

75 years since the assassination of Trotsky: 1940-2015

Leon Trotsky's place in history

By David North
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Sixty years ago, on August 21, 1940, Leon Trotsky died from wounds that had been inflicted by an agent of the Soviet secret police one day earlier. The Stalinist regime hoped that this murder would not only end the political activities of its greatest opponent, but also eradicate his place in history. Totalitarian pragmatism proved to be shortsighted in its calculations. The killer ended Trotsky's life. But the ideas and the writings of the great revolutionary lived on. Murdering Trotsky did not bring to an end the political work of the world movement that he had founded. The Fourth International, as it turned out, lived to see the collapse of the Stalinist regime. It follows, of course, that the assassination failed to remove Trotsky from history. As historians study and interpret the twentieth century, the figure of Leon Trotsky looms ever larger. In few other lives 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 observation of Thomas Mann that, "In our time the destiny of man presents itself in political terms," then it can be said that in the sixty years of Trotsky's life, destiny found its most conscious realization. The biography of Leon Trotsky is the concentrated expression of the vicissitudes of the world socialist revolution during the first half of the twentieth century.

Three years before his death, in a discussion with a skeptical American journalist, Trotsky explained that he saw his life not as a series of bewildering and ultimately tragic episodes, but as different stages in the historical trajectory of the revolutionary movement. His rise to power in 1917 was the product of a revolutionary upsurge of the working class. For six years his power depended on the social and political relations created by that offensive. The decline in Trotsky's personal political fortunes flowed 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. Indeed, Trotsky's historically conscious approach to politics—so effective during the revolutionary years—placed him at a disadvantage vis-à-vis his unscrupulous adversaries during a period of growing political conservatism. 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.

The 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 policies of the Stalinist-led German Communist Party—set into motion a chain of events that led to the Moscow Trials, the political catastrophes of Stalinist Popular Frontism and the final expulsion of Trotsky from Europe to distant Mexico.

It was there in Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City, that Trotsky was murdered by a Stalinist agent, Ramon Mercader. Trotsky's death came at the highpoint of the fascist and Stalinist counterrevolution. By 1940 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. At the time of his death in Paris in February 1938, Lev Sedov 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 believed his own assassination to be all but inevitable. This does not mean that he was resigned to his fate. He did all that he could to delay the blow being prepared by Stalin and his agents in the apparatus of the GPU/NKVD. But he understood that Stalin's actions were determined by the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy. "I live on this earth," he wrote, "not in accordance with the rule, but as an exception to the rule." [1] He predicted that Stalin would take advantage of the eruption of a shooting war in Western Europe during the spring and summer 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 focused 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 did Stalin consider 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 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 Robert 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 Führer 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." [2]

Nor had Stalin forgotten that the defeats suffered by the Russian armies during the First World War had discredited the tsarist 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 Trotsky lived he would remain the great revolutionary alternative to the bureaucratic dictatorship, the embodiment of the program, ideals and spirit of October 1917. That is why Trotsky was assassinated.

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 adapt his writings 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 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 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. In his introduction, Alexander observes:

As of 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. [3]

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 these 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 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.

Despite the vast economic and social changes 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 twentieth century, but also for the purpose of orienting oneself politically in the very complex world of the twenty-first 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 twentieth 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 conventional 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? Churchill's hymns to the fading British Empire were regarded as anachronistic even by many of his admirers. His writings are of interest as historical documents, but have very limited contemporary relevance. As for Roosevelt, he was the consummate political pragmatist, who reacted with a combination of guile and intuition to the problems of the day. 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 twenty-first century?

Even in their own day, Trotsky towered over his political contemporaries. The influence of all his adversaries 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 instruments 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 a timeless demonstration of the power of ideas and ideals that correspond to and articulate the progressive strivings of humanity.

Footnotes:

[1] *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-40]* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001), p. 298.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism* (London: New Park Publications, 1971), p. 39.

[3] Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 32.

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