

Preface to the Turkish edition of *The Heritage We Defend*

By David North
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I welcome the publication of *The Heritage We Defend* in Turkey, a country that played such an important role in the history of the Trotskyist movement. Leon Trotsky first found refuge off the coast of Istanbul in 1929, following his expulsion from the Soviet Union by the Stalinist regime. “Prinkipo is a fine place to work with a pen,” he wrote. During his four-year sojourn on the island, Trotsky produced many of his greatest works, including *My Life*, *The History of the Russian Revolution* and his incomparable essays on the struggle against fascism in Germany. Though he described Prinkipo as “an island of peace and forgetfulness,” his presence between 1929 and 1933 transformed this idyll in the Sea of Marmara into the world epicenter of revolutionary Marxist thought.

It is not only the relationship between Trotsky’s Turkish exile and the history of the Fourth International that imparts special significance to the publication of this new translation of *The Heritage We Defend*. The critical position occupied by Turkey in the geopolitics of the world imperialist system guarantees that the class struggle in this country will assume gigantic dimensions. The building of the Trotskyist movement in Turkey is, therefore, an essential strategic task of the Fourth International. This requires the education of the advanced sections of the Turkish working class and youth in the history of the long struggle waged by orthodox Trotskyists against the different forms of anti-Marxist revisionism—especially that associated with the liquidationist conceptions of Michel Pablo (1911–1996) and Ernest Mandel (1923–1995).

The Heritage We Defend was written thirty years ago, in the aftermath of the desertion of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) of Britain from the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). As the International Committee subsequently proved in numerous documents, the WRP’s renegecy was the outcome of its retreat, over a period spanning more than a decade, from the Trotskyist principles that it had once played a critical role in defending. The WRP, founded in 1973, was the successor organization of the British Trotskyist movement, which, in 1953, had formed the International Committee in alliance with the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the French Parti communiste internationaliste (PCI). Gerry Healy (1913–1989), the leader of the WRP, had signed the historic “Open Letter to the World Trotskyist Movement,” written by James P. Cannon (1890–1974), which denounced the Pablo-Mandel revisions of the program of the Fourth International. The “Open Letter,” issued in November 1953, articulated the foundational principles of the ICFI:

1. The death agony of the capitalist system threatens the destruction of civilization through worsening depressions, world wars and barbaric manifestations like fascism. The development of atomic weapons today underlines the danger in the gravest possible way.

2. The descent into the abyss can be avoided only by replacing capitalism with the planned economy of socialism on a world scale

and thus resuming the spiral of progress opened up by capitalism in its early days.

3. This can be accomplished only under the leadership of the working class in society. But the working class itself faces a crisis in leadership although the world relationship of social forces was never so favorable as today for the workers to take the road to power.

4. To organize itself for carrying out this world-historic aim, the working class in each country must construct a revolutionary socialist party in the pattern developed by Lenin; that is, a combat party capable of dialectically combining democracy and centralism—democracy in arriving at decisions, centralism in carrying them out; a leadership controlled by the ranks, ranks able to carry forward under fire in disciplined fashion.

5. The main obstacle to this is Stalinism, which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by the working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of wars fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR.

6. The need for flexible tactics facing many sections of the Fourth International, and parties or groups sympathetic to its program, makes it all the more imperative that they know how to fight imperialism and all its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and, conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism. [1]

The “Open Letter” summarized concisely the strategic conceptions of Trotskyism that had been repudiated by Pablo and Mandel. Pabloism replaced the Trotskyist movement’s characterization of Stalinism as counterrevolutionary with a theory that attributed to the Kremlin bureaucracy and its agencies a historically progressive and revolutionary role. Rather than working for the overthrow of the Stalinist regimes in a series of political revolutions, the Pabloites foresaw a process of bureaucratic self-reform, with Trotskyists acting as advisers to the Stalinist leaders, urging them toward a more left-wing course. The “deformed workers states” of Eastern Europe, ruled by the local Stalinist agents of the Kremlin regime, were destined, according to Pablo and Mandel, to last for centuries.

The Pabloites’ capitulation to Stalinism was but one aspect of their abandonment of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. They rejected the fight for Marxist consciousness in the working class and the

establishment of the political independence of the working class from all national bourgeois and petty-bourgeois agencies of imperialism.

Despite the central role that the British Trotskyists played in defense of the Fourth International in the 1950s and 1960s—especially in their opposition to the American SWP’s break with the International Committee and reunification with the Pabloites in 1963—their own drift toward revisionism became increasingly evident in the 1970s, particularly after the founding of the Workers Revolutionary Party in November 1973. In the early 1960s, the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League (predecessor of the WRP) had subjected the SWP’s glorification of Fidel Castro’s radical nationalism to withering criticism, rejecting the claim that the Cuban leader’s petty-bourgeois guerrilla army had proven that the path to socialism did not require the building of a Trotskyist party, based on and rooted in the working class.

But, by the mid-1970s, the WRP began to exaggerate the anti-imperialist program of various national movements in the Middle East—such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the radical nationalist regime of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi—in a manner that closely resembled the anti-Trotskyist policies of the Pabloites. [2] The WRP’s reversion to Pabloism was not merely the product of the personal errors of individual leaders. Under conditions in which the organized workers’ movement throughout the world was still dominated by the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties and trade unions, the Trotskyist organizations were vulnerable to the social and ideological pressure exerted by the mass radicalization of broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie, especially student youth, during the 1960s and early 1970s.

The challenge of integrating recruits from the petty-bourgeoisie into the Trotskyist movement required not only a firm political and practical orientation to the working class, based on an unrelenting struggle against the Stalinist and Social Democratic bureaucracies. It also required a persistent fight against the pseudo-Marxism and outright anti-Marxism of the ideological heroes of the “New Left” promoted by the Pabloites—above all, the disparate tendencies identified with “Western Marxism,” “state capitalism” and bourgeois nationalist “Third Worldism”—i.e., Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, Gramsci, Lefort, Castoriadis, Guevara, Fanon and Malcolm X, to name only the most widely celebrated. To this lengthy list we can also add the influence of Maoism, a viciously reactionary variant of Stalinism, which was embraced by innumerable petty-bourgeois intellectuals and led workers and youth all over the world into one bloody defeat after another.

The WRP’s opportunist policies encountered opposition within the International Committee. Between 1982 and 1984, the Workers League, the American Trotskyist organization, developed a comprehensive critique of the WRP’s neo-Pabloite policies. The principal WRP leaders—consisting of Healy, Michael Banda (1930–2014) and Cliff Slaughter (1928–)—suppressed the Workers League’s efforts to organize a discussion of its criticisms within the International Committee. [3] These unprincipled efforts led to the eruption of a political crisis within the WRP in the autumn of 1985. Still determined to evade a discussion of the theoretical and political issues underlying the breakdown of the WRP, Slaughter and Banda attempted to blame the International Committee for the opportunist course that the British section had pursued over the previous decade.

In February 1986, the WRP published a document announcing its break with Trotskyism. Written by Michael Banda, it was titled *27 Reasons Why the International Committee Should Be Buried Forthwith and the Fourth International Built*. The WRP released this document with great fanfare, predicting that it would take its place among the classics of Marxism. In reality, Banda’s document was an amalgam of distortions, outright lies and half-truths, whose purpose was to discredit not only the International Committee, but also the entire history of the Fourth International. The very title of Banda’s essay exposed its political dishonesty. If only a

fraction of his “27 Reasons” was sustainable, it would be impossible to justify the continued existence of the Fourth International. Following the conclusions that flowed inexorably from his own arguments, Banda—less than a year after completing his document—published a vile denunciation of Trotsky and declared his limitless admiration for Stalin. Banda’s political evolution anticipated the repudiation of Trotskyism by all those in the leadership and membership of the WRP who had endorsed his document. A substantial number joined the Stalinist movement. Others passed over to the imperialist camp and became active participants in the NATO war against Serbia. The largest group, encouraged by Cliff Slaughter, repudiated the entire legacy of the Lenin-Trotsky conception of the revolutionary party, abandoned the fight for socialism, and concentrated on making their personal lives as comfortable as possible.

From the moment it received Banda’s document, the International Committee understood the necessity for a detailed reply. Within two months, weekly installments of *The Heritage We Defend* were appearing in the newspapers published by the sections of the International Committee. I had not intended that the reply to Banda would require a book of more than 500 pages. However, as I studied Banda’s document, I realized that he was seeking to take advantage of the fact that the history of the Fourth International—particularly of the critical years between the assassination of Trotsky in 1940 and the 1953 split with the Pabloites—had never been adequately researched and was largely unknown to the existing cadre of the Trotskyist movement. It was not sufficient to denounce Banda’s renegacy. It was necessary to review the history of the Fourth International and, on this basis, educate its cadre.

Looking back over the text of this book, three decades after its publication, I believe that *The Heritage* has stood the test of time. It retains value as an introduction to the history of the Fourth International and examines problems relating to Marxist theory, program and strategy that are highly relevant to the present-day struggle to build the international Trotskyist movement.

The Heritage We Defend remains the only account of the history of the Fourth International that employs the method of historical materialism in explaining the emergence of political tendencies and the struggle between them. Rejecting the subjective approach that proceeds from the characteristics of individual leaders, good or bad, and their motives, noble or ignoble, *The Heritage* seeks to identify the objective social and political processes—arising from the contradictions of world capitalism and the global and national development of the class struggle during and in the aftermath of the second imperialist world war—that underlay the conflicts within the Fourth International. This history places central emphasis not on the subjectively conceived intentions of the main political actors—Cannon, Pablo, Mandel and Healy—but, rather, on the real objective driving forces of the class struggle, which, to borrow the words of Engels, “in the minds of the acting masses and their leaders—the so-called great men—are reflected as conscious motives...” [4]

The Heritage analyzes, within the context of the complex and rapidly changing conditions of the World War and its aftermath, the conflicts within the Fourth International that foreshadowed the struggle that developed following the Third World Congress of 1951 and culminated in the historical split in November 1953. The book draws attention to two revisionist tendencies in the 1940s, which reflected the rightward shift in the political orientation of large sections of the petty-bourgeois radical intelligentsia. This shift found expression in the persistent and growing political tensions within the Fourth International.

The “Three Theses” group (also known as the “Retgressionists”) emerged from the Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands (IKD). This was an organization of émigré German Trotskyists, led by Josef Weber (1901–1959). Prior to the publication of *The Heritage*, its role in the history of the Fourth International had been more or less forgotten. However, the conceptions it advanced proved influential in the

development of anti-Trotskyist and anti-Marxist tendencies, not only within the Fourth International, but also among broad sections of petty-bourgeois radicals.

The IKD published a document in October 1941 that rejected the perspective of world socialist revolution as a political pipedream. The modern world, it insisted, was advancing not toward socialism, but toward barbarism. The victories of fascism in Europe meant that the working class had been thrown back to pre-1848 conditions. The military victory of the Nazis, which the IKD believed to be irreversible, marked a new stage of world history. “The prisons, the new ghettos, the forced labor, the concentration and even war-prisoners camps are not only transitional political-military establishments, they are just as much forms of new economic exploitation which accompanies the development toward a modern slave state and is intended as the permanent fate of a considerable percentage of mankind.” [5]

The “Three Theses” group concluded that the fight for socialism had been, through a process of historical retrogression, superseded by the “drive for national freedom.” [6] In a later document, written in 1943, the IKD explicitly rejected the historical analysis of the imperialist epoch that Lenin had developed in the struggle against the betrayal of the Second International and upon which the strategy of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 was based. “If we glance back at the first world war and the total constellation at the time, we must recognize that the first world war, despite all causal connections which led to its outbreak, was no more than a *historical misfortune of capitalism*, an *accidental* event which staged the collapse of capitalism within the framework of historical necessity *earlier than historically necessary*.” But if the World War was an accident, so were the collapse of the Second International, the victory of the October Revolution and the founding of the Communist International. The entire objective foundation of revolutionary Marxist strategy in the twentieth century, as formulated by Lenin and Trotsky, was effectively denied.

The IKD formulated its political pessimism in the starkest terms. The working class, it declared, was finished as a revolutionary force. It was “dismembered, atomized, split up, counterposed to each other in its various strata, politically demoralized, internationally isolated and controlled...” [7] Although capitalism was putrefying, the working class was incapable of overthrowing it. The IKD asserted that the “most common mistake” of the Trotskyist movement, which arose from “a complete misunderstanding of Marxism,” consisted “in *conceiving the negation of capitalism only as the task of the proletarian revolution*...” In the face of the impotence of the working class as a revolutionary force, declared the IKD, the only political option was to return to the “century-old” fight for democracy. [8] It opposed the Fourth International’s call for the United Socialist States of Europe:

Before Europe can unite itself into “socialist states,” it must first separate itself again into independent and autonomous states. It is entirely a matter of the split-up, enslaved, hurled-back peoples and the proletariat constituting themselves again as a nation...

We can formulate the task in the following way: To reconstruct the whole screwed-back development, to regain all the achievements of the bourgeoisie (including the labor movement), to reach the highest accomplishments and excel them. ...

However, the most pressing political problem is the century-old problem of the springtime of industrial capitalism and of scientific socialism—*conquest of political freedom, establishment of democracy* (also for Russia), *as the indispensable precondition for national liberation and the founding of the labor movement*. [9]

The IKD insisted that its call to turn back the political calendar to the

pre-1848 era, to abandon the fight for international socialism and return to the struggle for national sovereignty and bourgeois democracy, applied to all countries.

With appropriate modifications this problem [of democracy and national liberation] exists for the whole world; for China and India, Japan and Africa, Australia and Canada, Russia and England. In a word, for all Europe, North and South America. Nowhere is there a country that does not have a *powerfully intensified democratic and national question, nowhere does there exist a politically organized labor movement*. [10]

The central slogan that had to be adopted, the IKD proclaimed, was “national freedom.”

By this, we mean to say: the national question is one of those historic episodes which *necessarily* become the strategic transition point for the reconstitution of the labor movement and the socialist revolution. Whoever does not understand this historically necessary episode and does not know how to use it, knows and understands *nothing* of Marxism-Leninism. [11]

In fact, it was the IKD that was repudiating the program of Lenin and Trotsky. The separation of the fight for democratic demands from the struggle to overturn capitalism signified the complete abandonment of the theory and program of permanent revolution. In countries with a belated bourgeois development, the theory of permanent revolution, Trotsky explained, “signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy and national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses.” [12]

It was bad enough that the IKD separated democratic from socialist demands in the less developed countries. But the IKD’s efforts to resuscitate a bourgeois program of national liberation in the advanced centers of world capitalism, and reject as untimely the fight for socialism, reflected a pathological level of political demoralization. Collaborators and friends of Josef Weber, the IKD leader, later recalled that he frequently expressed the view, in the mid-1940s, that Nazi rule over Europe would continue for at least thirty, if not fifty, years. [13]

The Shachtmanites welcomed and promoted the position of the IKD. Having broken with the Fourth International in 1940, the Shachtmanites believed that the IKD’s arguments were entirely compatible with their rejection of the definition of the Soviet Union as a workers state and the defense of the USSR against imperialism. The subsequent evolution of the IKD in the course of the 1940s proved the Shachtmanites correct in this evaluation of the retrogressionist theory.

The demoralized perspective of the IKD—which separated itself from the Fourth International—eventually found support within the Socialist Workers Party, in the form of the Morrow-Goldman tendency. Prior to the writing of *The Heritage*, the significance of this tendency had also been insufficiently studied. It emerged as a distinct oppositional group within the Socialist Workers Party in 1944. Its two principal leaders had played significant roles in the Fourth International and the American party. Albert Goldman (1897–1960) served as Trotsky’s lawyer, representing him at the Dewey Commission in 1937. In the 1941 Smith Act trial, Goldman defended the SWP members accused of sedition. He was among the defendants and was one of the eighteen party members found guilty and sent to prison. Felix Morrow (1906–1988) was a member of the SWP

Political Committee and an outstanding socialist journalist, best known for his book *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*. He, too, was among the party members sentenced to prison at the conclusion of the 1941 trial. Another important member of the Morrow-Goldman faction was Jean van Heijenoort (1912–1986), who had served as Trotsky's political secretary during the 1930s and as de facto secretary of the Fourth International during World War II.

The Heritage We Defend reviews the positions of the Morrow-Goldman tendency in detail. However, since the publication of *The Heritage*, the availability of many more SWP internal discussion bulletins, thanks to the internet, makes possible a fuller appreciation of the extent to which the Morrow-Goldman tendency was influenced by the arguments of the IKD. In 1942, Morrow and Van Heijenoort (writing as Marc Loris) had opposed the arguments advanced in the "Three Theses" resolution. But by mid-1944 their positions, and that of Goldman, had undergone a radical change. Morrow argued that the Fourth International's adherence to the program of socialist revolution in Europe rendered it politically irrelevant in the conditions that existed at the end of World War II. Interpreting events in Europe—especially in France and Italy—in the most conservative and defeatist manner, the Morrow-Goldman faction insisted that there was simply no possibility of socialist revolution. The Fourth International, it claimed, had no viable political option except to convert itself into a movement for bourgeois democratic reforms, allied with the Social Democracy and various democratically inclined bourgeois movements.

While advocating the transformation of the Fourth International into a left appendage of bourgeois democracy, Morrow and Goldman also called for political reunification with the Shachtmanites, whose earlier rejection of the defense of the Soviet Union was rapidly evolving into outright support for American imperialism's struggle against "communist totalitarianism." The Fourth International and the SWP forcefully and correctly rejected the demoralized perspective of Morrow and Goldman.

The evaluation of the arguments over a "correct line" toward events in Europe was not merely a matter of abstract intellectual discourse. In a highly fluid and unstable situation, where the outcome of the post-war political crisis was in doubt, the Trotskyists were trying to give full expression to the revolutionary potential in the situation. They based their work on the objectively existing potential for the overthrow of capitalism, not on a priori assumptions that capitalist restabilization was inevitable. In the grave hours before Hitler's rise to power, Trotsky was asked if the situation was "hopeless." That word, he answered, was not in the vocabulary of revolutionists. "Struggle," Trotsky declared, "will decide." The same answer had to be given to those who claimed, amid the disorder and chaos of post-war Europe, that the revolutionary cause was hopeless and the stabilization of capitalism inevitable. Had they conceded defeat in advance, as advocated by Morrow and Goldman, the Trotskyists would have become one of the factors working in favor of capitalist restabilization.

The conflicting arguments over the appropriate relation between democratic demands and a revolutionary socialist program reflected different class positions. All the leading representatives of the Morrow-Goldman tendency were moving rapidly to the right. Goldman left the SWP, briefly joined the Shachtmanite movement, and, soon after, repudiated Marxism. Morrow, after being expelled from the SWP in 1946, abandoned socialist politics, supported American imperialism's Cold War, and became a wealthy publisher of occult literature. Van Heijenoort also deserted the Fourth International, denounced the Soviet Union as a "slave state," ended his personal involvement in socialist politics and became a noted mathematician.

The political evolution of these individuals was part of a broader social process, as the Cold War climate, the economic restabilization of post-war Europe, and the bureaucratic stifling of the revolutionary movement of the working class affected the political outlook of the leftist petty-bourgeois

intelligentsia. Marxism gave way to existentialism. The earlier focus on social processes was replaced with a fixation on personal problems. The scientific appraisal of political events was dropped in favor of their interpretation from the standpoint of psychology. Conceptions of the future, based on the potential of economic planning, gave way to utopian daydreaming. Interest in the economic exploitation of the working class declined. Preoccupation with ecological problems—separated from the issues of class rule and the economic system—rose to prominence.

The evolution of the leader of the IKD is illustrative of the socially determined process of intellectual "retrogression." After the IKD severed its relationship with the Fourth International, Josef Weber broke entirely with Marxist politics and became a prophet of a semi-anarchistic ecological utopianism. Among his major disciples was a former member of the Socialist Workers Party, Murray Bookchin (1921–2006), who, in 1971, dedicated his book, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, to Josef Weber. Bookchin, who had become a bitter opponent of Marxism, thanked his mentor for having "formulated more than twenty years ago the outlines of the Utopian project developed in this book." [14] Bookchin's writings came to the attention of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the bourgeois nationalist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), after his capture and imprisonment by the Turkish government in 1999. Öcalan found, in the writings of Bookchin, ideas compatible with his own proposals for "Democratic Confederalism." Upon Bookchin's death, the PKK honored him as "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century." [15]

Politics is ruled by the logic of class interests. This is a basic truth that is frequently forgotten, especially by academics, who tend to evaluate political factions on the basis of subjective criteria. Moreover, their judgments are influenced by their own unstated political biases, particularly when it is a matter of evaluating a dispute between opportunists and revolutionists. To the petty-bourgeois academic, the policies advocated by the opportunists usually appear more "realistic" than those advanced by the revolutionaries. But, just as there is no innocent philosophy, there are no innocent politics. Whether foreseen or not, a political program has objective consequences. The Fourth International and the SWP recognized, in the 1940s, that the IKD program of a supra-historical national liberation and universal democracy was an expression of alien class interests, hostile to socialism.

By the early 1950s, the retrogressionist conceptions had been recast within the framework of anarchist and ecological theory. Somewhat later, via the efforts of the anti-Marxist Bookchin, the conceptions of Josef Weber developed a broader social and political base within diverse sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, including Kurdish nationalists, whose political activities involve endless maneuvering and collaboration with the major imperialist powers. It should be noted that Michael Banda, after repudiating Trotskyism, reverted to bourgeois nationalism and became a fervent admirer of Öcalan and active supporter of the PKK.

Within the social and political context of the 1940s, the essential political conception that connected the Shachtmanites, the "Three Theses" group and the Morrow-Goldman tendency with the somewhat later emergence of Pabloite revisionism was the rejection of the revolutionary potential of the working class. The precise forms taken by this rejection differed. Shachtman speculated that the Soviet Union represented a new form of "collectivist" society, controlled by a bureaucratic elite that was in the process of becoming, or already was, a new ruling class. A variant of the Shachtmanite theory was that the Soviet Union was a form of "state capitalism." The "Three Theses" group, followed by the Morrow-Goldman tendency, arrived at the conclusion that the socialist revolution was a historically lost cause.

The revisions of Pablo and Mandel cloaked their abandonment of Trotskyism with bombastic rhetoric. But in their perspective, the leading force in the establishment of socialism was the Stalinist bureaucracy, not the working class. Pabloite theory was a peculiar inversion of

Shachtmanite theory. While the Shachtmanites denounced the Stalinist regime as the progenitor of a new form of exploitative “bureaucratic collectivist” society, the Pabloite tendency proclaimed the bureaucratic Stalinist regimes established in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II to be the necessary form of the historical transition from capitalism to socialism. All these tendencies, each in their own way, based their political perspective on the *non-revolutionary* role of the working class. It ceased to be an active, let alone decisive, force in the historical process.

In September 1939, at the very beginning of the fight against the petty-bourgeois opposition, led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham, within the Socialist Workers Party, Trotsky called attention to the basic question of historical perspective involved in the dispute. The Fourth International, Trotsky wrote, insisted not only on the revolutionary role of the working class. It also maintained that it was possible to learn the lessons of past defeats, expel the betrayers of socialism from their positions of bureaucratic control, and build within the working class the leadership required for the victory of the struggle for power. The petty-bourgeois left, Trotsky wrote, rejected this basic revolutionary perspective:

All the various types of disillusioned and frightened representatives of pseudo-Marxism proceed *on the contrary* from the assumption that the bankruptcy of the leadership only “reflects” the incapacity of the proletariat to fulfill its revolutionary mission. Not one of our opponents expresses this thought clearly, but all of them—ultra-lefts, centrists, anarchists, not to mention Stalinists and social-democrats—shift the responsibility for the defeats from themselves to the shoulders of the proletariat. None of them indicate under precisely what conditions the proletariat will be capable of accomplishing the socialist overturn.

If we grant as true that the cause of the defeats is rooted in the social qualities of the proletariat itself then the position of modern society will have to be acknowledged as hopeless. [16]

The pessimism—one might even describe it as despair—that underlay Pabloite revisionism found consummate expression in its theory of “war-revolution,” developed in advance of the Third World Congress of 1951. “For our movement,” the Pabloite document declared, “objective social reality consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world.” The fight for socialism would assume the form of a war between these two camps, from which the Stalinist system would emerge victorious. Arising upon the ashes of a thermo-nuclear war, the Stalinists would establish “deformed workers’ states”—similar to those already existing in Eastern Europe—that would last for centuries. In this bizarre scenario, there was no independent role for the working class or the Fourth International. Its cadres were instructed to enter the Stalinist parties and act within them as a left pressure group. This liquidationist perspective was not limited to entry into the Stalinist parties. As explained in this volume:

The adaptation to Stalinism was a central feature of the new Pabloite outlook, but it would be a mistake to see this as its essential characteristic. Pabloism was (and is) liquidationism all down the line: that is, the repudiation of the hegemony of the proletariat in the socialist revolution and the genuinely independent existence of the Fourth International as the conscious articulation of the historical role of the working class. The theory of war-revolution provided the initial setting for the elaboration of the central liquidationist thesis: that all Trotskyist parties must be dissolved into whatever political

tendencies dominate the labor or mass movement in the countries in which the sections of the Fourth International worked. [17]

The split that occurred in November 1953 ranks among the most critical events in the history of the socialist movement. Nothing less than the survival of the Trotskyist movement—that is, the conscious and politically organized expression of the entire heritage of the struggle for socialism—was at stake. At the most critical moment in the history of the Fourth International, Cannon’s “Open Letter” clearly restated the foundational principles of Trotskyism, drawn from the strategic lessons of the revolutions and counterrevolutions of the twentieth century. The liquidation of the Fourth International would have meant the end of a politically organized Marxist opposition to imperialism and its political agencies in the Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties and organizations. This is not a speculative hypothesis. It is a matter of historical fact, which can be verified by examining the disastrous consequences of Pabloism in the many countries, on virtually every continent, where its liquidationist policies were implemented.

With respect to the fate of the Soviet Union, it must be recalled that the Pabloite leaders adhered to the theory of bureaucratic self-reform right up to the very end of the Stalinist regime. While the International Committee warned, as early as 1986, that the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev to power, and the implementation of his *perestroika* reforms, marked the final preparation for the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, the Pabloites hailed his reactionary policies as a decisive advance toward socialism. Ernest Mandel described Gorbachev in 1988 as “a remarkable political leader.” Dismissing as “absurd” the warnings that Gorbachev’s policies were leading to the restoration of capitalism, Mandel declared: “Stalinism and Brezhnevism are definitively at an end. The Soviet people, the international proletariat, the whole of humanity can breathe a great sigh of relief.” [18]

Mandel’s apprentice, the British Pabloite Tariq Ali, was even more unrestrained in his enthusiasm for the policies of the Gorbachev regime. In his book *Revolution From Above: Where is the Soviet Union Going?*, published in 1988, Ali combined several characteristic features of Pabloism: limitless support for the Stalinist bureaucracy, grotesque political opportunism and a total incapacity to understand political reality. In his preface, Ali provided this summation of the book’s thesis:

Revolution From Above argues that Gorbachev represents a progressive, reformist current within the Soviet elite, whose programme, if successful, would represent an enormous gain for socialists and democrats on a world scale. The scale of Gorbachev’s operation is, in fact, reminiscent of the efforts of an American President of the nineteenth century: Abraham Lincoln. [19]

Apparently concerned that his elevation of Gorbachev to the political heights of Abraham Lincoln did not express sufficiently the full measure of his own devotion to Stalinism, Tariq Ali humbly dedicated his volume to “Boris Yeltsin, a leading member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, whose political courage has made him an important symbol throughout the country.” [20]

The unconcealed support of the Pabloite leaders for the two central architects of the final destruction of the Soviet Union—Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin—provided an irrefutable historical confirmation of the reactionary character of Pabloism and the legitimacy of the struggle, spanning decades, waged by the International Committee against this pernicious petty-bourgeois political agency of imperialism.

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Since the publication of *The Heritage We Defend* in 1988, the world has witnessed profound economic, technological and social changes, not to mention explosive political developments. The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not bring about a new era of peace, let alone the “end of history,” as promised in the heyday of post-Soviet imperialist triumphalism. To state that the world is in “crisis” is an understatement. “Chaos” is a more appropriate description. The last quarter century has been wracked by perpetual war. Ever larger portions of the globe are being drawn into the maelstrom of imperialist geopolitical conflict. The United States, frustrated in its expectation that it would rule the world after 1991, is compelled to escalate, with ever-greater recklessness, its military operations. But the very foundations of the imperialist world order, as it emerged from the catastrophe of World War II, are falling apart. Even in the midst of Washington’s intensifying conflicts with Russia and China, political relations between the United States and its major imperialist “partners,” especially Germany, are rapidly deteriorating.

On the economic front, the capitalist system staggers from crisis to crisis. The effects of the economic crash of 2008 have not been overcome. The principal legacy of the crash has been intensifying social inequality, which has reached levels that are unsustainable within the framework of democracy. The staggering concentration of wealth within a small elite is a global phenomenon that underlies the growing political instability of bourgeois governments. Class conflict is on the rise in every part of the world. The globalization of capitalist production and financial transactions is drawing the international working class into a common struggle.

Objective conditions are providing the impulse for an immense expansion of revolutionary class struggle. But these objective impulses must be translated into politically conscious action. And this raises the all-important question of the leadership of the working class.

Despite the immense crisis of the global capitalist system and the general political disarray within the highest levels of the bourgeoisie, the efforts of the working class to find a way forward remain blocked by the parties and organizations that employ their influence to contain and misdirect its movement. And yet, the experiences of the past two decades have left their imprint on the consciousness of the masses. The bankruptcy of the official “socialist” parties is widely recognized. But as the masses turn to new organizations that promise a more radical approach to social problems, such as Syriza in Greece, the hollowness of their promises are rapidly exposed. It took only a few months for Syriza, having been brought to power on a wave of popular protests against the European Union, to repudiate every pledge it had made to its supporters. Were Podemos in Spain or Corbyn in Britain or Sanders in the United States to come to power, the outcome would be no different.

The resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership remains the central historical task confronting the working class. There is no political organization in the world, outside of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is fighting to meet this challenge. The validity of this statement is verified by the history of the ICFI’s struggle, now spanning sixty-five years, in defense of the theoretical and political heritage of Leon Trotsky’s struggle for the World Socialist Revolution.

David North
Detroit
June 22, 2017

Notes:

[1] Cited in *The Heritage We Defend* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), pp. 231–32

[2] The opportunist degeneration of the WRP was analyzed in detail in *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism 1973–1985*, published in *Fourth International*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Summer 1986.

[3] The documents of the Workers League are published in *The ICFI*

Defends –1986, Trotskyism Fourth International, 1982 Volume 2, Autumn 1986.

[4] Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990), p. 389.

[5] “The National Question in Europe: Three Theses on the European Situation and the Political Tasks,” dated October 19, 1941, published in the December 1942 edition of *Fourth International*, pp. 370–372. Available:

www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/vol03/no12/3theses.htm.

[6] Ibid.

[7] “Capitalist Barbarism or Socialism,” published in *The New International*, October 1944, p. 333.

[8] Ibid., emphasis in the original.

[9] Ibid., p. 340, emphasis in the original.

[10] Ibid., emphasis in the original.

[11] Ibid., emphasis in the original.

[12] *The Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park Publications, 1962), p. 152, emphasis in the original.

[13] Marcel Van Der Linden, “The Prehistory of *Post-Society Anarchism*: Josef Weber and the Movement for a Democracy of Content (1947–1964),” *Anarchist Studies*, 9 (2001), p. 131.

[14] Ibid. p. 127

[15]

<https://roarmag.org/essays/bookchin-kurdish-struggle-ocalan-rojava/>

[16] “The USSR in War,” *In Defense of Marxism* (London: New Park Publications, 1971), p. 15.

[17] *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 191.

[18] Ernest Mandel, *Beyond Perestroika* (London: Verso, 1989), p. xvi.

[19] Tariq Ali, *Revolution From Above* (Surry Hills, Australia: Hutchinson, 1988). p. xiii.

[20] Ibid., dedication page.

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