

Speeches commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Trotsky's assassination

The significance of Leon Trotsky's thought for Africa today

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At two meetings commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, speakers illuminated the contemporary significance of Trotsky's work. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the World Socialist Web Site hosted the meetings in Berlin and London in September. Chris Talbot, a regular contributor to the WSWs from Britain, gave the following speech on September 24 in London. This concludes our coverage of the Trotsky anniversary meetings in Europe.

This meeting has been called to insist upon the relevance and importance of the ideas of Leon Trotsky—co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution and arguably the greatest Marxist thinker of the twentieth century—to the political life of our period.

Trotsky's ideas and theoretical conceptions have shaped the development of our movement—the Fourth International—and are the prime motivation behind the political practice in which we are now engaged, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The present conditions in Africa are perhaps the greatest indictment of modern capitalism. Consider the points made in a recent World Bank report: The total income of all 48 sub-Saharan African countries is now roughly equal to that of tiny Belgium. Each country on average has an income of about \$2 billion a year—roughly the same as a small town in the West with a population of 60,000. If you work that out for each person, it is less than a dollar a day.

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of this vast continent is less than 1 percent of world GDP. Social conditions have deteriorated from the minor gains that were made after independence in the 1960s. If South Africa is excluded, there are fewer roads in the whole of Africa than in Poland, and there are only 5 million telephones. One can assume that there is no exaggeration being made in these appalling statistics, given the fact that the World Bank has to admit to at least some responsibility for what has happened.

In terms of health, a higher proportion of people are now dying from infectious diseases than at any time since the beginning of the twentieth century. The impact of AIDS in Africa is absolutely devastating. UN figures estimate 24.5 million people with HIV/AIDS in Africa, of which 4 million became infected in 1999. AIDS killed 2.2 million in Africa last year—80 percent of the total world deaths. In some countries, like Zimbabwe and Botswana, schools and factories are unable to operate because of the huge death rate in the working population. As we have detailed in our articles on AIDS, there is presently no possibility of the kind of emergency measures being implemented and the mobilisation of resources and drugs needed to stop these millions of people dying, let alone a serious discussion taking place in Western governments.

In looking for an explanation in the media of what has happened in Africa we are immediately confronted with a range of half-baked reactionary prejudices. The World Bank and Western politicians say Africa has been socially devastated because of its corrupt leaders, who have yet to apply the rules of “transparency” and “good governance”. These leaders are committed to “government over-spending”, and so on. There is usually no explanation of why this particular breed of leader is the problem only in Africa. When attempts are made to elucidate the problem of corrupt regimes, it is usually done in the pseudo-sociological terms of the “domination of tribal structures”. Accordingly, instead of the preponderance of the urban middle class values that we find in the West, local customs predominate. The essential conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that Africa needs a “civilising mission”—essentially the same racist conceptions that were held in Victorian times.

The most simplistic geographical or biological accounts for the underdevelopment of Africa are usually presented. The science writer Jared Diamond, for example, says that the problem was that agriculture developed much more easily in Europe and Asia. Africans never succeeded in domesticating their animals, like the rhino and the hippopotamus! Diamond is apparently unaware of the ancient African empires in Egypt and Carthage, or that by medieval times there were quite developed agricultural economies throughout Africa. It is perhaps an indication of the intellectual decline of our times that such theories are taken seriously. The *Economist* magazine included these ideas in a recent article “Africa—the Hopeless Continent”.

In opposition to these frankly stupid theories, we are asserting that it is not possible to understand what has happened to Africa without a study of Trotsky's ideas. These were, of course, initially developed in relation to a major underdeveloped part of the world at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely the Russia Empire.

Trotsky insisted the development of the working class internationally meant it was no longer conceivable that capitalist politicians in Russia could play a progressive role and provide a national-democratic solution as they had in France and America in earlier centuries. Rather they would collaborate with imperialist reaction against the workers and peasants of their own country. Trotsky emphasised that in backward countries the working class movement would have to assume the leading political role, and the democratic revolution would become integrated into the socialist revolution.

Moreover he insisted that imperialism—the division of the world amongst the major Western powers and the domination of the world economy by finance capital—had undermined the nation-state system through which capitalism had developed. Trotsky's conception was based on the primacy

of the world situation over all national conditions. Consequently, a national revolution—even if the bourgeoisie were capable of leading one—could not free the oppressed people of Africa, India, or China and the East from the domination of imperialism.

These ideas, elaborated in the Theory of Permanent Revolution, were the conceptions that Lenin was won to in 1917. They formed the theoretical basis for the October Revolution in Russia. They were also the ideas that Trotsky fought for and developed in the 1920s and '30s against the national conceptions of Stalin and the bureaucracy, summed up in their advocacy of “socialism in one country”.

Conditions of world economics and politics have vastly changed since the beginning of the twentieth century. And we are not suggesting that Trotsky's theory can just be applied in a mechanical way today. Nevertheless, the fundamental conceptions remain valid.

How do these ideas relate to what has happened in Africa and how do they point to a way forward for the working people and poor masses of that continent?

Africa must be understood as a product of world capitalism, and particularly as an essential part of the imperialism of the twentieth century. For several centuries, the slave trade formed a key part of the development of capitalism in Europe and America. It deprived Africa of millions of able-bodied people and fomented predatory wars that disrupted its economy. These conditions made it possible, in the late nineteenth century “Scramble for Africa”, for the whole continent to be divided up and ruthlessly exploited by the European powers. In the first half of the twentieth century, Africa was under direct colonial rule, with each territory geared up to export a limited range of minerals and primary commodities, using the most brutal exploitation of local labour, and with virtually all of the wealth produced going back into Western profits.

While most of the African colonies formally gained national independence in the 1960s, they did not break free from the political domination of the former colonial powers, nor from the economic exploitation of the giant corporations that controlled the trade in African commodities. Encouraged to take out loans in the 1970s, as interest rates shot up in the 80s and the price of basic commodities fell during the 1980s and '90s, virtually every African country plunged deeper into debt. By the mid 1980s, Africa's debt repayments were greater than the sums it received in aid and investment. Africa became a net exporter of capital to the West, even though it contains some of the poorest countries in the world.

Such is now the domination of world finance that IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes squeeze everything they can from the budgets of these countries. The so-called “debt reduction schemes” heralded by US President Bill Clinton and British Chancellor Gordon Brown last year place even more conditions on their economies, resulting in the top country on the debt reduction list, Uganda, paying out more than it did before the scheme was introduced.

The domination of underdeveloped countries by imperialism, which Trotsky argued was a basic issue even in the earlier part of the twentieth century when there were whole parts of Africa under subsistence peasant agriculture, is certainly the reality today.

Post-war “national independence” meant dividing Africa up along the irrational boundaries imposed by imperialism. It enabled a very limited economic development to take place in the 1960s, sometimes with health and education measures being introduced. But this has been driven back again under the West's financial strictures of the last two decades.

These developments are a brutal and negative confirmation of everything Trotsky wrote about the impossibility of economic advance within shut-off national boundaries. Although unlike in the Soviet Union, where capitalist property relations had been overthrown in the 1917 Revolution, the African countries and their regimes remained completely dominated by imperialism, even when their leaders claimed to be

socialists.

This brings me to the political movements in Africa, especially the independence struggles which lasted from the end of World War II through to the 1980s and '90s in Angola, Mozambique and Namibia.

It is in examining these independence struggles that I think Trotsky's analysis is seen to be the most prescient. His exposure of the betrayal of the Chinese revolution in the 1920s by the Stalinist leaders contains one of the most important strategic lessons of our movement. In complete opposition to Trotsky's analysis, Stalin had claimed that the nationalist movement in China—the Kuomintang—would lead a democratic revolution against the feudal warlords and imperialist domination. This was also carried out amidst a huge campaign to denigrate Trotsky and his supporters.

Stalin instructed the Chinese Communist Party to enter the Kuomintang and submit to its discipline. The result was a complete disaster, resulting in the defeat of the revolution and thousands of Chinese Communists being murdered by the nationalists in 1927.

The kind of bourgeois nationalism that had developed in China became the political inspiration of the future Pan-Africanist leaders, who later established the regimes in Africa after World War II. There is, in fact, quite a direct connection. If you read the autobiography of Azikiwe, the first President of Nigeria, you will see that when he was at Howard University in the United States in the early 1930s—after the butchery of the Chinese communists—he explains how impressed he was by Sun Yat-Sen and Chang Kai-Shek, the leaders of the Kuomintang.

Azikiwe studied at Howard, where black intellectuals like Tubman (the future president of Liberia), and Kwame Nkrumah (the future president of Ghana) developed Pan-Africanist ideas. They developed under the influence of the West Indian George Padmore, perhaps the best-known intellectual leader of Pan-Africanism, who went to Ghana after independence as Nkrumah's adviser.

Padmore was an international leader of the Communist Party and a devoted supporter of Stalin. His job in Moscow in the early 1930s was to serve on a special committee investigating the Chinese Communist Party to root out “Trotskyists” and oppositionists to the Stalinist line. Those who argued that the party should be based on the working class were driven out. Padmore completely accepted the “two-stage theory”, which became official Stalinist policy in underdeveloped countries. According to this, in these countries there would first be a national democratic revolution, which meant the Communists supporting various varieties of peasant and national-bourgeois movements; socialism would only come at some unspecified (and usually long-distant) future date. Padmore only broke from the Communist Party in the later 1930s when it became clear that Stalin had no real interest in the nationalist movements in Africa or anywhere else, except as pawns in the deals he was trying to make with imperialism. But Padmore's ideas on nationalism—derived from Stalinism—remained essentially unchanged.

Padmore influenced most of the future African leaders at the end of World War II, including Nkrumah, Kenyatta, and Nyerere, who would become leaders of the former British colonies. Many of them were present at the Pan-African conference held in Manchester in 1945. There were parallel developments in France, where leaders also trained by the Stalinists, like Sekou Touré in Guinea, came to the fore.

Padmore's basic idea was that the national independence struggle would contain the growing movement of the working class in Africa after the war. A small elite of black Africans, an aspiring black bourgeoisie, would be able to take political power. By that time there were some huge concentrations of workers in Africa, especially in mining, and there were a series of big strike battles. Thousands of miners in South Africa organised themselves against the British mine owners. In the Congo up to a million miners worked in the copper and diamond mines, and it was also where uranium for the atomic bomb was mined. This was part of an international

revolutionary wave in the immediate post-war period, which swept through India, China, and also whole parts of Europe.

As Padmore said: "The only force capable of containing Communism in Asia and Africa is dynamic nationalism based upon a socialist programme of industrialisation..." [1] He appealed to the imperialist powers to grant independence on that basis.

The socialism that he, Nkrumah, Nyerere and others spoke about meant some form of state intervention and state welfare spending—ideas which were favourably viewed by capitalists in the post-war crisis conditions, and were taken up by the Labour Party in Britain, for example. It had nothing to do with socialism, in the tradition of Marxism fought for by Trotsky, who always insisted it meant building an independent and politically conscious working class movement to overthrow imperialism. The Pan-Africanists were opposed to this and when they came into power in the 1960s throughout Africa they suppressed strikes and put down working class opposition.

Their value was recognised by the imperialist powers, as a recently released document of discussions between the British Foreign Office and the United States clearly show. "Pan-Africanism, in itself, is not necessarily a force that we need regard with suspicion and fear. On the contrary, if we can avoid alienating it and guide it on lines generally sympathetic to the free world, it may well prove in the longer term a strong, indigenous barrier to the penetration of Africa by the Soviet Union." [2]

The British ruling class had taken the measure of the Soviet bureaucracy, whom they had worked with throughout the war. They had also seen the value of the Stalinists in suppressing the post-war revolutionary movements all over the world. What they feared was the growth of working class movements they could not control.

There is not time to go into any detail concerning the experiences of the Trotskyist movement over the past half-century in developing the theory of Permanent Revolution against the Stalinists and middle class radicals—in counterposing the standpoint of working class internationalism to bourgeois nationalism. But considering the post-war period in Africa as a whole, what have been the experience of the working class and the peasantry of some 40 years of Pan-Africanism, or with regimes that initially espoused Pan-Africanism? What has been the legacy of the nationalist politics of Padmore, Nkrumah and the others—politics that were derived from Stalinism?

Again, it has verified Trotsky's analysis, with tragic consequences for the masses. To some extent, these regimes and the national liberation movements could rest on the Stalinist bureaucracy during the Cold War period. This created a little room for manoeuvre and sometimes even allowed limited state welfare measures to be introduced. But with the end of the Cold War and the profound changes in the world economy associated with globalisation over the last two decades, we have seen the complete collapse of bourgeois nationalist movements. The bogus character of these "independent states" has been revealed. Whatever limited progressive content the struggle of these movements against imperialism had in an earlier period, it is certainly not the case today.

Every one of the Pan-Africanists, or their political progeny, has capitulated to imperialism. All of them have fully embraced the free market economy, the domination of Africa by the IMF and the transnationals, and have accepted the horrendous social catastrophe now engulfing the continent. Whether you look at Colonel Gaddafi in Libya doing deals with the European Union; the MPLA in Angola doing deals with US oil companies; Museveni and Kagame—Clinton's so-called new leaders in Uganda and Rwanda—now at each other's throats over who should control the diamonds and gold in the Congo; brutal dictators like Charles Taylor who has turned Liberia into his private fiefdom with the backing of Jesse Jackson; or even Thabo Mbeki and the ANC in South Africa who are now busy sacking workers under a privatisation

programme. There is not a single nationalist movement or leader that has advanced the conditions of the population one iota. Rather they have helped imperialism to turn the clock back and are now opening the way to the kind of recolonisation that is being carried out by Britain in Sierra Leone.

Our work on Africa for the *World Socialist Web Site* reveals the power of Trotsky's thought. It confirms the dire consequences of imperialist domination of the continent, and particularly the crucial role played over the last half century by the nationalists and Stalinism in facilitating this domination of the Western powers. The development of the revolutionary movement of the working class internationally depends on assimilating these lessons. The crucial question in Africa is dealing with the confusion and disorientation caused by all the varieties of Pan-Africanism.

The distinctive analysis on the WSWS is finding a growing international audience. We are convinced that a revival of Trotsky's ideas and Marxist culture as a whole can be developed in this work on the Internet, and will provide the basis for the building of the Fourth International in the twenty-first century, in Africa and throughout the world.

Notes:

1. George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, Dobson, 1956, p. 339

2. *Africa: the Next Ten Years*, Foreign Office document, December 1959, quoted in Nicholas J. White, *Decolonisation, The British experience since 1945*, Longman, 1999, pp. 125-26



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