

# The contemporary significance of Leon Trotsky's life and work

## Meetings in Berlin and London draw appreciative audience

**Our correspondent**  
**27 September 2000**

At meetings held last weekend in Berlin and London commemorating the 60th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, David North—Chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the USA—explained the historical role of the great Marxist revolutionary and opponent of Stalin. The meetings were hosted by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

North emphasised that it was not possible to understand the tragic developments marking the last century without studying the writings of Trotsky. “In the writings of Leon Trotsky history itself appears to be attempting to present and make clear what it wants and where it is going,” he said.

Unlike other great Marxist figures, and despite many attempts, it has proved impossible to politically domesticate Trotsky's ideas and evaluations and interpret them in such a way as to justify prevailing conditions. Marx himself was reinterpreted by German social democracy and transformed into an advocate of reformism. During the period of Glasnost, the majority of those declared by Stalin to be enemies of the Soviet Union had been rehabilitated. But history records that the Stalinist regime collapsed without having ever rehabilitated Trotsky. It could not be done because his analyses and commentaries were far too concrete. He was the embodiment of a political perspective—that of world socialist revolution—which could not be granted legitimacy even decades after his death. To do so would point to an alternative to the rule of the Soviet bureaucracy and its path towards capitalist restoration.

Also speaking at the meeting held at Humboldt University in Berlin was Vladimir Volkov, who leads the Russian Editorial Board of the *WSWS*. Volkov described the colossal economic and social decline taking place on the territory of the former Soviet Union and posed the question: “Does this mean that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was senseless, that it was doomed from the beginning?”

He answered: “Absolutely not! The international perspectives which were behind the revolution of 1917 had nothing to do with the politics of national autarchy which were sanctioned in the Soviet Union in the middle of the 1920s. In addition, the possibility of the degeneration of the revolution along national lines had already been predicted long before it actually took place.”

There were only two possibilities for integrating the Soviet Union into the world economy. Either through systematic and patient collaboration with workers' states established in the industrialised countries, with the aim of building an economy on a world scale that proceeded on the basis of the requirements of humanity—i.e., the socialist perspective which Trotsky defended—or the destruction of the property relations established by the Russian Revolution and reintroduction of capitalism, which would be inevitably bound up with the establishment of dictatorship and extreme forms of exploitation. The suppression of Trotsky and the Left Opposition by the Stalin faction already headed the Soviet Union in the direction of its ultimate demise, Volkov continued.

“What differentiated Trotsky's socialism from the other ‘socialisms’ of the 20th century? Or, to put it more precisely: what differentiated the genuine Marxism represented by Trotsky from the numerous reformist, Stalinist and nationalist tendencies which for a time called themselves or continue to call themselves ‘socialist’ or ‘communist’?” This was the question posed by Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in his contribution to the Berlin meeting. “It is, of course, possible to give a very long, comprehensive and complex answer to this question, but the crucial point is as follows: for Trotsky the realisation of a socialist perspective—socialist revolution and the building of a socialist society—was inseparably bound up with an elevation of the cultural level of the masses and the awakening of its creative potential.” Trotsky's socialism was based on a comprehensive vision of

human progress, Schwarz explained.

Chairing Sunday's meeting at the International Students House in central London, Julie Hyland of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board gave a biographical sketch of Trotsky. She explained that Trotsky's greatest contribution to Marxism was the struggle he undertook against the Stalinist bureaucracy, which led to the founding of the Fourth International. He stood up against seemingly impossible "moral, emotional and physical blows to complete, as James P. Cannon described it, 'his testament to humanity...a literary treasure...that the moths and the rust cannot eat.'"

"Trotsky's weapons against the bureaucracy were his tireless efforts to expound and clarify the central political and social issues of the day. Brought together, Trotsky's writings would run to some 150 volumes, covering virtually every subject. They include works such as *Permanent Revolution*, the three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*; *The Stalin School of Falsification* and *Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, numerous articles on fascism and the situation in Germany, especially after Hitler's coming to power, his biography entitled *The Young Lenin*, works on social and artistic questions such as *Problems of Every Day Life*, *Women and the Family* and *Literature and Revolution* and, of course, his classic analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet Union, *Revolution Betrayed*.

The ideas expounded in this vast literary output constitute the contemporary significance of Trotsky and resonate today, Hyland concluded.

Chris Marsden, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, spoke of how Trotsky's political conceptions animated the *World Socialist Web Site*. Its development "was bound up with a scientifically founded belief in the continued validity of the Marxist perspective... an understanding that a successful struggle for socialism demanded above all the renewal of the rich socialist culture created over the decades preceding the Russian Revolution of October 1917".

Marsden continued: "Trotsky and the generation of revolutionaries of which he was the foremost representative understood that revolution, though objectively posed, required the conscious intervention of the working class in the political arena. The working class could neither overthrow the existing order nor build a new world unless a significant number of workers were educated as Marxists and inspired by the socialist political vision it articulates."

Chris Talbot, who heads the *World Socialist Web Site's* Africa department, noted that the present conditions in Africa were perhaps the greatest indictment of modern capitalism. He explained that the total income of all 48 sub-Saharan African countries was now roughly equal to that of

tiny Belgium. In that vast territory there was a higher proportion of people dying from infectious diseases than at any time since the beginning of the twentieth century. Talbot said it was not possible to understand what had happened to Africa without a study of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.

"What has been the experience of the working class and the peasantry in Africa of 40 years or so of Pan-Africanism, or regimes which initially espoused Pan-Africanism? In a tragic way, this experience has verified Trotsky's analysis, which stresses the blind alley of bourgeois nationalism in the countries oppressed by the imperialist powers. Apart from leaning to some extent on the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union during the Cold War period—which gave the Pan-Africanist regimes a little room for manoeuvre and sometimes made possible limited state welfare measures—not one of the African nationalist leaders was able to weaken the economic stranglehold of Western imperialism or seriously address the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. Over the past quarter century, every one of these leaders or their political progeny has embraced the capitalist market economy and the domination of Africa by the International Monetary Fund and the transnational corporations, and accepted the social catastrophe now engulfing the continent."

There was a question and answer session at the end of both meetings, covering a wide variety of topics. Collections raised over \$1,000 towards the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* and several hundred dollars of socialist literature were purchased.

The *WSWS* will publish in the near future the major speeches delivered at the two meetings.



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