

# The Revolution Betrayed and the fate of the Soviet Union

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In studying *The Revolution Betrayed* today, it is necessary not simply to admire this essential work of Marxism, but to review and assimilate the history of the ideas and the struggle over the past seven decades for the perspective and program outlined by Trotsky in these pages. This is the heart of building the party, and the training of a cadre. It is not a matter of beginning with the size of the membership, or merely finding the right slogan or tactical initiative, but above all of defending and developing the programmatic foundation of the socialist movement and the real heritage of Marxism for the twenty-first century.

This brings us to an examination of the post-World War II period inside the Trotskyist movement—a period that saw renewed attacks from the latter-day adherents of the state capitalist and bureaucratic collectivist theories that Trotsky takes on in *The Revolution Betrayed* and elsewhere. At the same time, elements within the Trotskyist movement, in response to the temporary restabilization of Stalinism and imperialism after the war, launched a politically symmetrical attack on Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism. It was politically symmetrical in the sense that it substituted for the Stalinophobia and adaptation to anti-communism that characterized those who rejected the defense of the Soviet Union, an adaptation to Stalinism and the conception, in the notorious phrase of the Pabloites, that Stalinism would be "forced to project a revolutionary orientation."

First, it must be said that the postwar period saw no shortage of revolutionary opportunities, along the general lines of what Trotsky had predicted as the Second World War began. This included a massive working class upsurge in Western Europe, with millions of workers in France and Italy looking to the Communist Parties to take the power, along with the Chinese Revolution and upheavals throughout the colonial world.

The victorious imperialist powers had learned something from the experiences after the First World War, however. They sought to restabilize their former enemies. They turned to Social Democracy and above all to the Kremlin and the Stalinist parties—in Italy, in France, in Greece and elsewhere—to discipline the working class and contain the development of a revolutionary situation. Even as the Cold War began, accompanied by a ferocious anti-Soviet and anti-communist hysteria inside the United States, Washington and Moscow moved toward the "postwar settlement."

Behind the rhetoric of the Cold War and the reality of the hot war in Korea, this settlement also made possible the temporary restabilization of both imperialism and its Stalinist agents, who emerged from the war with some temporary prestige, looked to by hundreds of millions around the world as the protagonists of a new society. A temporary boom was set in motion on the basis of the supremacy of the dollar and its backing by gold, alongside the utilization of Keynesian national reformist policies.

Stalinist regimes were established in Eastern Europe, but the imperialists wound up accepting these as a relatively small price to pay for the disciplining of the international working class and the squelching of its political independence and revolutionary aspirations.

No small factor in all of this, it must never be forgotten, was the fact that Trotsky had been assassinated in the first year of the Second Imperialist World War, and the ranks of the revolutionary movement emerged relatively isolated, decimated in crucial areas by the repression of both Fascism and Stalinism, and deprived of crucial leadership.

This in turn set the stage for the ideological and political assault on the Trotskyist movement that I have already referred to. The pressures of imperialism and Stalinism found their reflection inside the ranks of the Fourth International.

We are here speaking of trends that emerged after the war. As for the leaders of the petty-bourgeois opposition that broke with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US, Burnham had almost immediately renounced Marxism and moved to the far right. Shachtman took nearly two decades to make this journey, but by the late 1940s he was increasingly adopting the line of critical support to "democratic" imperialism against Stalinist "barbarism."

These trends were joined by others who concluded that the outcome of the war and the temporary strengthening of the Stalinists meant that socialism was now off the historical agenda, at least for generations. Such were the conclusions of Goldman and Morrow inside the American SWP, of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group in France, and of others. And there were those, like the Johnson-Forrest group in the SWP (C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya), and Tony Cliff in Britain, who declared their agreement with the "state capitalist" thesis in relation to the USSR.

The most immediate and mortal danger to the Fourth International, however, was posed by the development of Pabloite revisionism within the European-based leadership of the Fourth International. Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel declared that "objective social reality consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world." In other words, the historic crisis of capitalism had been resolved. This was covered up with left and even ultra-radical phrases such as war-revolution, centuries of deformed workers' states and similar slogans, but the essential politics was capitulation to the bureaucratic leaderships in the working class. With the claim that there was no longer time to build independent revolutionary parties, the Pabloites moved to liquidate the Fourth International into the Stalinist apparatus.

The Pabloites, as the members and supporters of the International Committee (IC) know from their whole history of struggle against this revisionist tendency, inflicted enormous damage on the Trotskyist movement. But they were eventually resisted and politically defeated, first in the Open Letter of 1953 issued by James P. Cannon and the SWP, and in more recent decades by the ongoing struggles of the IC, against the SWP's repudiation of Trotskyism, and above all the British WRP's degeneration.

The Pabloites emptied the "degenerated workers' state" of its Marxist meaning by developing the theory that "deformed workers' states" in Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, North Korea and elsewhere were the wave of the future. As David North puts it in his introduction to *The Revolution Betrayed*, the "centuries of deformed workers' states" turned out to be about four decades. Reading the pronouncements of the Pabloites during this period, up to the very moment of the Stalinist collapse, as in Mandel's immortal comment that it was ridiculous to claim that Gorbachev was restoring capitalism in the USSR, one is reminded of Trotsky's famous phrase that the great revolutionary developments would leave of various centrist and revisionist trends "not one stone upon another."

Today, however, I would like to deal, not primarily with the Pabloites, but with the state capitalist tendencies, which claim, utterly falsely, that the collapse of the Soviet Union somehow vindicates their theories. And in particular, I will examine the role of Tony Cliff, the British ex-Trotskyist who left the Fourth International almost 60 years ago and died in 2000, leaving behind a number of centrist groups claiming to be Trotskyist, including the British Socialist Workers Party and, in the US, the International Socialist Organization (although the SWP has broken from the ISO, they still share a common theoretical outlook).

Before we go further, it must be said that the term "centrist" does not apply here in the same sense as with parties such as the POUM in Spain and the SAP in Germany, in the 1930s. Those were parties that attracted thousands of workers looking for an alternative to Stalinism and Social Democracy. The state capitalists are a middle class group whose anti-Marxist outlook has been developed over decades.

Cliff developed his own version of the theory of Soviet state capitalism in 1948. He added little to the arguments that had been made in favor of the theory years earlier. As far as Cliff was concerned, the destruction of the Soviets and the loss of political power by the working class meant that the ruling bureaucracy, presiding over the rapid industrialization of the First Five Year Plan, had been transformed into a ruling class of state capitalists. Trotsky, as we already discussed briefly, had answered these arguments many years earlier. Cliff never explained how the ruling caste, with no right of inheritance and no special property relations, had become a ruling class.

#### Defeatist response to postwar developments

Notwithstanding the lack of much originality or theoretical seriousness in Cliff's conception, the political outlook expressed in his critique of Trotsky is an extremely revealing one. His starting point, he made clear, was not the theoretical challenge of an inevitably transformed world situation in the late 1940s, but rather disappointment with what he considered the false promises and prognoses of Trotsky. He reproduced almost word for word the complaints of Burnham and Shachtman a decade earlier, when they had similarly declared that Trotsky had become a "false prophet."

As Trotsky explained in his famous article, "A Petty Bourgeois Opposition in the Socialist Workers Party," part of *In Defense of Marxism*, he was not in the prophecy business. Trotsky wrote: "When the representatives of the opposition raised the hue and cry that the 'leadership is bankrupt,' 'the prognoses did not turn out to be correct,' 'the events caught us unawares,' 'it is necessary to change our slogans,' all this without the slightest effort to think the questions through seriously, they appeared fundamentally as party defeatists." [1]

Trotsky uses the term defeatist here to characterize a demoralized and skeptical faction that viewed the party, not as a conscious revolutionary force and not as their party, but as something external; not as the living memory and laboratory of the working class, embodying generations of struggle, but rather as a kind of political adviser that had offered an inferior product, or a service that was found defective.

This is no small question, because it gets at the heart of the empirical

and impressionist method of both Cliff and Shachtman, and their common class outlook, that of the demoralized petty bourgeois.

Decades later, in a little book called *Trotskyism After Trotsky*, Cliff sums up Trotsky's "false promises": "He had predicted that the Stalinist regime in Russia could not survive the war.... Trotsky thought that capitalism was in terminal crisis.... Trotsky argued that in backward, underdeveloped countries the accomplishment of bourgeois democratic tasks could be advanced only by working class power.... Trotsky was very confident that the Fourth International had a great future in the coming few years." [2]

Let us examine these horrible crimes of which Trotsky stands accused. Of course, the various references here deal not with guarantees, but with revolutionary perspectives. As Trotsky put it in his speech to the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922, "We have never based our policy on the minimizing of revolutionary possibilities and perspectives."

But this is exactly what outraged Cliff—that Trotsky pursued an active policy that was based on the fight to destroy Stalinism and to build the Fourth International into a mighty force. The fact that the living struggle of contending class forces resulted in complex and contradictory developments, developments that could not always be anticipated, Cliff takes as an invalidation of the nature of the epoch. "You promised us thousands of members," he whines, "but we still find ourselves swimming against the stream."

As Trotsky explained in his answer to the petty bourgeois opposition in 1939-1940, perspectives are not a promissory note, but a guide to practice. One might just as well argue that Marx's analysis was fundamentally wrong because he believed that socialism would arise first in an advanced capitalist country; or that Lenin and Trotsky had misled the movement with their expectation of revolution in Germany and elsewhere in the capitalist West. In fact, there were many who made such accusations, in order to justify their own desertion from the revolutionary movement. Cliff and his supporters stand squarely in this tradition of centrist renegacy.

This is further demonstrated when we examine Cliff's arguments in a bit more detail. "The actual reality at the end of the Second World War was very different [than Trotsky's alleged promise of the collapse of the bureaucracy]," Cliff wrote. "The Stalinist regime did not collapse. As a matter of fact, after 1945 it went from strength to strength by expanding into Eastern Europe." [3]

With a method and even a political conclusion quite similar to that of Pablo, Cliff, though claiming to remain a revolutionary opponent of Stalinism, completely misread the defensive expansionism of Moscow into Eastern Europe as a sign of great strength and stability. Just a few years before the death of Stalin, the East German uprising, then the Hungarian Revolution and Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, this was his verdict on Stalinism, essentially crediting it with an inner strength and progressive role that it never had.

What about the capitalist world? "Post war capitalism," writes Cliff, "was not trapped in general stagnation and decay. Indeed, Western capitalism enjoyed a massive expansion and alongside this came a flourishing of reformism...the social democratic and Communist parties, far from disintegrating, emerged in the postwar period stronger in number and support than ever before.... In Britain, for example the Attlee government represented the zenith of reformism...there is no doubt that it was the most effective reformist Labour government of all. Under Attlee workers and their families fared much better than before the war." [4] And he goes on for another page in the same vein.

This is not the place to recapitulate in detail the analysis made by the Trotskyist movement of the postwar boom, an analysis made well over 40 years ago. Suffice it to say that the International Committee, far from ignoring the boom, was the only political tendency that was able to explain it. As we insisted, it was *not* the result of any inherent strength of

capitalism or any remaining progressive role, but rather represented a response to the circumstances following the defeat of the Fascist powers. The role of the armed working class in Europe had to be taken into account, the upsurge of the American working class immediately after the war, the revolution gathering strength in China. Imperialism had not overcome any of its fundamental contradictions, but was able to utilize the services of its agencies inside the workers movement, both Social Democracy and especially Stalinism. The postwar period cannot be understood apart from this.

Cliff, on the other hand, celebrated the heyday of reformism. Above all, like the Pabloites, he dismissed the independent struggles of the working class and their impact during this period.

Cliff's abandonment of the theory of the degenerated workers' state had a definite political significance. It represented a capitulation to the ideological and political pressure of "democratic" capitalism in response to the difficulties faced by the revolutionary movement. Just as Shachtman had adapted to the moods among petty bourgeois intellectuals at the time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, Cliff and his supporters adapted to the pressures of the Cold War. Quite simply, they found it too difficult and uncomfortable to defend Marxism in the face of the anti-Communist campaign of this period. Only the genuine Trotskyists were able, as Cannon put it so well in *The Open Letter*, to fight imperialism without capitulating to Stalinism and to fight Stalinism, in the final analysis a petty bourgeois agency of imperialism, without capitulating to imperialism.

Capitulation to the pressure of "democratic" imperialism is a constant refrain in Cliff's arguments. One of his main complaints is that the Trotskyists following the war still said the Soviet Union was socialist. "The perception of the Stalinist regime as a socialist state, or even a degenerated workers' state—a transitional stage between capitalism and socialism—assumed that it was more progressive than capitalism,"[5] Cliff wrote. Elsewhere Cliff uses the same phrases, saying that for Trotsky the Soviet Union was a "deformed kind of socialism."

This is a falsification of the Trotskyist position. *The Revolution Betrayed* was written in order to explain, and not for the first time, the difference between the workers' state and socialism, not to mention the difference between a degenerated workers' state and socialist society. The Stalinist regime was not socialism and not progressive; what remained progressive were the conquests of the Revolution, which the bureaucracy had not yet destroyed. The state capitalists, dismissing this contradictory reality, rejected the defense of the Soviet Union, a defense that was upheld by the Trotskyist movement in spite of and in struggle against Stalinism, not in some kind of critical support, as Cliff falsely suggests.

While misrepresenting Trotsky, Cliff collaborated with the Shachtmanites during the decade of the 1950s. Although the Cliff group in Britain, first as the International Socialists and since 1977 renamed as the Socialist Workers Party, never moved all the way over to the extreme right as Shachtman did, its collaboration with Shachtman was testimony to its centrist break from the Fourth International.

Another constant refrain in the various articles and books by Cliff and his supporters is a demagogic falsification of the history of the Fourth International. First and foremost, the existence of the International Committee is simply ignored. Cliff quotes Pablo, Mandel and the Latin American Juan Posadas, the ultra-Pabloite who advocated nuclear war as the road to the socialist future. "Mandel, Pablo and Posadas came from the same stable—dogmatic Trotskyism,"[6] wrote Cliff just a few years before he died. There is no mention of Cannon, or of Gerry Healy when he led the struggle against Pabloism in the 1960s. Trotskyism equals Pabloism, according to Cliff, and this conveniently enables the state capitalists to fraudulently pose as intransigent opponents of Stalinism.

Revolutionary internationalism vs. tactical opportunism

Behind this crude falsification is the Cliff group's bitter hostility to the

very founding of the Fourth International. Duncan Hallas spells this out in his book, *Trotsky's Marxism*, from 1979.

Hallas quotes from an article written by Trotsky in 1930:

"If the Communist Left throughout the world consisted of only five individuals, they would nevertheless have been obliged to build an international organization simultaneously with the building of one or more national organizations. It is wrong to view a national organization as the foundation and the International as a roof. The interrelation here is of an entirely different type. Marx and Engels started the communist movement with an international document in 1847 and with the creation of an international movement. The same thing was repeated in the creation of the First International. The same path was followed by the Zimmerwald Left in preparation for the Third International. Today this road is dictated far more imperiously than in the days of Marx. It is, of course, possible in the epoch of imperialism for a revolutionary proletarian tendency to arise in one or another country, but it cannot thrive and develop in one isolated country; on the very next day after its formation it must seek or create international ties, an international platform, because a guarantee of the correctness of the national policy can be found only along this road. A tendency which remains shut in nationally over a stretch of years condemns itself irrevocably to degeneration." [7]

One would imagine that a Marxist opponent of Stalinism, such as Hallas claimed to be, would find himself in agreement with this powerful defense of internationalism against the kind of national socialism espoused by the Soviet bureaucracy. Not at all. He goes on to denounce this passage, saying Trotsky's arguments "will not withstand critical examination." According to Hallas, the Communist Manifesto was written for the Communist League, "which was international only in the sense that it existed in several countries. It was essentially a German organization, consisting of German émigré artisans and intellectuals in Paris, Brussels and elsewhere, as well as groups in the Rhineland and German Switzerland."

Moreover, says Hallas, "The First International started as an alliance between existing British trade union organizations under liberal influence and existing French ones under Proudhonist influence..." [8] And so on. This ignorant falsification of history purposely misrepresents the essential nature of the founding programmatic document of scientific socialism, and goes on to falsify Marx's life's work and attempt to turn him into a trade unionist simply because he patiently fought with a group of trade unionists to lay the basis for an international movement.

The state capitalists, far from being principled opponents of Stalinism, wound up putting forward a conception of the party with which the Stalinists could find much agreement. According to Hallas, the experiences of 1917 to 1936 "demonstrated the indispensability of parties rooted in their national working classes through a long period of struggle for partial demands." [9]

One could not ask for a more explicit repudiation of Marxism. This outlook sums up the "tactical opportunism" of the state capitalists. Seeking to root themselves in the British working class on the basis of partial demands, not an international program, this is exactly how they have functioned for all these decades. "Rank-and-fileism" and collaboration with the bureaucracy in the trade unions; single-issue middle class protest as in their Anti-Nazi League of the 1970s and 1980s; collaboration today with Tommy Sheridan and Scottish nationalism, and with George Galloway in the Respect electoral coalition. In the US, the ISO has become the biggest boosters of Ralph Nader and the Greens and most recently the anti-Trotskyist demagogue Peter Camejo.

The historic collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, preceded by the overturns of the East European Stalinist regimes, put to the test the various conceptions of the nature of Stalinism upheld by the various left-wing political tendencies over previous decades.

Certainly the Pabloites were immediately and utterly exposed, and in fact had been exposed much earlier. There is the case of Michael Banda of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, a latter-day convert to the Pabloite outlook, who made the preposterous claim that the restoration of capitalism was no longer even a possibility in the USSR only a few years before it took place.

The state capitalists claim some kind of vindication in the collapse of the Soviet Union, but this is based on nothing more than blind assertions without serious analysis.

In fact, the state capitalist and bureaucratic collectivist theories fail on all counts to explain the 74-year history of the Russian Revolution and the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR.

They cannot explain why the bureaucracy denied its own existence and continued until the end to rule in the name of the working class; nor why the Communist Parties, as rotten as they were, continued to base themselves on their influence and control of the labor movement in the capitalist world.

State capitalism cannot explain why the bureaucracy was hostile to the property relations on which it rested. If it was a ruling class, this was the first time in history that a ruling class exhibited that kind of antagonistic relationship to the source of its rule. In fact, its relationship to nationalized property was a parasitic one.

It could not explain the international role of the bureaucracy. It was never an independent factor defending its own property, but rather functioned as an agency of imperialism, which it served through its role in strangling the movement of the working class.

This ability to control the workers movement is precisely what reached a dead end in the 1980s. Stalinism had exhausted its usefulness because the global economic crisis left it—and the other bureaucratic leaderships as well, in the reformist and labor bureaucracies, for that matter—no leeway to pursue the kind of national reformist policies that had been possible at an earlier stage.

The Soviet state had a dual character, as we have explained. On this score, the state capitalists cannot explain the basic source of the Cold War, of more than four decades' duration. If the USSR was state capitalist, why was the Soviet Union perceived as a threat by world imperialism? This was, of course, not a figment of anyone's imagination. The capitalist world found itself in opposition to the Soviet Union not because of the bureaucracy, but because of the example of the Russian Revolution, an example that still lived, albeit in an extremely degenerated form. That's why the Cold War ended when it did, and that's why imperialism celebrated the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, although the triumphalism was extremely short-lived, for reasons that we have extensively analyzed and explained.

The state capitalists also cannot explain the devastation that befell the working class in the former Soviet Union after its collapse. The world has witnessed a decline in living standards and in lifespan unprecedented in modern history, a social retrogression even greater than during the years of the Great Depression. This has, in little more than a decade, created a social polarization and a social misery that is so enormous that it has even engendered nostalgia for Stalin. This can only be understood in terms of a fundamental change in the nature of the state. It previously rested, even if in an extremely distorted way, on the working class, and was forced to make some concessions, while today it leads the onslaught on social conditions and living standards.

A final point. The state capitalists argue that Trotsky was proven wrong because capitalist restoration was not the product of a violent counterrevolution, as Trotsky predicted would be necessary. Here too they are guilty of distortion and misrepresentation. They don't bother to explain how, according to their own theory, capitalism was allegedly restored in 1928, along with the establishment of the first Five Year Plan. That is truly a perversion of the Marxist theory of the state, since the supposed

transfer of power from one class to another took place entirely peacefully.

Trotsky, writing in the 1930s, warned of the danger of capitalist counterrevolution. The restoration of capitalism, when it finally came decades later, was relatively "peaceful" precisely because of the protracted character of the degeneration. By the time the bureaucracy was swept from the scene, the undermining of the remaining achievements of the October Revolution had reached such a stage that the final blows were relatively easy.

Once again, however, if we turn to *The Revolution Betrayed*, we find that even this variant is anticipated. After discussing the possibility of a proletarian political revolution against Stalinism, or a capitalist counterrevolution, Trotsky goes on:

"Let us assume—to take a third variant—that neither a revolutionary nor a counterrevolutionary party seizes power. The bureaucracy continues at the head of the state. Even under these conditions, social relations will not jell. We cannot count upon the bureaucracy's peacefully and voluntarily renouncing itself in behalf of socialist equality. If at the present time, despite the too obvious inconveniences of such an operation, it has considered it possible to introduce ranks and decorations, it must inevitably in future stages seek supports for itself in property relations. One may argue that the big bureaucrat cares little what are the prevailing forms of property, provided only they guarantee him the necessary income. This argument ignores not only the instability of the bureaucrat's own rights, but also the question of his descendants. The new cult of the family has not fallen out of the clouds. Privileges have only half their worth if they cannot be transmitted to one's children. But the right of testament is inseparable from the right of property. It is not enough to be the director of a trust, it is necessary to be a stockholder. The victory of the bureaucracy in this decisive sphere would mean its conversion into a new possessing class. On the other hand, the victory of the proletariat over the bureaucracy would insure the revival of the socialist revolution. The third variant consequently brings us back to the two first, with which, in the interests of clarity and simplicity, we set out." [10]

It should be clear that the question of the nature of the Russian Revolution and the nature of the Soviet state is not an abstract or academic matter, but one that raises the most fundamental questions of the nature of the epoch, the lessons of the twentieth century and the issues facing the working class and the Marxist movement today. The Revolution was no accident. Its degeneration likewise has objective material causes, which are bound up with the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system that never stopped exercising its sway and domination over the global economy.

It was precisely the contradiction between the global character of production and the barriers of the nation state that found its malignant expression in two imperialist world wars as well as the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution. The task of preparing and leading the international working class in the struggle to overcome the dead end of capitalism in the imperialist epoch is posed with increasing urgency and must be based on the foundations of Trotskyism and its analysis of the Soviet Union and Stalinism.

#### *Concluded*

#### Notes:

1. *In Defense of Marxism* (New Park, 1971), p. 79
2. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1999/trotism/ch01.htm>
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1955/statecap/intro.htm>
6. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1999/trotism/ch01.htm>
7. Quoted in *Trotsky's Marxism* (Bookmarks, 1979), pp. 89-90
8. *Ibid.* p. 90
9. *Ibid.* p. 94

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