decade of the new century, our world remains well within the gravitational field of the twentieth. If historians still look back in anger on the last century, it is because mankind is still fighting—in the spheres of politics, economics, philosophy, and even art—its undecided battles.

Until recently, historians were fairly confident that the twentieth century had been successfully laid to rest. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 set into motion a tidal wave of capitalist triumphalism that engulfed, with little resistance, academic institutions all over the world. The professoriat proceeded rapidly to bring its theories of history into alignment with the latest newspaper headlines and editorials.

Prior to the events of 1989–91, the vast majority of the academic specialists assumed that the Soviet Union, which they more or less equated with socialism, would last forever. Even those who were familiar with Leon Trotsky's critique of Stalinism viewed his prediction that the regime of the Kremlin bureaucracy would lead, unless overthrown by the Soviet working class, to the dissolution of the workers' state and the restoration of capitalism, as the unrealistic and self-justifying jeremiad of Stalin's vanquished foe.

As the Stalinist regimes dissolved themselves, however, the professors and think-tank analysts hastened to proclaim that not only had the United States achieved an irreversible victory over its Cold War adversary, but capitalism had expunged its socialist nemesis from the realm of historical possibilities. The spirit of the moment found its consummate expression in an essay by the Rand analyst, Francis Fukuyama, entitled "The End of History?" published in the journal *National Interest*. He wrote:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.[1]

To be fair to Fukuyama, he did not argue that the future would be placid and trouble free. However, he claimed that there could no longer be any doubt that liberal capitalist democracy, however imperfectly practiced in the United States and Western Europe, represented, in terms of mankind's political and economic evolution, an unsurpassable ideal. History had "ended" in the sense that there was no credible intellectual and political alternative to liberal democracy based on capitalist market economics. In a book published in 1992 that developed his argument, Fukuyama wrote:

In our grandparents' time, many reasonable people could foresee a radiant socialist future in which private property and capitalism had been abolished, and in which politics itself was somehow overcome. Today, by contrast, we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist. Within that framework, of course, many things could be improved: we could house the homeless, guarantee opportunity for minorities and women, improve competitiveness, and create new jobs. We can also imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know now, in which national, racial, or religious intolerance makes a comeback, or in which we are overwhelmed by war or environmental collapse. But we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better. Other, less reflective ages also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt *had* to be better than liberal democracy.[2]

Fukuyama's analysis combined bourgeois political triumphalism with extreme philosophical pessimism. It might have been appropriate for the publisher to insert in every copy of Fukuyama's book a prescription for Prozac. If the existing capitalist reality was, for all intents and purposes, as good as it could get, mankind's future was very bleak. But how realistic was Fukuyama's hypothesis? Though he claimed to draw inspiration from Hegel, Fukuyama's grasp of dialectics was extremely limited. The claim that history had ended could make sense only if it could be demonstrated that capitalism had somehow solved and overcome the internal and systemic contradictions that generated conflict and crisis. But even Fukuyama avoided such a categorical conclusion. He acknowledged that capitalism would be plagued by social inequality and the discontent that it engendered. He went so far as to admit the possibility that the dissatisfaction with the "imperfect reciprocity of recognition [i.e., social inequality] will be the source of future attempts to find alternatives to liberal democracy and to capitalism from the Left." [3] But what, then, was left of Fukuyama's proclamation of history's end?

The American historian Martin Malia (1924–2004) understood that

Fukuyama's theory was untenable. He cautioned against "triumphalist talk that History, after having overcome the illusions of both fascism and Communism, had at last arrived at a safe harbor in market democracy." Malia expressed doubts about the viability of "a post-Marxist vision of the end of history..."[4] Capitalism, he feared, would never free itself from the specter of its historical antagonist. "The socialist idea will surely be with us as long as inequality is, and that will be a very long time indeed." [5] Thus, Malia argued, the only way to combat the persistence of socialist aspirations was to insist, on the basis of the Soviet experience, that socialism could not work. This was the thesis of *The Soviet Tragedy*. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the inevitable outcome of the October 1917 Revolution. The Bolshevik Party had attempted the impossible: the creation of a non-capitalist system. This was the fatal historical error of Lenin and Trotsky.

The failure of integral socialism stems not from its having been tried out first in the wrong place, Russia, but from the socialist idea per se. And the reason for this failure is that socialism as full noncapitalism is intrinsically impossible.[6]

This argument was hardly substantiated, and Malia ended his book on a strangely ambivalent and troubled note. He foresaw the possibility of a renewed upsurge of a mass revolutionary movement for socialism.

The unprecedented Leninist phenomenon appeared because of the unprecedented world crisis of 1914–1918. Any analogous global crisis could drive dormant socialist programs once again toward maximalism, and consequently towards the temptation of seeking absolute power in order to achieve absolute ends.[7]

While Fukuyama had argued that the "End of History" signified the end of socialism, Malia mournfully acknowledged that socialism would continue to attract adherents, even though the goal of a noncapitalist society was impossible to realize. The British historian, Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), who had been a devoted member of the Stalinist British Communist Party for more than a half-century, borrowed and modified the arguments of both Fukuyama and Malia in the formulation of a theory of twentieth century history that struck a chord among a broad layer of moderately left and ex-left academics. Hobsbawm was too knowledgeable a historian, and too steeped in empiricist methodology, to accept the metaphysical speculations of Fukuyama. He trimmed Fukuyama's conception to more manageable proportions. The dissolution of the Soviet Union signified, if not the end of history, the end of the twentieth century. In *The Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm argued that the years between the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 comprised the "Short Twentieth Century"

which, as we can now see in retrospect, forms a coherent historical period that has now ended ... there can be no serious doubt that in the late 1980s and early 1990s an era in world history ended and a new one began. That is the essential information for historians of the century...[8]

Hobsbawm's periodization of the twentieth century as a "short" seventy-seven year time span between 1914 and 1991 reformulated, in a less strident form, Malia's rejection of the revolutionary project of the

Bolsheviks. By bringing the curtain down on the drama of the twentieth century with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Hobsbawm proclaimed the end of the revolutionary epoch that had begun with the outbreak of World War I. Between 1914 and 1991, socialism—in one form or another—had been seen as an alternative to capitalism. That period ended, for all time, in 1991. Hobsbawm left little doubt that the revolutionary socialist project as conceived by Lenin and Trotsky probably had been an illusion from the start. In the light of 1991, the Bolshevik seizure of power, *three quarters of a century earlier*, could be seen to have been a tragic error. Even if one could find, in the circumstances that existed in 1917, political justification for the decisions of the Bolshevik leaders, Hobsbawm insisted that the October Revolution was a one of a kind, absolutely unique and unrepeatable event—the outcome of circumstances so peculiar as to be without any contemporary political relevance.

Fukuyama and Hobsbawm placed the fate of the Soviet Union at the center of their periodization of the historical process. For Fukuyama the dissolution signified the "End of History." For Hobsbawm it marked the end of the "Short Twentieth Century." The vast historical significance they attributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a somewhat backhanded acknowledgment that the October Revolution was the central political event of the twentieth century. However, both the "End of History" and "Short Twentieth Century" theses were based on a fundamentally false conception of the historical foundations of the October Revolution and the nature of the Soviet state as it evolved in the decades following the Bolshevik seizure of state power in 1917. While Fukuyama engaged in abstract theorizing that paid little attention to specific problems of historical causality, Hobsbawm accepted the conventional and superficial view that the socialist revolution in Russia would never have taken place had it not been for the primal disaster of World War I. "Without the breakdown of nineteenth-century bourgeois society in the Age of Catastrophe," he wrote, "there would have been no October revolution and no USSR." [9]

This is a tautology, not an explanation. The real intellectual challenge, evaded by Hobsbawm, was to identify the deep-rooted contradictions, of a global character, that finally erupted in world war *and* social revolution. After all, World War I was preceded by years of intensifying Great Power conflicts. And in the decades that preceded the October Revolution, socialism had emerged as an international mass movement of the working class. Prior to 1914 socialists had not only expected the breakdown of bourgeois society, but had also warned that the breakdown might assume the form of a devastating European-wide and even global war. Far from welcoming such a war as an essential precondition for socialist revolution, the great Marxists of the pre-1914 era placed the struggle against imperialist militarism at the center of their political work.

Only as it became increasingly evident that a major imperialist war was imminent did socialists begin to consider the strategic implications, from the standpoint of revolutionary struggle, of such an event. The critical point is that even before 1914, Marxian socialists had recognized the common origin of war and revolution in the historical crisis of the capitalist system. Ignoring the pre-1914 debates within the socialist movement, Hobsbawm's superficial treatment of the problem of historical causality portrayed the October Revolution as a merely contingent and accidental outcome of the war.

A serious flaw in the arguments of Fukuyama, Hobsbawm and, we should add, Malia, was their uncritical identification of the Soviet Union, at all stages of its history, with socialism. The Stalinist regime was accepted as the inevitable outcome of the original sin of the October Revolution. This fatalistic and ultra-deterministic view of Soviet history refused to consider the possibility of a non-Stalinist course of development. Hobsbawm expressed complete indifference to the struggle of oppositional tendencies within the Soviet Communist Party—especially

that led by Leon Trotsky—to the emerging bureaucratic dictatorship headed by Stalin. He dismissed discussion about alternatives to Stalin's rule as an illegitimate exercise in counterfactual history. However intense the conflict within the Communist Party, Stalin's faction eventually prevailed; and, from that point on, Stalinism was—to cite the cynical phrase of the historian—"the only game in town." What Trotsky and the Left Opposition said and wrote in the struggle that raged within the Communist Party between 1923 and 1927 was beside the point. For Hobsbawm, the issue was rather straightforward. Stalin won. Trotsky lost. That's all there was to it. Historians should not concern themselves with what might have been.

Hobsbawm's peremptory dismissal of alternatives to Stalinism was far less the expression of an uncompromising historical objectivity than an exercise in political apologetics. He was hardly a detached and impartial commentator. During his long membership in the British Stalinist movement, Hobsbawm had never objected to the Soviet bureaucracy's falsification of the history of the Russian Revolution and the role of Leon Trotsky. Hobsbawm went to his grave in 2012, at the age of ninety-five, without ever acknowledging forthrightly that he had upheld for decades the official Stalinist history of the USSR that had been based on lies.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, according to Hobsbawm, had brought the "Age of Extremes" to an end. Capitalism was once again, as it had been before 1917, "the only game in town." And while it was not unlikely that society would experience violent upheavals at some point in the future, there existed no prospect that a mass revolutionary socialist movement would re-emerge.

Hobsbawm's narrative led the reader to conclude that mankind had arrived at an impasse and that its situation was hopeless. "We do not know where we are going," he wrote at the end of *The Age of Extremes*. Hobsbawm saw nothing in the experience of the past that might serve as a positive guide for the future. He was certain of only one thing: the socialist revolution of October 1917 neither could nor should serve as an example or guide for the struggles of the future. "If we try to build the third millennium on that basis," he wrote, "we shall fail." And "the price of failure," Hobsbawm intoned in the final sentence of his long book, "is darkness." [10]

The lectures and essays published in this volume were, for the most part, developed in opposition to the claim that the dissolution of the Soviet Union had brought to a conclusive end the epoch of world socialist revolution. In opposition to Fukuyama's "End of History" and Hobsbawm's "Short Twentieth Century," I argued that the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while certainly an event of great importance, did not mark the traumatic end of socialism. History would continue. And, to the extent that the twentieth century is defined as an epoch of intense capitalist crisis, giving rise to wars and revolutions, it is most appropriately characterized as "unfinished." That is, the central economic, social and political contradictions that confront mankind at the start of the twenty-first century are, in the main, the same as those it confronted at the beginning of the twentieth. For all the scientific advances, technological innovations, political upheavals and social transformations, the twentieth century ended on a strangely inconclusive note. None of the great social, economic and political issues that underlay the struggles of the century had been conclusively settled. The First World War was preceded and actually triggered by conflicts over the borders of states in the Balkans. Nearly eighty years later, the dissolution of Yugoslavia—instigated by the United States and Germany—set into motion a decade of bloody conflict over state sovereignty and the location of borders. World War I began in 1914 with the decision of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to punish the nationalist regime in Serbia for its obstruction of imperial interests. Eighty-five years later, in the twilight of the twentieth century, the United States bombed Serbia mercilessly to compel it to accept the imperialist rearrangement of borders in the Balkans.

This is not merely a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they remain the same). It is, rather, an example of the long-term persistence of fundamental socioeconomic and political issues that connect the world of 2014 with that of 1914 and endow the twentieth century with its "unfinished" character.

By way of comparison, let us consider how the world of 1800 would have appeared to those who celebrated New Year's Eve at the dawn of the twentieth century. As the 1800s came to a close, the Napoleonic Wars had clearly receded into the realm of history. The French Revolution and the battles of Austerlitz and Waterloo appeared to those alive in 1900 as the epic struggles of a very different age. The personalities of Robespierre, Danton and Napoleon continued to fascinate. But they were figures of another time and historical place, distant from the world of 1900. Of course, their impact on world history endured. But the political world in which they lived had been fundamentally and dramatically transformed in the course of the nineteenth century. In Western Europe and North America the processes of bourgeois-democratic and national-state consolidation precipitated by the American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century had been largely completed. The industrial revolution had changed the economic and social structures of the advanced countries. The old conflict between the feudal aristocracies and rising bourgeoisie was transcended by the new form of class struggle arising out of the rapid development of industrial capitalism and the emergence of the proletariat. The inadequacy of the general democratic phrases that guided the great struggles of the late eighteenth century was made painfully obvious by the revolutions of 1848. *The Rights of Man* was written in the language of the old bourgeois-democratic revolutions. *The Communist Manifesto* was written in the language of the new proletarian socialist revolution.

By the turn of the twentieth century, politics had acquired a thoroughly global character, based on the development of a highly interconnected world economy. The system of national states, consolidated in the course of the nineteenth century, came under terrific strain, which assumed the form of an increasingly bitter struggle among the most powerful capitalist states for world domination. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the term "imperialism" entered into common usage. In the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I, the economic foundations of this new phenomenon and its social and political consequences were carefully analyzed. In 1902 the British economist J.A. Hobson wrote a book, entitled *Imperialism*, in which he argued, "The economic root of Imperialism is the desire of strong organized industrial and financial interests to secure and develop at the public expense and by public force private markets for their surplus goods and their surplus capital." [11] In 1910, the Austrian Social Democratic theoretician Rudolf Hilferding, in his work *Finance Capital*, called attention not only to the inherently antidemocratic and violent character of imperialism, but also to its revolutionary implications:

The action of the capitalist class itself, as revealed in the policy of imperialism, necessarily directs the proletariat into the path of independent class politics, which can only end in the final overthrow of capitalism. As long as the principles of *laissez-faire* were dominant, and state intervention in economic affairs, as well as the character of the state as an organization of class domination, were concealed, it required a comparatively mature level of understanding to appreciate the necessity for political struggle, and above all the necessity for the ultimate political goal, the conquest of state power. It is no accident, then, that in England, the classical country of non-intervention, the emergence of independent working class political action was so difficult. But this is now changing. The capitalist class seizes possession of the state apparatus in a direct,

undisguised and palpable way, and makes it the instrument of its exploitative interests in a manner which is apparent to every worker, who must now recognize that the conquest of political power by the proletariat is his own most immediate personal interest. The blatant seizure of the state by the capitalist class directly compels every proletarian to strive for the conquest of political power as the only means of putting an end to his own exploitation.[12]

In 1916, with the world war entering its third year, Lenin provided a succinct characterization of imperialism:

The supplanting of free competition by monopoly is the fundamental economic feature, the *quintessence* of imperialism.

... Imperialism, as the highest stage of capitalism in America and Europe, and later in Asia, took final shape in the period 1898–1914. The Spanish-American War (1898), the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) and the economic crisis in Europe in 1900 are the chief historical landmarks in the new era of world history.

... the decay of capitalism is manifested in the creation of a huge stratum of *rentiers*, capitalists who live by “clipping coupons.” ... export of capital is parasitism raised to a high pitch. ... Political reaction *all along* the line is a characteristic feature of imperialism. Corruption, bribery on a huge scale and all kinds of fraud. ... the exploitation of oppressed nations ... by a handful of “Great” Powers ...[13]

In *War and the International*, written in 1915, Trotsky identified the conflict as

a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state. It means the collapse of the national state as an independent economic unit.

... The War proclaims the downfall of the national state. Yet at the same time it proclaims the downfall of the capitalist system of economy. By means of the national state, capitalism has revolutionized the whole economic system of the world. It has divided the whole earth among the oligarchies of the great powers, around which were grouped the satellites, the small nations, who lived off the rivalry between the great ones. The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions but also against the capitalist economic organizations, which has now turned into barbarous disorganization and chaos.[14]

In these writings we encounter the vocabulary and terminology of contemporary international geopolitics. The world described in them is one that we can still recognize as our own. It is the world of capitalism, of oligarchic elites, of massive conglomerates that pursue their global interests, and of authoritarian regimes. These works were written at the dawn of an epoch—of wars and revolutions—in which we still live. The conflicting conceptions of the twentieth century have far reaching

implications for our understanding of the present and our expectations for the future. The “End of History” thesis legitimizes resignation and complacency. The “Short Twentieth Century,” with its narrative of inevitable defeat and the ultimate futility of the revolutionary struggle for socialism, promotes a mood of existential hopelessness in a capitalist world which—even as it moves inexorably toward a catastrophe that threatens the extinction of civilization—will always possess sufficient power to crush whatever mass opposition may arise.

The conception of the “Unfinished Twentieth Century” rejects the ahistorical pessimism of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. The “Unfinished Twentieth Century” locates humanity in the midst of a continuing and unresolved conflict. The outcome of the global crisis that began in August 1914 has yet to be decided. The historical alternatives confronting mankind are those identified by Rosa Luxemburg, in the midst of World War I, nearly a century ago: “Either the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture, and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery; or, the victory of Socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism.”[15] For Marxists, the existential category of *hopelessness* has no place in a scientific appraisal of historical possibilities. We understand existing conditions, in all their complexity, as the transitional manifestations of law-governed socioeconomic contradictions that can (and must) be comprehended and acted upon. The understanding of the “unfinished” character of the twentieth century places immense importance on the study of its history. The upheavals and struggles of the past are seen as vital strategic experiences whose lessons must be thoroughly assimilated by the international socialist movement.

More than twenty years have passed since the formulation of these conflicting interpretations of the significance of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Which of them have stood the test of time? Contrary to Fukuyama’s expectation, history, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, shows no sign of abating. One of his central claims was that the “End of History” would be characterized by a decline in the frequency of wars. With learned references to Hume, Kant and Schumpeter, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy was peaceful. “The argument then,” he prophesied, “is not so much that liberal democracy constrains man’s natural instincts for aggression and violence, but that it has fundamentally transformed the instincts themselves and eliminated the motive for imperialism.”[16]

Mr. Fukuyama was gazing into a faulty crystal ball. Just as the Rand scholar was imagining a post-Soviet world of universal peace, the US was proclaiming that it would not permit the emergence of a new competitor to its position as the world’s hegemonic power. This new strategic doctrine required the virtual institutionalization of war as the *essential* instrument of US geopolitics. Accordingly, the 1990s witnessed a steady escalation of US military operations. The decade began with the first invasion of Iraq and ended with the savage bombing campaign against Serbia.

The tragedy of 9/11, whose murky origins and execution have never been adequately explained, was seized upon by the Bush administration to declare a never-ending and constantly expanding “War on Terror.” Under Obama, the crazed hunt for “terrorists” has merged with unrestrained geopolitical appetites that have made the entire planet—and outer space as well—a potential theater for US military operations. The terrible human cost of the chaos generated by the post-Soviet eruption of imperialist militarism is indicated by the fact that the number of refugees in the world today (July 2014) exceeds fifty million, the highest number since the end of World War II.[17] Afghanistan and Pakistan—the prime target of Washington’s homicidal rampage through Central Asia—account for more than four million of the total number of refugees.

Since Fukuyama announced the triumph of liberal democracy, it has become more and more apparent that it is in crisis everywhere, above all,

in the United States. The American state assumes ever more ruthlessly the character of an uncontrollable Leviathan. The Bill of Rights is being eviscerated. The US government asserts authority over its citizens—not only to spy upon them and gather data about the most private aspects of their lives, but also to kill them without due process of law—that would have been virtually inconceivable less than a generation ago. As for Eric Hobsbawm’s “Short Twentieth Century,” its intellectual shelf life proved shorter than its author could have possibly imagined. The new twenty-first century had hardly started before it became apparent that it would be preoccupied with the historical problems of the 1900s. Far from receding into an ever more distant past, the twentieth century has acquired the character of a massive debt which no one knows how to pay off.

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This unpaid debt exacts interest in the form of continuous demands for the revision of history in accordance with present-day political agendas. The practice of history—or, to call things by their right name, “pseudo-history”—is being ever more crassly subordinated to the financial and political interests of the ruling elites. The distinction between history and propaganda is being systematically obliterated.

The outcome of the degradation of history into propaganda has been the creation of yet another approach to the twentieth century. The “End of History” and the “Short Twentieth Century” is giving way to the “Fabricated Twentieth Century.” The creation of this school involves the suppression, distortion and outright falsification of the historical record. The aim of this project is to whitewash and legitimize the worst crimes of twentieth century capitalist imperialism and, conversely, to criminalize and render morally illegitimate the entire struggle of the international socialist movement.

In this exercise in right-wing historical revisionism, the socialist revolution of October 1917 is portrayed as the primal crime of the twentieth century, from which all subsequent horrors—including and in particular, Hitler’s Nazi regime and the Holocaust—inevitably, and even legitimately, followed. Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, such a grotesque perversion of twentieth-century history would have been considered, especially in Germany, as intellectually illegitimate and deserving of contempt.

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, Germany was the scene of a famous *Historikerstreit* —a “Conflict of Historians”—that was provoked by the publication of an essay by the historian Ernst Nolte. He argued that the crimes of the Nazi regime should be seen as an understandable response to the October Revolution, the Russian Civil War of 1918–21 and the barbarism of Soviet Bolshevism. Calling for a sympathetic reassessment of the Third Reich, Nolte wrote that Nazi actions were “the fear-borne reaction to the acts of annihilation that took place during the Russian Revolution.” Nolte continued: “The demonization of the Third Reich is unacceptable. We may speak of demonization when the Third Reich is denied all humanity, a word that simply means that all that is human is finite and thus can neither be all good nor all bad, neither all light nor all dark.”[18]

Nolte’s writings represented the most explicit attempt by a member of the German academic establishment, since the end of World War II, to mount a defense of Hitler and the Third Reich. He even justified the brutal treatment of European Jewry on the grounds that Chaim Weizmann, the leader of the Zionist World Congress, had declared in 1939 that Jews should fight with Britain against Germany.[19] In a grossly tendentious biography of Martin Heidegger written in 1992, Nolte defended the philosopher’s anti-Semitism and embrace of Nazism. “In comparison [with communism] the German revolution of National Socialism was modest, even meager in its ... goals—the restoration of Germany’s honor and equality of right—and moderate in its methods.” [20]

Nolte’s writings encountered principled opposition in the German and

American academic community. He was accused of engaging in historical apologetics on behalf of Nazism, and his reputation as a scholar was shattered. Today, however, Nolte’s star is on the rise. Now ninety-one years old, he is being hailed as a prophet whose time has finally come. In its issue of February 14, 2014, *Der Spiegel*, the most widely circulated news magazine in Germany, featured a cover story in which it was claimed that Nolte’s views have been vindicated. *Der Spiegel* asserted that when compared to the crimes of Stalin, the scale of Hitler’s crimes appears diminished. Among the historians interviewed by *Der Spiegel* was Professor Jörg Baberowski, who is chairman of the department of East European Studies at the prestigious Humboldt University in Berlin. Defending Nolte, with whose views he has always agreed, Baberowski declared, “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious. He didn’t want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”[21] Justifying Nolte’s efforts to downplay the scale and unique character of the crimes of the Third Reich, Baberowski stated: “Historically speaking, he was right.”[22]

About what was Nolte right? Interviewed by *Der Spiegel*, Nolte claimed that Hitler was forced into war by the intransigence of Britain and Poland. But that is not all. *Der Spiegel* reported that Nolte “insisted on ascribing to the Jews their ‘own share of the ‘gulag,’” because some Bolsheviks were Jews. Based on this logic, the Jews were at least partly responsible for Auschwitz. Somewhat taken aback by Nolte’s bluntness, *Der Spiegel* acknowledged that his position “has long been an argument of anti-Semites.”[23] But that was the extent of *Der Spiegel*’s criticism, and the statements of Nolte and Baberowski encountered virtually no public protest. The fact that the arguments of Nolte and Baberowski went largely unchallenged is an expression of not only intellectual but also political processes. During the past year, there has been a determined political campaign to build public support for a revival of German militarism. Spearheaded by Joachim Gauck, the country’s president, the leading newspapers demand that the German people overcome their post-World War II pacifism and accept that Germany has legitimate great power interests that require military operations beyond its borders.

Significantly, the revival of calls for Germany to seek, once again, its “place in the sun” has been accompanied by efforts to discredit the long-established historical consensus—dating back to the publication in 1961 of historian Fritz Fischer’s ground-breaking and magisterial study *Germany’s Aims in the First World War (Griff nach der Weltmacht)*—that the Imperial regime of Kaiser Wilhelm II bore major responsibility for the outbreak of the war in 1914. Fischer, who died in 1999, is now the target of relentless attacks that are aimed at destroying his posthumous reputation as a scholar.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine exemplifies the subordination of history to contemporary geopolitical agendas. The political marketing by the United States and Germany of the right-wing putsch of February 2014, in which fascist organizations played a major role, as a democratic revolution has been facilitated by the flagrant falsification of the historical record. This process is the subject of the penultimate essay in this volume.

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This volume constitutes a portion of the record of the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International over the past twenty years to defend historical truth against the distortions and falsifications that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This was a struggle for which the Trotskyist movement was well prepared. Since the formation of the Left Opposition in 1923, the Trotskyists had been compelled to defend the historical record and legacy of the October Revolution against the lies of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The bureaucratic reaction against the program and principles of the October Revolution began in the early 1920s with the distortion of the pre-1917 factional struggles inside the Russian social democratic movement, with the aim of casting Trotsky as an inveterate opponent of Lenin. Then, the political

positions of Trotsky were misrepresented to portray him as the brutal enemy of the Russian peasantry. In the aftermath of Trotsky's expulsion from the Russian Communist Party in 1927 and his exile from the USSR in 1929, every event in Soviet history was falsified in accordance with the political interests of the Stalinist regime. Even Sergei Eisenstein had to recut his 1927 cinematic masterpiece, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, so that there would be no image of Trotsky, the man who had actually organized and led the October 1917 insurrection in Petrograd.

The lies and falsifications of the 1920s—which were employed to remove Trotsky from power and to repudiate the program of socialist internationalism upon which the October Revolution was based—metastasized in the 1930s into the frame-ups of the Moscow Trials that were staged by Stalin as a pseudo-legal smokescreen for the mass extermination of the generation of Marxists that had led the working class to power, formed the Communist International and created the Soviet Union. Lies about history, as Trotsky explained, serve a vital role as the ideological cement of political reaction. Whether in the form of judicial frame-ups, state and media propaganda, or the distortion of the historical record by unscrupulous petty-bourgeois academics, their purpose is to legitimize the crimes of the ruling elites, disorient public opinion, and deprive the great mass of the people of the information and knowledge they require in order to mount an effective and revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system. Thus, the struggle against the falsification of history is not a secondary, let alone optional component of political work. The defense of historical truth—especially that pertaining to the October Revolution and the strategic experiences of the international socialist movement in the twentieth century—is necessary for a renaissance of socialist consciousness in the working class.

In the final years of the Soviet Union, there was an upsurge of popular interest throughout the country in the history of the Russian Revolution. After decades of suppression, articles about Trotsky and, more importantly, works by Trotsky, became widely available. This development aroused anxiety within the Soviet leadership. In contrast to the persistent pro-capitalist orientation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which sought to convince the public that a reversion to market economics was the only way forward, Trotsky's writings and the record of the Fourth International's struggle against Stalinism made clear that a socialist alternative to the bureaucratic regime was possible.

Among the Kremlin's central aims in carrying through the dissolution of the USSR was to preempt the resurgence of a socialist perspective in the working class. Thus, the dissolution was accompanied by a new campaign of historical falsification, centered on the claim that the Soviet Union was, from the start, a doomed enterprise. The emergence of this new "Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification" moved along the same trajectory as the writings of Fukuyama, Malia and Hobsbawm. All these works conveyed the basic message that the dissolution of the USSR followed inexorably from the October Revolution, and that no other outcome was possible. Stalinism was not a perversion of the October Revolution, but rather its necessary consequence. There was no alternative.

In the development of the conception of the "Unfinished Twentieth Century," the lectures and essays in this book insisted that the historical record proved conclusively that there did exist an alternative to Stalinism. I challenged Hobsbawm's claim that any consideration of alternatives to Stalinism was a pointless and intellectually illegitimate exercise in counterfactual history. "History must start from what happened," he wrote. "The rest is speculation." [24]

I call attention to this particular passage because it typifies an approach to the history of the Soviet Union that is widespread and insidious. Hobsbawm does not resort to outright falsification of historical material. But he sins against historical truth by withholding important facts and presenting an incomplete record. Hobsbawm's omissions contribute to

the distortion of history.

Unfortunately, in many of the lectures and essays, I was compelled to deal not only with omissions but also with blatant distortions of historical facts. There were times when I could not help but be amazed at the brazenness with which some individuals, who call themselves historians, can put down on paper statements that are demonstrably untrue, and thereby leave to posterity evidence of their intellectual dishonesty.

The practice of falsification has been abetted by the influence of various schools of postmodernism, whose cumulative impact on the study and writing of history has been nothing short of catastrophic. The connection between this regression in philosophy and the falsification of history cannot be overstated. Let us refer again to the work of Professor Baberowski, a disciple of Michel Foucault, who described in his *Der Sinn der Geschichte* (*The Meaning of History*) the methodology that guides his work:

In reality the historian has nothing to do with the past, but only with its interpretation. He cannot separate what he calls reality from the utterances of people who lived in the past. *For there exists no reality apart from the consciousness that produces it.* We must liberate ourselves from the conception that we can understand, through the reconstruction of events transmitted to us through documents, what the Russian Revolution really was. *There is no reality without its representation.* To be a historian means, to use the words of Roger Chartier, to examine the realm of representations. [25] (Emphasis added)

Baberowski invokes the most extreme proposition of idealist solipsism—there exists no reality outside of and apart from thought—to legitimize the repudiation of historiography as the truthful reconstruction of a past that objectively existed. History, he tells us, exists only as a subjective construction. There is no objective historical truth that accurately depicts social, economic and political conditions as they once really existed. That sort of historical reality is of no interest to Baberowski. "A history is true," Baberowski declares, "if it serves the premises set up by the historian." [26] This debasement of history condones the writing of fraudulent narratives to serve subjectively contrived agendas—for example, the rehabilitation of Hitler's criminal regime. It is not an accident that Professor Baberowski has joined forces with the likes of Ernst Nolte.

Future generations will struggle to understand how philosophical reactionaries such as Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty and Foucault, working with concepts rummaged from the "basement of bourgeois thought," [27] came to exert such an unwarranted and dangerous influence in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. I would be very pleased if the lectures and essays in this volume that deal with philosophical issues help future scholars understand the political and social pathology of the postmodernist pandemic.

The polemical approach taken in this book is, I believe, appropriate to both the subject matter and the times in which we live. History has become a battleground. "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living," wrote Marx. [28] Fifteen years into the new century, neither politicians nor historians can free themselves from the nightmares of the last one. The ever-mounting conflicts and crises of the twenty-first century are invariably entangled in disputes over twentieth-century history. As contemporary political struggles evoke historical issues, the treatment of these issues is more and more openly determined by political considerations. The past is falsified in the interest of present-day political reaction. By exposing at least some of the most glaring falsifications of the history of the twentieth century, it is the

author's hope that this book may prove to be a weapon in the revolutionary struggles of the future.

* * *

The material in this book is presented, with only few exceptions, chronologically. This allows the reader to follow the evolution of the International Committee of the Fourth International's work on historical issues over a period of two decades. As part of the normal editing process, I have made stylistic changes where necessary to facilitate the often bumpy passage of lectures from the auditorium where they are heard to the printed page where they are read.

The lectures and essays reflect the benefits of the intense collaboration that I have enjoyed with comrades and co-thinkers in the Trotskyist movement internationally and within the United States. I have been discussing and working over the tragic and tortured history of the German workers movement with Ulrich Rippert, the national secretary of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, for close to forty years. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance I have received from Frederick S. Choate, whose knowledge of Russian and Soviet history is an intellectual resource that I have drawn upon for many years. I am grateful to the indefatigable editorial team of Mehring Books, Jeannie Cooper and Heather Jowsey, who have managed to assemble a coherent and properly referenced volume out of the disparate parts. I also wish to thank Linda Tenenbaum of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia for the care with which she has reviewed so many of the lectures and essays in this volume as they progressed from rough draft to final form.

Finally, I must call attention to the role played by the late Soviet-Russian historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin in the development of the historical work of the International Committee of the Fourth International. In February 1993 we met for the first time in Kiev. He had recently completed a study, entitled *Was There an Alternative?*, of the struggle waged by the Left Opposition against the Stalinist regime between 1923 and 1927. As a result of our discussions there and in Moscow, Vadim resolved to work with the International Committee in the development of an "International Counter-offensive Against the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification." Despite being stricken with terminal cancer in 1994, he lectured at meetings sponsored by the International Committee all over the world. Vadim's study of Leon Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism grew to seven volumes. To this day, there is not another work on the Soviet Union written after 1991 that is remotely equal—in style and substance—to this masterpiece of historical literature.

In January 1998 I shared a platform with Vadim for the last time. He traveled with his wife Galya to Sydney, Australia, to lecture at the International School sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party. At the conclusion of his lecture, Vadim announced the dedication of the final volume of his historical work to the International Committee. Eight months later, on September 18, 1998, Vadim died in Moscow at the age of sixty-one. It is to the memory of this fighter for historical truth that I dedicate this volume.

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Footnotes:

- 1 *The National Interest* 19 (Summer 1989), p. 3. [back]
- 2 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 46. [back]
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 299. [back]
- 4 Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. 514. [back]
- 5 *Ibid.* [back]
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 225. [back]
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 520. [back]
- 8 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Pantheon Books,

- 1994), [back] p. 5. [back]
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 8. [back]
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 585. [back]
- 11 J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 113. [back]
- 12 Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 368. [back]
- 13 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 105–106. [back]
- 14 Leon Trotsky, *The War and the International* (Colombo: A Young Socialist Publication, June 1971), pp. vii–viii. [back]
- 15 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet* (Colombo: Young Socialist Pamphlet, undated), p. 17. [back]
- 16 *The End of History and the Last Man*, p. 263. [back]
- 17 Available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-27921938> [back]
- 18 "Between Historical Legend and Revisionism? The Third Reich in the Perspective of 1980," by Ernst Nolte in *Forever In the Shadow of Hitler?*, James Knowlton, ed., Truett Cates, tr. (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993), pp. 14–15. [back]
- 19 Cited by Geoffrey Eley in "Nazism, Politics and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German *Historikerstreit* 1986–1987," *Past and Present*, No. 121, November, 1988, p. 175. [back]
- 20 *Martin Heidegger: Politik und Geschichte im Leben und Denken* by Ernst Nolte, cited in a review by Richard Wolin, *The American Historical Review* Volume 98, No. 4, Oct. 1993, p. 1278. [back]
- 21 Available: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/questions-of-culpability-in-wwi-still-divide-german-historians-a-953173.html> [back]
- 22 *Ibid.* [back]
- 23 *Ibid.* [back]
- 24 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), p. 249. [back]
- 25 Jörg Baberowski, *Der Sinn der Geschichte: Geschichtstheorien von Hegel bis Foucault* (Munche: C.H. Beck, 2005), (translation by D. North), p. 22. [back]
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 9. [back]
- 27 The phrase was coined by G.V. Plekhanov. [back]
- 28 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 11 (New York: International Publishers, 1979), p. 103. [back]

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