

Toward a reconsideration of Trotsky's legacy and his place in the history of the 20th century

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Sixty years since the assassination of Leon Trotsky

Somewhat more than sixty years ago, on August 21, 1940, a man died who will indisputably and always occupy one of the first places in the history of man's struggle for self-emancipation. As historians, in the years and decades to come, study, analyze and interpret the 20th century, the figure of Leon Trotsky will loom ever larger. In no other life were the struggles, aspirations and tragedies of the last century reflected so profoundly and nobly as in that of Trotsky. If we accept as true the remarkable observation of Thomas Mann, that "In our time the destiny of man presents itself in political terms," then it can be said, without fear of exaggeration, that in the sixty years of Trotsky's life that destiny found its most conscious realization. The biography of Leon Trotsky is the most essential and concentrated expression of the vicissitudes of the world socialist revolution during the first half of the twentieth century.

Three years before his death, in the course of a discussion with a skeptical and hostile American journalist, Trotsky explained that he saw his life not as a series of bewildering and ultimately tragic episodes but in terms of different stages in the historical trajectory of the revolutionary movement. His rise to power in 1917 was the product of an unprecedented upsurge of the working class. For six years his power depended on the social and political relations created by that upsurge. The decline in Trotsky's personal political fortunes flowed inexorably from the ebbing of the revolutionary wave. Trotsky lost power not because he was less skilled a politician than Stalin, but because the social force upon which his power was based—the Russian and international working class—was in political retreat. The exhaustion of the Russian working class in the aftermath of the civil war, the growing political power of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the defeats suffered by the European working class—particularly in Germany—were, in the final analysis, the decisive factors in Trotsky's fall from power.

All the subsequent defeats suffered by the international working class were recorded in Trotsky's personal fate: the political demoralization provoked by the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 provided Stalin with the opportunity to expel the Left Opposition from the Communist International and to exile Trotsky, first to Alma Ata and, not long after, outside the borders of the USSR. The victory of Hitler in 1933—made possible by the criminally irresponsible policies of the Stalinist-led German Communist Party—set into motion a horrifying chain of events that led to the Moscow Trials, the political catastrophes of Stalinist Popular Frontism, and the final expulsion of Trotsky from the European continent, to distant Mexico.

It was there, in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City, that Trotsky was murdered by a Stalinist agent. Trotsky's death came at the very climax of the bloody orgy of fascist and Stalinist counter-revolution. By that time virtually all of Trotsky's old comrades had been liquidated in the Soviet Union. All four children of Trotsky were dead. The two older daughters had died prematurely as a result of the hardships caused by the persecution of their father. The two sons, Sergei and Lev, were murdered by the Stalinist regime. Lev Sedov, at the time of his death in Paris in February 1938, was, next to his father, the most important political figure in the Fourth International. Other exceptional figures in the secretariat of the Fourth International—Erwin Wolf and Rudolf Klement—were assassinated in 1937 and 1938.

By 1940 Trotsky considered his own assassination all but inevitable. This does not mean that he was resigned in any sort of pessimistic manner to his fate. He did all that he could to parry and delay the blow being prepared by Stalin and his agents in the apparatus of the GPU/NKVD. But he understood that Stalin's conspiracies were nourished by the counter-revolution. "I live," he wrote, "not in accordance with the rule, but as an exception to it." He predicted that Stalin would take advantage of the eruption of a shooting war in western Europe during the spring of 1940 to strike a blow. Trotsky was proved correct.

The first major assassination attempt, on the evening of May 24, 1940, took place as the world's attention was focussed on Hitler's rout of the French army. The second and successful attempt occurred during the Battle of Britain in the late summer of the same year.

Why was Trotsky, in exile and apparently isolated, so feared? Why was his death necessary? Trotsky himself offered a political explanation. In the autumn of 1939, several weeks after the signing of the Stalin-Hitler Pact (which, by the way, he had predicted) and the outbreak of World War II, Trotsky called attention to a conversation, reported in a Parisian newspaper, between Hitler and the French ambassador Coulondre. As Hitler boasted that his treaty with Stalin would give him a free hand to defeat Germany's enemies in the west, Coulondre cut the Fuhrer short with a warning: "The real victor (in case of war) will be Trotsky. Have you thought this over?" Hitler voiced agreement with the assessment of the French ambassador, but blamed his adversaries for forcing his hand. Citing this amazing report, Trotsky wrote: "These gentlemen like to give a personal name to the specter of revolution ... Both of them, Coulondre and Hitler, represent the barbarism which advances over Europe. At the same time neither of them doubts that their barbarism will be conquered by socialist revolution."

As much as Trotsky was feared by imperialists of the fascist and democratic camp, that felt by the Soviet bureaucracy was still greater. Stalin had not forgotten that the defeats suffered by the Russian armies during the First World War had discredited the regime and set the masses into motion. Did there not exist a similar danger should war break out

again, notwithstanding the agreement with Hitler? As long as he lived Trotsky would remain the great revolutionary alternative to the bureaucratic dictatorship, the human embodiment of the program, ideals and spirit of October 1917. That is why Trotsky could not be allowed to live.

But even in death, the fear of Trotsky did not abate. It is hard to think of another figure who, not only in his lifetime but even decades after his death, retains his power to frighten the powers that be. The historical legacy of Trotsky resists any form of assimilation and cooptation. Within 10 years of Marx's death, the theoreticians of the German Social Democracy had found ways to make his writings acceptable to the perspective of social reform. The fate of Lenin was even more terrible—his remains were embalmed and his theoretical legacy was falsified and remade into a bureaucratically sanctioned state religion. This has not proved to be possible with Trotsky. His writings and actions were too precise and concrete in their revolutionary implications. Moreover, the political problems that Trotsky analyzed, the socio-political relations that he defined, and even the parties that he so precisely, aptly and scathingly characterized, persisted for most of the remainder of the century.

In 1991, Duke University published a 1,000 page study of the International Trotskyist movement by Robert J. Alexander, a fervent anti-Marxist who is viewed in academic circles as a specialist in this field. In his introduction, Alexander made the following remarkable observation: "At the end of the 1980s the Trotskyists have never come to power in any country. Although International Trotskyism does not enjoy the support of a well-established regime, as did the heirs of Stalinism, the persistence of the movement in a wide variety of countries together with the instability of the political life of most of the world's nations means that the possibility that a Trotskyist party might come to power in the foreseeable future cannot be totally ruled out." [1]

That "well-established regime" disappeared not long after the publication of Alexander's book. The Soviet bureaucracy never rehabilitated Leon Trotsky. History, as has often been noted, is the greatest of all ironists. For decades the Stalinists claimed that Trotsky had sought the destruction of the Soviet Union, that he had entered into conspiracies with the imperialists to dismember the USSR. For such alleged crimes Trotsky had been sentenced to death in absentia by the Soviet regime. But in the end, it was the Soviet bureaucracy itself, as Trotsky had warned so presciently, that dismembered and liquidated the USSR. And it did so without ever repudiating, openly and forthrightly, the charges leveled against Trotsky and his son, Lev Sedov. Instead, it was easier for Gorbachev and Yeltsin to sign the death warrant of the USSR than to acknowledge the utter falsity of all the charges against Trotsky.

Without in any way underestimating the colossal dimensions of the economic and social changes that have been realized in the last 60 years, we are not so far removed from the problems, issues and themes with which Trotsky dealt. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Trotsky's writings retain, to an extraordinary degree, a contemporary character. A study of Trotsky's writings is essential not only for an understanding of the politics of the 20th century, but also, and no less, for the purpose of orienting oneself politically in the very complex world that we confront in the opening decade of the 21st century.

If the greatness of a political figure is measured by the extent and enduring relevance of his legacy, then Trotsky must be placed in the very first rank of 20th century leaders. Let us for a moment consider the political figures that dominated the world stage in 1940. It is difficult even to mention the names of the totalitarian leaders of that era—Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Franco—without uttering an obscenity. They left nothing behind but the memory of their unspeakable crimes. As for the "great" leaders of the imperialist democracies, Roosevelt and Churchill, no one would deny that they were striking personalities and displayed skill within the framework of parliamentary politics. Churchill, more brilliant than the

American president, was a talented orator and displayed some skill as a writer. But can one really speak of either man's legacy? Would anyone suggest seriously that one would find in the speeches and/or books of Churchill and Roosevelt (the latter, by the way, did not write any) analyses and insights that would contribute to an understanding of the political problems that we confront at the outset of the 21st century?

Even in their own day, Trotsky towered over his political contemporaries. The influence of all those that I have mentioned was directly bound up with, and dependent upon, their control over the instruments of state power. Separated from that power, they could hardly have commanded world attention. Stalin, separated from the Kremlin and its apparatus of terror, would have been no more than he was before October 1917: "a grey blur."

Trotsky was deprived of all the official accoutrements of power in 1927. He was, however, never powerless. Trotsky was fond of quoting the famous sentence, spoken by Dr. Stockman, with which Ibsen closes his *Enemy of the People*: "The most powerful man is he who stands alone." The insight of the great Norwegian dramatist was realized in the life of the greatest of all the Russian revolutionists. Trotsky provided the most inspiring and timeless demonstration of the power of ideas and ideals that correspond to and articulate the progressive strivings of humanity and, therefore, have lodged within them the force of historical necessity.

Trotsky as a writer

When speaking of Trotsky's life, it is difficult to resist the temptation to devote all one's allotted time to simply quoting from his writings. At the very least, one would certainly succeed in providing for one's audience an exceptional aesthetic experience. Putting aside for a moment one's political sympathies, any reader capable of rendering objective judgment would be hard pressed to deny that Trotsky ranks among the greatest writers of the 20th century. Some 30 years have passed since I first read a book by Trotsky—his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*. I am sure that I am not the only person who still recalls the emotional and intellectual impact of his first encounter with Trotsky's astonishing prose. Reading Trotsky in translation, I wondered what estimate of his stature as a writer would be made by those able to read his work in the original Russian. Unexpectedly, an opportunity arose for me to satisfy my curiosity. I attended a lecture on Russian literature by a specialist who had fled his homeland in the aftermath of the October Revolution. This was not a man from whom one would expect the slightest sympathy for Trotsky. At the conclusion of his lecture, a survey of Russian literature in the 20th century, I asked him to give his opinion of Trotsky as a writer. I recall vividly both his answer and the thick accent with which it was delivered: "Trotsky," he replied, "is the greatest master of Russian prose since Tolstoy." Many years later, this assessment was echoed in a remark made by a student I met during my first visit to the Soviet Union in 1989. He confessed that reading Trotsky was for him a very difficult experience. Why was this so? "When I read Trotsky," he explained, "I am forced to agree with him—but I don't want to!"

The range of Trotsky's writings—on art, literature and culture, scientific developments, problems of life, and, of course, politics—almost defies comprehension. We lesser mortals, forced to make do with our far more modest talents, can only be staggered by the dimensions of Trotsky's literary output. How, one asks oneself, did he do it—before the age of word-processors and spell check? Perhaps part of the answer lies in Trotsky's remarkable ability to speak *ex tempore* almost as beautifully and cogently as he wrote. His dictation, by all accounts, reads better than the polished drafts of even very skilled writers.

A major figure in the literature of the 20th century, Trotsky owed a great deal to the great Russian masters of the 19th century—particularly Turgenev, Tolstoy, Herzen and Belinsky. The same man who wrote in unyielding martial prose proclamations and battle orders that stirred millions could also produce passages of haunting beauty, as, for example,

when he recalled one moment during his 1907 escape from Siberian exile:

“The sleigh skidded along smoothly and noiselessly, like a boat on the glassy surface of a pond. In the gathering darkness the forest looked even more gigantic than before. I could not see the road and hardly felt the motion of my sleigh. It was as though the trees were under a spell and came running towards us, bushes slipped away, old tree stumps covered with snow flew past—everything seemed filled with mystery. The only sound was the fast, regular chu-chu-chu-chu of the reindeer’s breathing. Thousands of long-forgotten sounds filled my head in the midst of the silence. Suddenly I heard a sharp whistle in the depths of the dark forest. It seemed mysterious and infinitely remote. Yet it was only our Ostyak signaling to his reindeer. Then silence once more, more whistling far away, more trees rushing noiselessly out of darkness into darkness” [1905 (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 459-60].

Whatever the subject at hand might have been, the underlying and essential theme of Trotsky’s writings was always revolution ... a revolution that expresses itself organically in every aspect of life. Trotsky delighted in drawing to the attention of his readers the unexpected forms in which the revolution manifests itself. And so, in describing the trial of the Soviet workers’ deputies in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky savors the contrast between the harsh and threatening official environment of the court building—crowded with “gendarmes with drawn sabers”—and the “infinite quantities of flowers” that had been delivered to the court room by admirers and supporters of the revolutionary defendants:

“There were flowers in buttonholes, flowers held in hands and on laps, finally flowers simply lying on the benches. The president of the court did not dare to remove these fragrant intruders. In the end, even gendarmier officers and officers of the court, totally ‘demoralized’ by the prevailing atmosphere, were handing flowers to the defendants.” [Ibid., p. 356].

It was, I believe, no less a writer than George Bernard Shaw who once observed that when Trotsky used his pen to cut off the head of an opponent, he could not resist the opportunity to pick it up and show, to one and all, that it had no brains. Yet, the power of Trotsky’s polemics lay in the brilliance with which he exposed the incongruity between the subjective aims of this or that politician and the objective development of social contradictions in a revolutionary epoch. Using the necessary unfolding of the historic process as his measuring rod, Trotsky’s withering criticisms were not cruel. They were simply correct. Thus, of the principal leader of the bourgeois Provisional Government in 1917:

“Kerensky was not a revolutionist; he merely hung around the revolution ... He had no theoretical preparation, no political schooling, no ability to think, no political will. The place of these qualities was occupied by a nimble susceptibility, an inflammable temperament, and that kind of eloquence which operates neither upon mind nor will, but upon the nerves” [History of the Russian Revolution, (London: Pluto Press), p. 201].

And of the SR leader, Victor Chernov: “A well-read rather than educated man, with a considerable but unintegrated learning, Chernov always had at his disposal a boundless assortment of appropriate quotations, which for a long time caught the imagination of the Russian youth without teaching them much. There was only one single question which this many-worded leader could not answer: Whom was he leading and whither? The eclectic formulas of Chernov, ornamented with moralisms and verses, united for a time a most variegated public who at all critical moments pulled in different directions. No wonder Chernov complacently contrasted his methods of forming a party with Lenin’s ‘sectarianism’” [Ibid., p. 247].

And finally, of the once-formidable theoretician of German Social-Democracy: “Kautsky has a clear and solitary path to salvation: democracy. All that is necessary is that every one should acknowledge it and bind himself to it. The Right Socialists must renounce the sanguinary

slaughter with which they have been carrying out the will of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie itself must abandon the idea of using its Noskes and Lieutenant Vogels to defend its privileges to the last breath. Finally, the proletariat must once and for all reject the idea of overthrowing the bourgeoisie by means other than that laid down in the Constitution. If the conditions enumerated are observed, the social revolution will painlessly melt into democracy. In order to succeed it is sufficient, as we see, for our stormy history to draw a nightcap over its head, and take a pinch of wisdom out of Kautsky’s snuffbox” [Terrorism and Communism, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) p. 28].

One could without difficulty spend an entire day quoting passages in which Trotsky’s literary genius finds brilliant expression. But this genius was not simply, nor primarily, a matter of style. There is a deeper and more profound element that makes Trotsky’s literary work, in its totality, one of the greatest intellectual achievements of the 20th century. To the extent that history can find conscious articulation in the course of its own immediate unfolding, that process is manifested in the writings of Leon Trotsky. In general, there is nothing more ephemeral than political commentary. The half-life of even a well-written newspaper column is generally no longer than the time it takes to drink a cup of coffee—it passes straight from the breakfast table to the wastepaper basket.

That is not the case with the writings of Trotsky—and I am speaking not of his major works, but even commentary he produced for newspapers. The writings and, I must add, speeches of Leon Trotsky, appear at times to represent history’s first attempt to explain as best as it can what it is doing and attempting. The essential purpose of Trotsky’s greatest political writings—to locate the latest events in the world historical trajectory of socialist revolution—was reflected in the titles he chose: “Through What Stage are We Passing?,” “Where is Britain Going?,” “Whither France?,” “Towards Capitalism or Socialism?” Lunarcharsky once said of Trotsky: He is always aware of his position in history. This was Trotsky’s strength—the source of his political resistance against opportunism and all manner of pressures. Trotsky conceived of Marxism as the “science of perspective.”

A point must be made in this regard: One of the consequences of the destruction of revolutionary cadre by Stalinism and the consequent erosion of Marxism as a theoretical weapon of the emancipatory struggle of the working class has been the celebration of all sorts of people, unconnected with this struggle, as great Marxists: Marxist economists, Marxist philosophers, Marxist aestheticists, etc. Yet, when they have attempted to apply their supposed mastery of the dialectic to political analysis of the events through which they were living, they have proven to be incompetent. Trotsky was the last great representative of a school of Marxist thought—let us call it the classical school—whose mastery of the dialectic revealed itself above all in a capacity to assess a political situation, to advance a political prognosis, to elaborate a strategic orientation.

Reassessing Trotsky

Perhaps the most critical task of the Fourth International throughout its history has been the defense of Trotsky’s historical role against the calumny of the Stalinists. This task involved not simply the defense of an individual but, far more fundamentally, of the entire programmatic heritage of international Marxism and the October Revolution. In defending Trotsky, the Fourth International was upholding historical truth against the monstrous falsification and betrayal of the principles upon which the Bolshevik Revolution was based.

And yet, notwithstanding its intransigent defense of Leon Trotsky, did the Fourth International do full justice to the political and historical legacy of the “Old Man”? There is good reason to believe, now that the century in which Trotsky lived is behind us, that a richer and more profound appreciation of his political legacy and historical stature is now possible.

Let us begin this task by subjecting to critical re-examination a well-known passage in which Trotsky assessed his own contribution to the success of the October Revolution of 1917.

In an entry into his *Diary* dated March 25, 1935, Trotsky wrote: “Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place—on the condition that Lenin was present and in command. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring—of this I have not the slightest doubt! If Lenin had not been in Petersburg, I doubt whether I could have managed to overcome the resistance of the Bolshevik leaders. The struggle with ‘Trotskyism’ (i.e., with the proletarian revolution) would have commenced in May, 1917, and the outcome of the revolution would have been in question. But I repeat, granted the presence of Lenin the October Revolution would have been victorious anyway. The same could by and large be said of the Civil War, although in its first period, especially at the time of the fall of Simbirsk and Kazan, Lenin wavered and was beset by doubts. But this was undoubtedly a passing mood which he probably never even admitted to anyone but me...Thus I cannot speak of the ‘indispensability’ of my work, even about the period from 1917 to 1921” [*Diary in Exile* (New York: Atheneum), p. 46-47].

Is this assessment accurate? In this passage, Trotsky is referring principally to the political struggle within the Bolshevik Party. Quite correctly, he takes as his point of departure the crucial significance of the reorientation of the Bolshevik Party in April 1917. Lenin’s greatest achievement in 1917, upon which the success of the Revolution depended, was overcoming the resistance of Old Bolshevik leaders—particularly Kamanev and Stalin—to a strategic change in the political orientation of the Bolshevik Party.

And yet, the critical importance of this struggle within the Bolshevik Party serves to underscore the far-reaching implications of the earlier disputes within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party over questions of political perspective. Even if one accepts that Lenin played the critical role in overcoming resistance within the Bolshevik Party to adopting an orientation toward the seizure of power and the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship, he was waging a struggle against those who adhered to the political line that Lenin had heretofore upheld in opposition to the perspective of Leon Trotsky.

When Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917 and repudiated the perspective of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry,” it was widely understood that he was adopting—even if he failed to acknowledge this openly—the political line with which Trotsky had been associated for more than a decade—that of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky and the theoretical anticipation of October: The Theory of Permanent Revolution

I will review briefly the basic issues that confronted the Russian revolutionary movement in the final decades of the tsarist regime. In its efforts to plot the strategic trajectory of Russian socio-political development, Russian socialist thought advanced three possible and conflicting variants. Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, conceived of Russian social development in terms of a formal logical progression, in which historical stages of development were determined by a given level of economic development. As feudalism was replaced by capitalism, the latter, in turn, when all the required conditions of economic development had been attained, would give way to socialism. The theoretical model with which Plekhanov worked assumed that Russian development would follow the historical pattern of Western Europe’s bourgeois-democratic evolution. There existed no possibility that Russia might move in a socialist direction before the far more advanced countries to its west. Russia, at the turn of the 20th century, Plekhanov maintained, still had before it the task of achieving its bourgeois democratic revolution—by

which he meant the overthrow of the tsarist regime and the creation of the political and economic preconditions for a future, distant, social revolution. In all probability, Russia had before it many decades of bourgeois parliamentary development before its economic and social structure could sustain a socialist transformation. This organic conception of Russia’s development constituted the accepted wisdom that prevailed among broad layers of the Russian social-democratic movement during the first years of the 20th century.

The events of 1905—that is, the eruption of the first Russian Revolution—generated serious questions about the viability of Plekhanov’s theoretical model. The most significant aspect of the Russian Revolution was the dominant political role played by the proletariat in the struggle against tsarism. Against the background of general strikes and insurrection, the maneuverings of the political leaders of the Russian bourgeoisie appeared petty and treacherous. No Robespierre or Danton was to be found among the bourgeoisie. The Cadet party (Constitutional Democrats) bore no resemblance to the Jacobins.

Lenin’s analysis went further and deeper than Plekhanov’s. The former accepted that the Russian Revolution was of a bourgeois-democratic character. But such a formal definition did not adequately exhaust the problem of the relation of class forces and balance of power in the revolution. Lenin insisted that the task of the working class was to strive, through its independent organization and efforts, for the most expansive and radical development of the bourgeois democratic revolution—that is, for an utterly uncompromising struggle to demolish all economic, political and social vestiges of tsarist feudalism; and thereby create the most favorable conditions for the establishment of a genuinely progressive constitutional-democratic framework for the flowering of the Russian workers’ movement. For Lenin, at the very heart of this democratic revolution was the resolution of the “agrarian question”—by which he meant the destruction of all the economic and juridical remnants of feudalism. The vast landholdings of the nobility constituted an immense barrier to the democratization of Russian life, as well as to the development of a modern capitalist economy.

Lenin’s conception of the bourgeois revolution—in contrast to that of Plekhanov—was not limited by formalistic political prejudices. He approached the bourgeois democratic revolution from, so to speak, within. Rather than beginning with a formal political schema—the absolute necessity of a parliamentary democracy as the unavoidable outcome of the bourgeois revolution—Lenin sought to deduce the political form from the essential and internal social content of the revolution.

Recognizing the immense social tasks implicit in Russia’s impending democratic revolution, Lenin—in contrast to Plekhanov—insisted that their achievement was not possible under the political leadership of the Russian bourgeoisie. The triumph of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia was possible only if the working class waged the struggle for democracy independently of and, in fact, in opposition to the bourgeoisie. But due to its numerical weakness, the mass basis of the democratic revolution could not be provided by the working class alone. The Russian proletariat, by advancing an uncompromisingly radical democratic resolution of the agrarian issues, had to mobilize behind it the multi-millioned Russian peasantry.

What then, would be the state form of the regime arising from this revolutionary alliance of the two great popular classes? Lenin proposed that the new regime would be a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.” In effect, the two classes would share state power and jointly preside over the fullest possible realization of the democratic revolution. Lenin offered no specifics as to the precise nature of the power-sharing arrangements that would prevail in such a regime, nor did he define or describe the state forms through which this two-class dictatorship would be exercised.

Notwithstanding the extreme political radicalism of the democratic

dictatorship, Lenin insisted that its aim was not the economic reorganization of society along socialist lines. Rather, the revolution would, of necessity, remain, in terms of its economic program, capitalist. Indeed, even in his advocacy of a radical settlement of the land question, Lenin stressed that the nationalization of land—directed against the Russian latifundia—was a bourgeois democratic, rather than socialist measure.

In his polemics, Lenin was unwavering on this critical point. He wrote in 1905: “Marxists are absolutely convinced of the bourgeois character of the Russian revolution. What does this mean? This means that those democratic transformations ... which have become indispensable for Russia do not, in and of themselves, signify the undermining of capitalism, the undermining of bourgeois rule, but on the contrary they clear the soil, for the first time and in a real way, for a broad and swift, for a European and not an Asiatic, development of capitalism. They make possible for the first time the rule of the bourgeoisie as a class” [Trotsky, *Writings 1939-40*, p. 57].

The position of Trotsky differed profoundly from that of the Mensheviks and Lenin. Notwithstanding their different conclusions, both Plekhanov and Lenin based their perspectives on an estimate of the given level of Russian economic development and the existing relations of social forces within the country. But Trotsky’s real point of departure was not the existing economic level of Russia or its internal relation of class forces, but rather the *world-historical* context within which Russia’s belated democratic revolution was destined to unfold.

Trotsky traced the historical trajectory of the bourgeois revolution—from its classical manifestation in the 18th century, through the vicissitudes of the 19th century, and finally, in the modern context of 1905. He explained how the profound change in historical conditions—especially the development of world economy and the emergence of the international working class—had fundamentally altered the social and political dynamics of the bourgeois democratic revolution. Traditional political equations, based on the conditions that prevailed in the middle of the 19th century, were of little value in the new situation.

Trotsky detected the political limitation of Lenin’s formula. It was politically unrealistic: it did not solve the problem of state power but evaded it. Trotsky did not accept that the Russian proletariat would be able to limit itself to measures of a formally democratic character. The reality of class relations would compel the working class to exercise its political dictatorship against the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. In other words, the struggle of the working class would, of necessity, assume a socialist character. But how was this possible, given the backwardness of Russia—which, considering the limitations of its own economic development—was clearly not ready for socialism?

Looking at the Russian Revolution from within, there did not seem to be any solution to this problem. But examining it from without—that is, looking at the Russian Revolution from the vantage point of both world history and the international development of the capitalist economy—an unexpected solution did present itself. Thus, as early as June 1905, as the first Russian Revolution unfolded, Trotsky noted that “capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism.” Trotsky grasped the implications of this profound change in the structure of world economy:

“This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions” [*Permanent Revolution*, New Park, p. 240].

Trotsky’s approach represented an astonishing theoretical breakthrough. As Einstein’s relativity theory—another gift of 1905 to

mankind—fundamentally and irrevocably altered the conceptual framework within which man viewed the universe and provided a means of tackling problems for which no answers could be found within the straitjacket of classical Newtonian physics, Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution fundamentally shifted the analytical perspective from which revolutionary processes were viewed. Prior to 1905, the development of revolutions was seen as a progression of national events, whose outcome was determined by the logic of its internal socio-economic structure and relations. Trotsky proposed another approach: to understand revolution, in the modern epoch, as essentially a world-historic process of social transition from class society, rooted politically in nation-states, to a classless society developing on the basis of a globally-integrated economy and internationally-unified mankind.

I do not believe that the analogy to Einstein is far-fetched. From an intellectual standpoint, the problems facing revolutionary theorists at the turn of the 20th century were similar to those confronting physicists. Experimental data was accumulating throughout Europe that could not be reconciled with the established formulae of Newtonian classical physics. Matter, at least at the level of sub-atomic particles, was refusing to behave as Mr. Newton had said it should. Einstein’s relativity theory provided the new conceptual framework for understanding the material universe.

In a similar sense, the socialist movement was being confronted with a flood of socio-economic and political data that could not be adequately processed within the existing theoretical framework. The sheer complexity of the modern world economy defied simplistic definitions. The impact of world economic development manifested itself, to a heretofore unprecedented extent, in the contours of each national economy. Within even backward economies there could be found—as a result of international foreign investment—certain highly advanced features. There existed feudalist or semi-feudalist regimes, whose political structures were encrusted with the remnants of the Middle Ages, that presided over a capitalist economy in which heavy industry played a major role. Nor was it unusual to find in countries with a belated capitalist development a bourgeoisie that showed less interest in the success of “its” democratic revolution than the indigenous working class. Such anomalies could not be reconciled with formal strategic precepts whose calculations assumed the existence of social phenomena less riven by internal contradictions.

Trotsky’s great achievement consisted in elaborating a new theoretical structure that was equal to the new social, economic and political complexities. There was nothing utopian in Trotsky’s approach. It represented, rather, a profound insight into the impact of world economy on social and political life. A realistic approach to politics and the elaboration of effective revolutionary strategy was possible only to the extent that socialist parties took as their objective starting point the predominance of the international over the national. This did not simply mean the promotion of international proletarian solidarity. Without understanding its essential objective foundation in world economy, and without making the objective reality of world economy the basis of strategic thought, proletarian internationalism would remain an utopian ideal, essentially unrelated to the program and practice of nationally-based socialist parties.

Proceeding from the reality of world capitalism, and recognizing the objective dependence of Russian events on the international economic and political environment, Trotsky foresaw the inevitability of a socialist development of Russia’s revolution. The Russian working class would be compelled to take power and adopt, to one extent or another, measures of a socialist character. Yet, in proceeding along socialist lines, the working class in Russia would inevitably come up against the limitations of the national environment. How would it find a way out of its dilemma? By linking its fate to the European and world revolution of which its own struggle was, in the final analysis, a manifestation.

This was the insight of a man who, like Einstein, had just reached his 26th birthday. Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution made possible a realistic conception of world revolution. The age of national revolutions had come to an end—or, to put it more precisely, national revolutions could only be understood within the framework of the international socialist revolution.

Trotsky and the Bolsheviks

When one considers the profound implications of Trotsky's advance one can better appreciate both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. It is not my intention here to minimize in any way the significance of Lenin's great achievement, which was to understand more profoundly than anyone else the political significance of the struggle against political opportunism in the revolutionary movement and to extend that struggle to every level of party work and organization. And yet, as crucial and critical as questions of revolutionary organization are, the experience of the 20th century has taught the working class, or should teach the working class, that even the firmest organization, unless directed by a correct revolutionary perspective, can and will become, in the final analysis, an obstacle to revolution.

For Trotsky, what determined his attitude to all tendencies within the Russian social democratic labor movement was their perspective, their program. To what extent was their political program based on a correct assessment of the world forces that would determine the evolution and fate of the Russian Revolution? Trotsky, from this standpoint, was justifiably critical of the program and orientation of the Bolshevik party. Let me read from an article he wrote in 1909 in which he surveyed the different positions held by the varying factions in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party.

He wrote: "Lenin believes that the contradictions between the proletariat's class interests and objective conditions will be resolved by the proletariat imposing a political limitation upon itself and that this self-limitation will be the result of the proletariat's theoretical awareness that the revolution in which it is playing a leading role is a bourgeois revolution. Lenin transfers the objective contradiction into the proletariat's consciousness and resolves it by means of a class asceticism, which is rooted not in religious faith but in a so-called scientific schema. It is enough to see this intellectual construct clearly, to realize how hopelessly idealistic it is.

"The snag is that the Bolsheviks visualize the class struggle of the proletariat only until the moment of the revolution and its triumph, after which they see it temporarily dissolved in the democratic coalition, reappearing in its pure form, this time as a direct struggle for socialism only after the definitive establishment of a republican system. Whereas the Mensheviks, proceeding from the abstract notion that our revolution is a bourgeois revolution, arrive at the idea that the proletariat must adapt all its tactics to the behavior of the liberal bourgeoisie, in order to ensure the transfer of state power to the bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks proceed from an equally abstract notion, democratic dictatorship not socialist dictatorship and arrive at the idea of a proletariat in possession of state power imposing a bourgeois democratic limitation upon itself. It is true that the difference between them in this matter is very considerable. While the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism have already become apparent, those of the Bolsheviks are likely to become a serious threat only in the event of victory" [*Our Differences*].

This was an astonishingly prescient insight into what was actually to occur in the Russian Revolution. Once the Tsarist regime was overthrown, the limitations of Lenin's perspective of the democratic dictatorship became immediately clear. Trotsky went on to say that the Russian working class would be forced to take power and "will be confronted with the objective problems of socialism, but the solution of these problems will, at a certain stage, be prevented by the country's economic backwardness. There is no way out from this contradiction from

the framework of a national revolution." So Trotsky clearly identified that the limitations of Lenin's perspective were not merely in its political calculations, but that those political calculations proceeded from a national, rather than an international appreciation of the framework in which the Russian Revolution would unfold.

He wrote, in 1909: "The workers' government will be faced with the task of uniting its forces with those of the socialist proletariat of Western Europe. Only in this way will its temporary revolutionary hegemony become the prologue to a socialist dictatorship. Thus permanent revolution will become, for the Russian proletariat, a matter of class self-preservation. If the workers' party cannot show sufficient initiative for aggressive revolutionary tactics, if it limits itself to the frugal diet of a dictatorship that is merely national and merely democratic, the united reactionary forces of Europe will waste no time in making it clear that a working class, if it happens to be in power, must throw the whole of its strength into the struggle for socialist revolution."

This was really the central question. The political evaluation of the form of state power flowed, in the final analysis, from the differing appraisals of the significance of the international as the determining factor in the political outcome of the revolutionary movement. The following point must be made in assessing the development of the Bolshevik Party. Every program ultimately reflects the influence and interests of social forces. In countries with a belated bourgeois development, in which the bourgeoisie is incapable of defending consistently the national and democratic tasks of the revolution, we know that elements of those tasks pose themselves to the working class. The working class is obliged to adopt and take up those democratic and national demands which retain a progressive significance. There have been many occasions in the course of the 20th century in which the socialist movement has been compelled to assume those democratic and national responsibilities and draw into its own ranks elements for whom those tasks are of essential significance—for whom the socialistic and international aspirations of the working class weigh far less heavily. I think it can be said that such a process influenced the development of the Bolshevik Party. Lenin certainly represented, within the framework of the Bolshevik Party, the most consistent opposition to such nationalist and petty bourgeois democratic prejudices. He was aware of their presence and could not ignore them.

I would like to read an article that was written in December 1914 after the outbreak of the First World War.

"Is a sense of national pride alien to us Great Russian class conscious proletarians? Certainly not! We love our language and our country, and we are doing our very utmost to raise *her* toiling masses (i.e., nine-tenths of her population) to the level of a democratic and socialist consciousness. To us it is most painful to see and feel the outrages, the oppression and humiliation our fair country suffers at the hands of the Tsar's butchers, the nobles and the capitalists. We take pride in the resistance to these outrages put up from our midst, from the Great Russians; in *that* midst having produced Radishchev, the Decembrists and the revolutionary commoners of the seventies; and the Great Russian working class having created, in 1905, a mighty revolutionary party of the masses; and the Great Russian peasantry having begun to turn towards democracy and set about overthrowing the clergy and the landed proprietors...

"...We are full of national pride because the Great Russian nation, too, has created a revolutionary class, because it, *too*, has proved capable of providing mankind with great models of the struggle for freedom and socialism, and not only with great pogroms, rows of gallows, dungeons, great famines and great servility to the priests, tsars, landowners and capitalists." [2]

Lenin was the author of these lines. It would be unjust to read this article as a political concession by Lenin to Great Russian chauvinism. His entire biography testifies to his unyielding opposition to Great Russian nationalism. Yet the article, an attempt by Lenin to exert a

revolutionary influence on these deep-rooted nationalist sentiments among the working masses and to utilize these sentiments for revolutionary ends, reflects the sensitivity he felt, not only towards the strong nationalist sentiments in the working class, but also in segments within his own party. There is a fine line between utilizing nationalist sentiments for revolutionary purposes and adapting revolutionary aims to nationalist sentiments. There is not an exact correspondence between the message that an author intends to convey and how the message is interpreted. There is all but inevitably a degradation in the political quality of the message as it makes its way across an ever broader audience. What Lenin had intended to be as a tribute to the revolutionary traditions of the great Russian working class was, in all likelihood, interpreted by the more backward sections of party workers as an elevation of the revolutionary capacities of Great Russians. Notwithstanding its left form, this too is a form of chauvinism with politically dangerous implications, as Trotsky pointed out in 1915.

He wrote: "To approach the prospects of a social revolution within national boundaries is to fall victim to the same national narrowness which constitutes the substance of social patriotism. In general, it should not be forgotten that in social patriotism there is, alongside the most vulgar reformism, a national revolutionary Messianism which deems that its own national state, whether because of its industrial level or because of its democratic form and revolutionary conquests, is called upon to lead humanity towards socialism or towards democracy. If the victorious revolution were really conceivable within the boundaries of a single, more developed nation, this Messianism, together with the program of national defense, would have some relative historical justification. But as a matter of fact this is inconceivable. To fight for the preservation of a national basis of revolution by such methods has undermined the revolution itself, which can begin on a national basis but which cannot be completed on that basis under the present economic, military and political interdependence of European states. This was never revealed so forcefully as during the present war."

It would be worthwhile to consider the conditions under which Lenin himself reevaluated his political perspective. No doubt his study of world economy under the impact of the First World War gave him a deeper insight into the dynamics of the Russian Revolution and led him to adopt, in essence, the perspective that had been associated with Trotsky for so many years.

When Lenin read his April Theses, it was immediately understood by those in the hall that he was in fact arguing very much along the lines that Trotsky had argued. The charge of "Trotskyism" was immediately raised and, in this very fact, we can understand the enormity of Trotsky's intellectual contribution to the success of the revolution that year. Trotsky had already provided an intellectual and political framework within which the debate inside the Bolshevik Party could go forward. It did not come as a complete bolt from the blue. If Lenin's personality and his unchallenged stature within the Bolshevik Party made possible a relatively rapid victory of the new perspective, it must also be the case that Trotsky's pioneering of those conceptions facilitated the struggle which Lenin waged, particularly under conditions where the masses in Russia in 1917 were moving to the left.

In a certain sense, what occurred in the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 1917 was a deeper and more profound expression of political developments that had occurred 12 years before. I would like to read an interesting passage from the book called *The Origins of Bolshevism* by the Menshevik Theodore Dan. He makes the following observation about 1905:

"The background of the Days of Liberty [the climax of the 1905 revolution] was such as we have seen that practically speaking both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were pushed towards Trotskyism. For a short time Trotskyism, which at that time, to be sure, still lacked the name, for

the first and last time in the history of the Russian social democracy became its unifying platform."

That is to say, under conditions of the most explosive movement of the Russian working class to the left, the perspective of Trotsky acquired immense prestige and stature. This occurred in 1905, it repeated itself at an even more explosive, powerful and history-making form in 1917. The triumph of 1917 was a triumph, to a great extent, of Trotsky's perspective of Permanent Revolution. What occurred in 1922 and 1923, that is the beginning of the political reaction against the October Revolution and the resurgence of Russian nationalism within the Bolshevik Party, created the best conditions for the recrudescence of the old anti-Trotskyist tendencies within the Bolshevik Party. It is not possible to treat the tendencies of that time as if they were unrelated to the political divisions that had existed within the Bolshevik Party. This does not mean that they were precisely the same.

The social tendencies that began to predominate in 1922-23 were very different from those upon which the growth of Bolshevism was based in 1917. The growth of Bolshevism in the revolutionary year was based on an explosive radicalization of the working class in the major urban centers. The social forces which underlay the growth of the party in 1922 and 1923, and which were the source of great concern to Lenin, were to a great extent non-proletarian elements, specifically from the lower middle classes in the urban areas for whom the revolution had opened up innumerable career opportunities, not to mention remnants of the old Tsarist bureaucracy. For such elements, the Russian Revolution was seen, more or less, as a national rather than international event. Lenin began to warn of this, of the growth of a type of national Bolshevism, as early as 1922, and he became increasingly strident in his warnings about the growth of chauvinistic tendencies. As we know, in late 1922 and early 1923 those warnings were directed specifically against Stalin, whom he referred to in his final writings as the individual who expressed the reemergence of the Great Russian chauvinist bully.

The struggle against Trotskyism was, in essence, a reemergence of the political opposition to the theory of Permanent Revolution within the party. What prevented Trotsky from stating this explicitly? I think the answer is to be found in the extraordinarily difficult circumstances created by Lenin's final illness and his death. Trotsky found it virtually impossible to speak as objectively as I suspect he would have preferred about the differences that had previously separated himself from Lenin. The only passage in which that difference found objective and thoroughly honest expression was in the famous final letter of Joffe, where Joffe told Trotsky that he had often heard Lenin state that on basic questions of perspective it had been Trotsky, rather than himself, who was correct, including on the question of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky, throughout 1923 and 1924, had sought to inculcate within the cadre of the Bolshevik Party a more critical attitude to the national environment, which he saw as the greatest enemy of the elaboration of a genuinely socialist perspective. There are many passages in *Problems of Everyday Life*, brilliant articles, in which he revealed the relationship between the backwardness of Russia's national environment and the great problems confronting the Russian working class in the development of socialist policies and the initiation of the socialization of Russian economic life. Only much later, towards the end of his life, did Trotsky state explicitly that the struggle against Trotskyism in the Soviet Union was rooted in the pre-1917 differences within the Bolshevik Party. He wrote in 1939: "It may be said that the whole of Stalinism, taken on a theoretical plane, grew out of the criticism of the Permanent Revolution as it was formulated in 1905" [*Writings 1939-1940*, p. 55].

How will Trotsky be remembered? What is his significance in the history of socialism? I think Trotsky will be remembered and will continue to occupy a vast place in the consciousness of the revolutionary movement as the theoretician of world revolution. Of course, he lived

longer than Lenin and was faced with new problems. But there is a basic continuity in all of Trotsky's works from 1905 until his death in 1940. The struggle for the perspective of world revolution is the decisive and essential theme of all his work. All of Lenin is contained in the Russian revolution. But for Trotsky, it was an episode in his life—a very great episode to be sure, but only an episode in the greater drama of world socialist revolution.

Trotsky and classical Marxism

A review of Trotsky's work in the aftermath of his fall from political power is beyond the scope of a single lecture. But in bringing this lecture to a conclusion, I wish to place emphasis on one critical element of Trotsky's theoretical legacy—that is, his role as the last great representative of classical Marxism.

In speaking of classical Marxism, we have two fundamental conceptions in mind: first, that the basic revolutionary force in society is the working class; and second, that the fundamental task of Marxists is to work indefatigably, theoretically and practically, to establish its political independence. The socialist revolution is the end product of this sustained and uncompromising work. The political independence of the working class is not achieved through clever tactics, but, in the most fundamental sense, through education—first and foremost, of its political vanguard. There exist no shortcuts. As Trotsky frequently warned, the greatest enemy of revolutionary strategy is impatience.

The 20th century witnessed the greatest victories and the most tragic defeats of the working class. The lessons of the past 100 years must be assimilated, and it is only our movement that has begun that task. In history, nothing is wasted and forgotten. The next great upsurge of the international working class—and the *international* scope of that upsurge is guaranteed by the global integration of capitalist production—will witness the intellectual resurgence of Trotskyism, i.e., classical Marxism.

Notes:

1. *International Trotskyism*, p. 32 2 Volume 21, pp. 103-104
2. *Volume 21*, pp. 103-104

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