

On the 79th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky

21 August 2019

It was on this day, seventy-nine years ago that Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Vladimir Lenin of the Russian Revolution, commander of the Red Army and founder of the Fourth International, died from grievous wounds inflicted the day before by a Stalinist assassin.

This crime of the century was the product of a massive international operation organized by the GPU, the secret police of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. It involved a conspiracy to infiltrate agents into the Trotskyist movement and Trotsky's household in the Mexico City borough of Coyoacán to facilitate the bloody work carried out by the GPU assassin, Ramon Mercader.

The assassination represented the apogee of Stalinist and fascist reaction, coming one year to the day after Stalin agreed to sign a non-aggression pact with Hitler, providing Germany's Nazi regime a free hand in launching the Second World War.

Trotsky had been exiled from the Soviet Union since 1929, confronting what he termed a "planet without a visa" with Mexico the only country offering him asylum. GPU assassins had already murdered many of his closest collaborators, including Trotsky's son Leon Sedov, his political secretary Erwin Wolf and the secretary of the Fourth International, Rudolf Klement.

In the Soviet Union itself, the Stalinist bureaucracy had carried out the Moscow Trials of 1936-38, directed at the extermination of all political opposition. The principle targets were the supporters of Trotsky, with hundreds of thousands of socialists—the product of an immense development of revolutionary culture in both Russia and internationally—slaughtered in what amounted to a political genocide. As Trotsky wrote in 1937, from then on Stalinism and genuine Marxism were separated by a "whole river of blood."

Yet Stalin justifiably feared that with the outbreak of war and a resulting crisis in the USSR and internationally, Trotsky could be raised up by a new upsurge of the working class, posing a revolutionary challenge to the ruling bureaucracy.

As Victor Serge wrote in 1937: "There is no other explanation for the mad proscriptions which are destroying the structure of the regime except hatred and fear... The substitute team has been shot as a precaution. Only the Old Man remains... As long as the Old Man lives, there will be no security for the

triumphant bureaucracy."

While the Stalinist assassin was able to end the life of the great revolutionary by driving an ice-axe into his skull, if Stalin's aim was to exterminate the ideas of Trotsky and the movement that had been built based upon these ideas, then the operation proved an abject failure.

The Fourth International, founded by Trotsky in 1938, outlived not only Stalin and his assassin, but the Stalinist bureaucracy as a whole, which liquidated itself and the Soviet Union half a century after Trotsky's assassination.

Trotsky had warned that, outside of a political revolution by the working class to overthrow the Stalinist regime, the Soviet bureaucracy would destroy the USSR and restore capitalism. While bourgeois analysts saw the Stalinist bureaucracy as a permanent fixture of world politics and pseudo-lefts and revisionists hailed Gorbachev and Yeltsin as the initiators of a "political revolution," Trotsky's analysis proved correct, and the Fourth International was the only movement that foresaw and was politically prepared for this development.

As for the Stalinist Communist Parties that had dominated and betrayed the working class in country after country, they disintegrated, confirming Trotsky's prognosis in 1938 that, "The great events that rush upon mankind will not leave of these outlived organizations one stone upon another."

In his relentless battle against Stalinism, Trotsky laid the foundations for the development of revolutionary strategy in the 21st century along with the programmatic and political foundations of the struggle for socialism. No other figure in the history of the Marxist movement is as relevant to the present world situation and the tasks facing the international working class and its revolutionary vanguard.

The struggle waged by Trotsky against the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Third International was based upon a sweeping global vision and understanding of the socialist revolution as an international process.

All of the horrendous crimes for which Stalin will be remembered and loathed by generations to come were carried out in the defense of the Soviet bureaucracy's repudiation of an international socialist perspective and its embrace of "socialism in one country." This autarkic conception of the development of the USSR as a national state reflected the bureaucracy's identification of its own privileges with its grip on national

state power.

This retrograde theory justified the subordination of the world revolution to the interests of the conservative bureaucratic apparatus. Trotsky foresaw the consequences of this policy for the international working class, which suffered a series of catastrophic defeats, culminating in the coming to power of Hitler in Germany.

From the initiation of the Left Opposition in 1923, the movement led by Trotsky based itself upon the theory of permanent revolution that had guided the October 1917 Revolution.

This theory took as its starting point not the backward economic conditions and existing relation of class forces within Russia, but rather an understanding of the Russian Revolution in its world-historical context. Under conditions of the development of a world economy and an international working class, he established that in countries with a belated capitalist development like Russia, the democratic tasks associated with earlier bourgeois revolutions could be completed only by the working class. The Russian working class would be compelled to take power and adopt measures of a socialist character, but this revolution could find a way out of the limits imposed by Russia's backwardness only within the framework of the world socialist revolution.

The struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism developed on the basis of this strategy of world socialist revolution, which found its political expression in the founding of the Fourth International in September 1938.

He had spelled out this strategic conception a decade earlier in his Critique of the Draft Program of the Communist International in which he wrote:

“In our epoch, which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of world economy and world politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country. This also holds entirely for the party that wields state power within the boundaries of the USSR. On August 4, 1914, the death knell sounded for national programs for all time ... In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.”

Trotsky's insistence that a revolutionary strategy can be developed only on the basis of an analysis of the world economy and world politics makes him an entirely contemporary political figure under conditions in which the unprecedented global integration of production comes into ever sharper conflict with the capitalist nation state system, and in which the struggles of the working class can be waged successfully only on the basis of international strategy and organization.

Trotsky would have no difficulty in understanding the world in which we live today, which is beset by all the economic, social and political contradictions that existed during his lifetime, and faces a global resurgence of the class struggle. Ruling elites the world over are turning to the right, aiding and abetting the emergence of fascist and far-right forces, even as masses of working people are turning to the left. And, as in the years preceding Trotsky's assassination, the major powers, with the US in the lead, are building up their military in preparation for global war.

The essential perspective of Leon Trotsky in founding of the Fourth International, that this is the epoch of the death agony of capitalism in which the paramount issue confronting the working class is the building of a revolutionary leadership, retains all of its power and urgency.

This perspective, and the continuity of the struggle waged by Trotsky during the tumultuous events of the first half of the 20th century are today embodied in the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Socialist Web Site and the struggle being waged by the Socialist Equality Parties around the globe.

Against the promotion of nationalism and racial and ethnic division that drives the entire spectrum of bourgeois politics, from the fascist and far right, to the liberals and pseudo-lefts, the ICFI advances the class-based strategy of world socialist revolution.

Seventy-nine years after the assassination of Leon Trotsky, the struggle of the ICFI to defend and develop the program of world socialism to which he dedicated his life is intersecting with the growth of the class struggle internationally. On this anniversary, we not only pay tribute to the immensely powerful struggle waged by Trotsky under the most difficult conditions. We honor his memory through our party's intervention in the struggles of the working class internationally in order to build the World Party of Socialist Revolution that Trotsky envisioned.

Bill Van Auken

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