

Trotsky's Europe and America: new edition of seminal essays from the 1920s published in Germany

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Arbeiterpresse Verlag, the Marxist publishing house in Germany, has published a new edition of Europe and America, a collection of speeches and essays written by Leon Trotsky in the 1920s. We are publishing below the new foreword to this important work.

The speeches and essays contained in this volume were written by Leon Trotsky in the 1920s and deal with two subjects: the assessment of the global situation and the resultant tasks for the international workers movement.

Trotsky's approach to these issues is a far cry from the schematic, mechanical approach into which the Social Democrats had transformed Marxism (before they jettisoned it completely) and which was later adopted by the Stalinists as a distorted caricature of Marxism. In that pattern of thinking, capitalism was in a process of continuous decline which would automatically result in a corresponding growth and, ultimately, triumph of the workers movement. Accordingly, the task of the party was reduced to passive waiting or—in the “left” version of this schematic approach—to unceasing, but aimless, activity.

As a Marxist, Trotsky's position was, of course, that economic events ultimately determine social and political development—but only ultimately. People make their own history, and they do so consciously. Class struggle is not simply a mechanical reproduction of the economic process. It is fought out by classes, parties and individuals who play a crucial role at critical turning points. Also, the trajectory of the economic process itself is anything but linear. It is characterised by contradictions and abrupt turns of events that can be of decisive importance for political tactics. It is precisely for this reason that a Marxist party that doesn't just react, but is able to foresee events and provide leadership, is necessary.

As a rule, this aspect is ignored when assessments are made of the—largely misunderstood—twentieth century. The reviews and essays published at the turn of the millennium deal mainly with the great catastrophes—the two world wars, Stalinism and fascism—and express the vague, but hardly justified hope that these will not be repeated in the new century. As opposed to this, hardly any attention is given to the decisive turning points at which history might have taken a different path. And yet it is only the study of these turning points, of the possible alternatives, that enables us to learn the lessons of history.

The 1920s are generally regarded as a relatively calm period, an interlude between the First World War and the subsequent revolutionary upheavals on the one hand and the ascent of fascism and the Second World War on the other. But if one regards this period from the point of view of the subjective factor—that is, of the leadership and political orientation of the working class—then it becomes apparent that the courses that were set in the 1920s were decisive in making the catastrophe that was to follow perhaps not inevitable, but at any rate much more likely.

The fate of Leon Trotsky is in itself crucial in this context. At the

beginning of the decade he stood at the head of the Soviet state and of the Communist International, his political authority second only to that of Lenin. At the end of the decade he was in exile on a small, remote Turkish island. Trotsky's expulsion by the Stalin faction, which represented the interests of the rising bureaucracy, was tantamount to the expulsion of Marxism from the world communist movement.

That this had profound consequences for the fate of the Soviet Union is scarcely denied, at least not by serious historians. The suppression of the Left Opposition reached its climax in 1937 with the physical annihilation of a whole generation of revolutionary Marxists and leading intellectuals during the Moscow Show Trials. From that point on, there is a straight line leading to the liquidation of the Soviet Union by Stalin's heirs 50 years later. What has been given much less attention, however, are the effects the suppression of the Left Opposition had on the international workers movement and world politics during the 1930s and 1940s. History would certainly have taken a different course if Trotsky's perspectives, and not Stalin's, had dominated the Communist International.

To understand this question, which has remained an issue of urgent topicality to this very day, it is necessary to examine the contents of the strategic concepts that Trotsky presented in his many writings. In addition to the articles contained in this volume, these include—to name only the most important—*The Permanent Revolution*, *The Third International after Lenin*, Trotsky's writings on German fascism and on the Spanish Civil War, and the founding document of the Fourth International—*The Transitional Programme*.

In several of the writings contained in this volume Trotsky examines the global situation in the early 1920s. In doing so, he focuses on the question of whether capitalism offers a way out of the European blind alley. His answer is categorically “no”.

The First World War had solved none of the problems which had caused it in the first place. The national boundaries had become too restrictive for the modern productive forces. German capitalism, the old continent's most progressive and dynamic form of capitalism, had stepped forward to reorganise fragmented Europe—and had failed abysmally. Britain and France emerged from the war as victors, but as completely impoverished victors. The real winner and newly dominating force in the world economy was the United States of America. The centre of the world economy had shifted from the old to the new continent.

In assessing the global situation, Trotsky proceeded from the relationship between Europe and America. This aspect was already at the centre of the report (“The World Situation”) he delivered to the Third Congress of the Communist International which was held in Moscow in the summer of 1921. He returned to this subject in two speeches held in 1924 and 1926 (*Europe and America*). His conclusion was that for

European capitalism, ensnared as it was in a tightly meshed network of state boundaries and economically dominated by the United States, there was no way out of decline and crisis in the foreseeable future.

“The unattainable economic dominance of the US automatically precludes the possibility of economic rise and rebirth for capitalist Europe,” he writes in the preface to *Europe and America*. “Whereas, in earlier times, European capitalism had a revolutionary effect on backward parts of the world, it is now American capitalism that is revolutionising overripe Europe. Europe has no way out of its economic blind alley other than: proletarian revolution, elimination of the state customs barriers, creation of the United European Soviet States and federation with the Soviet Union and the liberated peoples of Asia.”

As early as 1921 Trotsky warned against a fatalistic interpretation of this assessment that assumed the victory of the socialist revolution was preordained. In Russia the working class had seized the initiative in 1917 and had boldly conquered political power. In Western Europe, and particularly in Germany, however, the first attempts at emulating the Russian workers had failed. The Social Democrats' abrupt defection to the side of the bourgeoisie had disorganised the workers movement. The newly emerged Communist Parties were too young and inexperienced to offset this immediately, and had suffered a number of defeats. As a result, there was a transitory period of political and economic stabilisation in the early twenties.

Accordingly, the dominant theme of the Third Congress of the Communist International was a reorientation of the International. The reaction to the defeats among many of the delegates was disappointment and impatience expressed in left-radical positions. This attitude was particularly widespread in the delegation from Germany, where in March 1921 the German Communist Party (KPD) had undertaken an ill-prepared attempt at leading an uprising, and had suffered heavy losses. Some delegates proposed a so-called “offensive strategy”, according to which the party was at all times and under all circumstances obliged to go on the offensive and call for an offensive.

This nonsense was firmly rejected by Trotsky and Lenin, who wrote the pamphlet “‘Left-Wing’ Communism--An Infantile Disorder” on the subject. They made every effort to convince the delegates of the necessity of applying more attention to issues of strategy and tactics. One of the pivotal lessons of the Congress was that, before one is able to conquer power, one must conquer the masses, and: “It is not enough to go into the struggle, you have to win it. And, to do that, you have to learn the art of revolutionary strategy.”

Trotsky subsequently summarised the conclusions of the Third Congress in his article “The School of Revolutionary Strategy”. Once again, he warned against a mechanical, fatalistic interpretation of Marxism. The transformation of society, he wrote, “does not happen of its own accord, like sunrise and sunset.” The prerequisite was the emergence of a new class “with the necessary degree of consciousness, organisation and power to ... open the way to the new social relations.”

At the same time, Trotsky explicitly excluded the possibility that crisis-racked society would be able to continue in its present state for any length of time. The efforts of the Social Democrats to create a stable foundation for bourgeois democracy were doomed from the outset. He warned that the only alternatives were socialism and barbarism: “Humanity does not stand still in one place ... if an upwards development becomes impossible, society collapses downwards; if there is no class capable of driving society upwards, society breaks apart and throws the gates wide open for barbarism.”

Twelve years later this forecast became an horrific reality when the Nazis assumed power in Germany. By that time, the lessons of the Third Comintern Congress had long since been forgotten. Trotsky had been declared a non-person and left radicalism had experienced a macabre renaissance in the form of the so-called Third Period of class struggle

propagated by the Stalinist-dominated Comintern since 1928. According to this standpoint, which was an offspring of the bureaucracy's panic-stricken reaction to the social crisis it itself had engendered in the Soviet Union, the struggle for power was on the immediate agenda in all countries of the world.

The Communist Parties intoxicated themselves with revolutionary phraseology and were completely blind to the rising fascist threat. Every tactical measure aimed at influencing Social Democratic workers was deemed counterrevolutionary and “Trotskyist”. In Germany, being in favour of a united front with the SPD (Social Democratic Party) against the fascists meant being expelled from the KPD. The Social Democrats were defined as “social fascists” and twin brothers of the Nazis. The splitting and paralysing of the workers movement that resulted from the KPD's politics paved the way for Hitler's ascension to power.

The KPD leader Ernst Thälmann, who pushed through this “party line” in the KPD as a loyal agent of Stalin, had already opposed Trotsky when he was one of the German delegates at the 1921 Comintern Congress. If the lessons of that time had been properly learned, the course of events in Germany would have been a different one.

Trotsky also turned his attention in the workers movement of the 1920s to the issue of opportunism. The influence of opportunistic labour leaders was particularly pronounced in Britain, the leading imperialist power of the nineteenth century, and the US, the leading imperialist power of the twentieth century. The enormous wealth of the ruling classes in these two countries had enabled them to bribe the upper stratum of the working class.

Traditions are tenacious, and thus opportunism retained its hold on the leadership of the British workers movement even when the country had long since been in economic decline. In his work *Where Is Britain Going?*, written in 1925, Trotsky draws a brilliant portrait of the British labour leaders, and examines the stark contrast between their politics and the revolutionary mood of the workers. The essence of his analysis is that this contrast can only be resolved by building a determined Communist Party. “There is no way of bypassing this. Anyone who believes there is and proclaims this, can only end up by deceiving the English workers.”

A short while later, Trotsky's assessment of the revolutionary mood of the workers was proved to be correct. In May 1926, a general strike shook British society to its foundations. “The general strike is the response of the proletariat, which does not intend to, and indeed cannot allow the bankruptcy of British capitalism to become the beginning of the bankruptcy of the British nation and of British culture,” Trotsky commented in the preface of the second edition of *Where Is Britain Going?* “But this response is dictated more by the logic of the situation than by the logic of consciousness. The English working class had no other choice.” Trotsky's conclusion is that a general strike requires “more than any other form of class struggle a clear, determined, firm, i.e., revolutionary leadership. But in the present strike the British proletariat shows not a trace of such a leadership, and one cannot expect that it will appear out of the blue, conjured up fully matured from out of nowhere.”

Instead of helping the British workers develop such a leadership, the Comintern leaders bolstered the opportunistic trade union leadership, which then promptly sold out the strike. The Soviet trade union leaders closely cooperated with their British counterparts within the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee which functioned under the auspices of Stalin and Bucharin. Thus, yet another opportunity to influence the international situation in favour of the communist movement was missed.

In his article *Europe and America*, written in 1925, Trotsky examines opportunism in the American workers movement and the new continent's prospects for revolution. He warns against concluding that America's economic strength will result in a long period of political stability, pointing out that the “dominant position of the United States in relation to weakened Europe and the economically backward colonial peoples” was

at the same time its Achilles heel. “The inner balance of the United States requires continuous expansion to the outside, and this striving to encompass other states and countries infects the American economic system with the elements of the European and Asian troubles. Under such circumstances, a victorious revolution in Europe and Asia will inevitably lead to a revolutionary epoch in the United States.”

By “saving” Europe from proletarian revolution, Stalinism ultimately “spared” the US this fate as well.

In conclusion, let us briefly consider the significance of Trotsky’s analysis for the present time (although, obviously, a comprehensive treatment of this subject would go well beyond the limits of a preface). In the 1920s Trotsky regarded the relationship between Europe and America as the starting point for an assessment of the global situation. But does this approach still hold true today?

Between 1945 and 1990, that question would presumably have been mainly answered in the negative. While it is true that transatlantic relations were not always without a certain amount of friction, the pre-eminence of the United States in Europe was never seriously questioned. This has changed since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Calls for overcoming American domination have become increasingly strident, postulating this as a central task of European foreign and security policy. As a rule, governments and politicians are diplomatically reticent on this issue, but academic studies and in-depth articles in specialised publications, which are not subject to foreign-policy constraints, leave little to be desired in terms of frankness.

A typical example is the latest special issue of *Merkur*, the “German Magazine for European Thought”, which, significantly, is entitled “Europe or America? On the Future of the West”.

In one of the articles, Ernst-Otto Czempiel, professor emeritus of international relations and member of the Hessian Peace and Conflict Research Foundation, accuses the US of having “extended and reinforced its claim to hegemonic leadership, which up to 1990 was restricted to the West, to the point of global domination”. The desire of the Europeans for a “NATO reform that lets them participate in the leadership” was brusquely rejected. “This continued development of American global politics,” Czempiel complains, “no longer justifies the epithet ‘benevolent hegemon’, which was correctly conceded to the USA during the long years of the Cold War.” Instead, he writes, the strategy pursued by the US since the mid-90s is transforming “the hegemony concept into a claim to the global exercise of power” (*Merkur*, issue 9/10, Sept./Oct. 2000, pp. 905-06).

Czempiel warns that “such ambitions could fire the engine of the next global conflict”, and does not exclude the possibility of a war between the big powers: “Those who proclaim themselves the keepers of global order inevitably bring forth rivals.” He sees a reaction to the position of the US in the efforts of European countries to create their own European defence identity. “The sole purpose of building up an independent European rapid-deployment force is to redistribute power within the alliance. Since the USA is not granting equal status, Europe intends to force the issue” (*ibid.*, pp. 901, 910)

Another professor emeritus of politics, Werner Link, proposes similar ideas in the same issue of the magazine. Link calls for the “departure of Europe from its self-induced lack of autonomy in matters of security and defence policy” and considers—as does Czempiel—the Kosovo War to have been the decisive turning point in European-American relations. The war “blatantly demonstrated to the European allies their dependence on the leading world power and the disastrous lack of their own *diplomatie armée*” (“armed diplomacy”) (*ibid.*, p. 923).

If one considers these complaints, which are very much slanted in favour of European interests, about the United States’ “global claim to power” in the light of economic developments, it becomes evident that the influence of the US in the world economy has noticeably declined since

the post-World War II period.

According to Trotsky, in the 1920s the US was producing “one to two thirds of all of the things humanity in its entirety needs to survive”. More than 80 percent of automobile production, more than 70 percent of oil output, 60 percent of cast iron production and 60 percent of steel production took place in the US at that time. After the Second World War, from which the US once again emerged as the actual victor, the situation was similar. Most of global production and the world’s gold reserves were concentrated in the United States.

Things have changed since then. Europe has largely caught up with the US economically, and new, powerful rivals have arisen in other regions of the world, particularly in eastern Asia. Whereas in 1924 the national income of the United States was two-and-a-half times larger than that of Britain, France, Germany and Japan combined, the total gross national product of those four countries is now considerably higher than that of the US. And if one considers the European Union, which is increasingly functioning as an economic unit, as a whole, then Europe has already outdistanced the US in terms of production output. In 1995, 30 percent of world production volume was accounted for by the EU, and only 27 percent by the US.

The difference is even more striking in global trade. In 1995, more than 40 percent of total world trade was accounted for by EU member states. This figure, however, includes trade between the individual EU members. But even if one excludes inner-EU trade and considers the EU as if it were one big country, it still accounts for 20 percent of global trade, while the US share of world trade is only 15 percent.

These figures reveal another fundamental change compared to the 1920s. More than two fifths of world production and more than half of world trade now originate in countries other than the US and the EU members, most of it in Japan and other eastern Asian countries. The significance of the US economy has thus not only declined in relation to the EU, but even more so in relation to the world economy as a whole. Also, new countries with the potential to become major economic powers have arrived on the scene, namely China and—to a lesser degree—India.

Another indication of the demise of the American economy is the staggering foreign debt of the United States. From 1990 to 1996, it increased from \$170 billion to \$550 billion. 1997 and 1998 each saw roughly another \$500 billion added to this, so the total debt is now approaching the \$2 trillion mark. That is approximately equivalent to the annual gross national product of Germany.

Given these facts, how does one correctly assess the complaints about American superpower aspirations and the efforts to achieve a European defence identity?

On the one hand, the US is in effect the only remaining military superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union. True, European defence expenditure is only one-third lower than that of the US. But since Europe has large and disparate ground forces and numerous individual armies, its military effectiveness is only one tenth that of the US. Also, the US is increasingly showing a tendency to buttress its world power status by military means in order to compensate for its declining economic power.

On the other hand, the reaction of the European powers shows that they are no longer prepared to unquestioningly accept the American claim to leadership. For the moment, this is expressed in the demand for “equal status”, as is always the case when a weaker power challenges a stronger one. As Trotsky points out in this book, the US also started out on the path of active imperialist world politics in the name of peace, equal rights and democracy. The ultimate significance of the demand for “equal status” is thus the struggle for a redistribution of economic and political spheres of influence. This can only mean that the conflict between Europe and America will intensify in future.

This analysis is often countered with the argument that globalisation, the

increasing integration of the world economy, undermines the nation-state, making open conflict between great powers improbable. In this way of thinking, the transatlantic quarrels about trade issues and security policy are in reality a sign of “how close the relations actually are and how great the need for mutual coordination is, even in minor issues; basically, the relations are very healthy” (quote from a recent article in the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*). This interpretation is based on a fallacy. While it is true that the capacity of the nation-state to regulate and cordon off the economy has decreased due to globalisation, and mutual interdependency has increased, this does not mean that national antagonisms have died down. On the contrary, the enormous intensification of global competition, in the course of which the ups and downs of the finance markets and the fate of individual corporations affect the lives of millions of people, has dramatically increased national rivalries.

Just how severe these conflicts are can be seen in the exchange rate decline of the euro in relation to the dollar, a downslide that has been continuing now for months. Financial experts are perplexed by this development and European politicians never tire of emphasising that the European economy is “fundamentally sound”. In the final analysis, the US bought the continuous inflow of international capital that has buoyed up the dollar with an unparalleled social polarisation. The result of deregulation, which guarantees high return on investment and makes the US attractive for capital, has been that the growth of the economy during the past years has benefited only a small minority on the top rungs of society, while the struggle to survive has become increasingly difficult and intolerable for the mass of the population.

Europe, in turn, can only keep up with America if it emulates this and also reduces standards of living and social welfare. European unification is almost entirely based on this premise. In order to hold its ground against global competition, European big business considers the unification of Europe to be imperative. But the methods it uses are driving not only broad sectors of the working class, but also large sections of the middle class into a situation of social marginalisation. And the United States is forced to keep its lead, since a stoppage of the inflow of international capital would inevitably lead to a severe recession.

The growing conflict between Europe and America has thus resulted in an unceasing intensification of social polarisation on both continents. As opposed to the 1920s, it is now no longer a case of only America revolutionising Europe. The reverse is also true. Only an initiative “from below” can break out of this vicious circle of economic war and dismantling of social welfare. And, as in the 1920s, the decisive element in this is the subjective factor.

Applied to today's Social Democratic and trade union leaders, Trotsky's term “opportunist” would be a euphemism. They have completely joined the ranks of big business. Ever since Social Democrats assumed government power in most European countries in the mid-90s, the dismantling of social welfare and the deregulation of the economy have proceeded at a much faster rate than under the preceding conservative governments. The gap between these parties and the mass of the population has widened accordingly. Lacking a political alternative, this gap has so far mainly been filled by right-wing parties. Decades in which Stalinism and Social Democracy held sway over the workers movement have left a profound crisis in their wake. This does not have to remain the case. The enormous social conflicts accumulating under the surface of society are creating the conditions for rapid changes in the consciousness of the masses.

But these changes will not take place spontaneously. They require a revival of the internationalist, socialist traditions suffocated by Stalinism. Today's communication society has created new possibilities for this. Never before has the global working class been so closely interlinked. And this is another aspect of the relationship between Europe and

America: Every step forward that the workers movement makes on one continent will also be an impetus to it on the other.



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