

Record attendance at Leipzig Book Fair

Peter Schwarz presents new German edition of Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism*

A correspondent
31 March 2006

The Leipzig Book Fair held earlier this month saw record attendance. A total of 126,000 visitors attended the fair in eastern Germany, which featured stands, exhibitions and book readings by 2,160 exhibitors from 36 countries. This represented a 17 percent increase in attendance compared to the previous year.

Large numbers of school and high school youth were among those visiting the fair, and at times the crush of people in attendance made it difficult to navigate the gangways. The considerable attendance is indicative of an enormous need for culture and information by a new generation.

This was also clear at the stand of the Arbeiterpresse Verlag publishing house, which featured prominently the first German edition of the second volume of noted Russian author Vadim S. Rogovin's seven-volume work, "Was there an Alternative?," on the Left Opposition against Stalinism in the Soviet Union. The book, titled *Stalin's War Communism*, investigates the policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the years 1928 to 1933, which were politically dominated by the suppression of the Left Opposition.

In 1929, the leading figure of the Left Opposition, Leon Trotsky, was expelled from the Soviet Union. In this same period, the bureaucracy carried out its policy of forced collectivisation, which involved a veritable civil war against the Russian peasantry. During this time, the opposition was able to expand its influence against the ruling bureaucracy. *Stalin's War Communism* is the fifth of Rogovin's seven volumes that has been translated into German. Volumes 3 through 6 are already available.

At a meeting during the Leipzig Book Fair, attended by more than 70 people, the Arbeiterpresse Verlag publishing house also introduced Leon Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism*, which will be published in a new German edition later this year. We reproduce here the contribution delivered at the half-hour meeting by Peter Schwarz of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG (Socialist Equality Party—Germany):

"There are political and theoretical controversies that, even after the passage of decades, retain their relevancy. One such controversy is the Bernstein debate, which shook German and international social democracy at the end of the nineteenth century—the debate between opportunism and Marxism, between reformism and revolutionary internationalism, which eventually led to a split in the social democratic movement from which the communist movement arose.

"Just as significant as the Bernstein debate is the dispute that is documented in the volume *In Defence of Marxism*. It occurred in 1939 within the Socialist Workers Party, the American Trotskyist movement at the time. Leon Trotsky personally participated in the internal party dispute while living in exile in Mexico, not long before he was murdered by a Stalinist agent.

"There are two things that make this dispute so significant and relevant:

"First, it centred on a key question of the twentieth century: the

character of the Soviet Union. Was the Soviet Union, in spite of the crimes of the Stalinist leadership, still a workers' state? Did it contain anything to defend?

"A half-century later, this issue would appear to have become irrelevant. Following the collapse of the East German GDR and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was no end to the pronouncements that not only was Stalinism shattered, but that Marxism was once and for all dead. The entire socialist project had only been a grand illusion. The development of humanity had reached its zenith; history had reached its end.

"Today, however, 15 years later, the situation looks a little different. The restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and in eastern Europe has led to a social disaster. Never before in times of peace has the social infrastructure of a country—the education system, its health care, pensions, etc.—been so radically destroyed as in the successor states of the Soviet Union.

"Within 15 years, the life expectancy of Russians has sunk by 5 years to 59. The death rate is far higher than the birth rate. If current trends continue, the country will lose one third of its population during the next 50 years. A small, fabulously wealthy minority has grabbed the property of the former Soviet state, while the overwhelming majority of the population suffers poverty, unemployment and rising insecurity.

"It does not end there, however. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ruling classes in the West have dropped any inhibitions in doing away with all previous social gains. During the Cold War, they claimed that the market economy could guarantee a higher standard of living and resolve social problems better than a state-controlled planned economy. Today, anyone that opposes the dismantling of social services and welfare is labelled as an embittered reactionary and an 'opponent of reform.'

"Without clarity on the question of the Soviet Union—i.e., without an understanding of how it arose, what it represented, why it degenerated and in the end disintegrated, and without knowing what was to defend and what was to condemn—one cannot find a progressive way out of the present dead end of capitalism, nor is a rejuvenation of socialism possible. The question of the Soviet Union remains a key political issue in the twenty-first century.

"The second thing that makes the controversy documented in *In Defence of Marxism* so relevant is that ideological tendencies have their origin here that were to have great significance later. Both of Trotsky's most important opponents at the time—James Burnham and Max Shachtman—became propagandists for right-wing political tendencies during and after the Cold War: Burnham became an ideologue for the American right wing; Shachtman for the anticommunist trade union bureaucracy. I will return later to these points.

"*In Defence of Marxism* is a collection of letters and articles that were written by Trotsky in the years 1939-1940, just after the start of the

Second World War. In them, he answered a petty-bourgeois faction within the Socialist Workers Party, the party aligned at the time with the Fourth International.

“The faction was founded in autumn 1939 under the leadership of Max Shachtman, a founding member of the American Trotskyist movement, and James Burnham, a professor of philosophy. Its formation was a reaction to the nonaggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, as well as to the invasion of Poland by the Germany army that started World War II.

“Burnham held the view that the Fourth International, as a consequence of these events, had to change its programme: after Stalin had made a pact with Hitler, the Soviet Union could no longer be considered a workers’ state and therefore could no longer be defended. Trotsky fought hard against this position and was supported by the majority within the Socialist Workers Party, under its leader James P. Cannon. Trotsky insisted that the Soviet Union remained a workers’ state, albeit in a degenerated form.

“Trotsky’s defence of the Soviet Union constituted support for neither the Stalinist regime nor the Stalin-Hitler pact. Since the founding of the Left Opposition in 1923, Trotsky had been the sharpest and most indefatigable adversary of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which he constantly criticised from an international socialist standpoint.

“In the second half of the 1920s, Trotsky and his supporters in the Bolshevik Party were expelled, persecuted, jailed and exiled. In the 1930s, tens of thousands—with or without juridical proceedings—were shot or sent to their deaths in the gulags. This constituted a political genocide, which in the end claimed an entire generation of revolutionaries and outstanding intellectuals who carried out and made possible the October Revolution. Trotsky, therefore, had not the slightest reason to make any kind of concessions to the Stalinist regime.

“However, the definition of the Soviet Union and the perspective that flowed from this could not be determined simply from the reactionary nature of the ruling clique and far less from a single political action, like the Stalin-Hitler pact, which, incidentally, Trotsky had long foreseen.

“‘If Burnham were a dialectical materialist,’ Trotsky wrote, ‘he would have probed the following three questions: (1) What was the historical origin of the USSR? (2) What changes has this state suffered during its existence? (3) Did these changes pass from the quantitative stage to the qualitative? That is, did they create a historically necessary domination by a new exploiting class? Answering these questions would have forced Burnham to draw the only possible conclusion—the USSR is still a degenerated workers’ state.’

“Regardless of its policies, the Stalinist bureaucracy continued to base itself on the property relations that were created by the October Revolution—and these property relations had to be defended. The Soviet Union was a transitional regime between capitalism and socialism. Its historical fate had not yet been decided. It could develop towards socialism, but it could also degenerate back to capitalism. A fundamental contradiction existed between the property relations and the Stalinist regime.

“‘The USSR thus embodies terrific contradictions,’ wrote Trotsky in the founding programme of the Fourth International. ‘But it still remains a degenerated workers’ state. Such is the social diagnosis. The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers’ state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.’

“According to this estimation, which was written one year before the dispute in the Socialist Workers Party broke out, it was clear that Trotsky saw the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy by the working class as a condition for the defence of the Soviet Union. In contrast, Burnham and

Shachtman threw the baby out with the bath water. They refused to defend the Soviet Union on the basis of the crimes of the bureaucracy.

“What seemed on the surface to be radical and moral posturing was in reality a capitulation to imperialism. Burnham and Shachtman were not prepared to stand on the side of the Soviet Union during the war. They gave the Stalinist bureaucracy qualities that it did not possess and characterised it as a new exploiting class. In reality, it was merely a parasitic ulcer on the organism of the workers’ state.

“In one of the last articles contained in the book, Trotsky argued for the defence of the Soviet Union with the following words: ‘We defend the USSR...for two fundamental reasons. First, the defeat of the USSR would supply imperialism with new colossal resources and could prolong for many years the death agony of capitalist society. Secondly, the social foundations of the USSR, cleansed of the parasitic bureaucracy, are capable of assuring unbounded economic and cultural progress, while the capitalist foundations disclose no possibilities except further decay.’

“More than half a century later, the farsightedness of these words has been dramatically confirmed. I have already mentioned in my introduction how the restoration of capitalist relations has led to the decay of social infrastructure in the former Soviet territories.

“And the end of the Cold War as a result of the liquidation of the Soviet Union has not opened up a new period of world peace, but on the contrary a new, maleficent stage in the death agony of capitalist society, of which the Iraq War is only the preliminary culmination. The Bush administration has made clear that it will attack any country—first of all, Iran—that stands in the way of American imperialism. The national security strategy, which the White House published March 16, belligerently asserts the right of the United States to avert potential attacks by assumed adversaries through ‘preventative’ measures.

“Another one of Trotsky’s predictions has also been confirmed: in 1991 it was the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy itself—the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev and Yeltsin—that introduced new property relations and threw the country back to capitalism.

“In the course of the dispute with the petty-bourgeois faction in the Socialist Workers Party, the question of dialectical materialism, the philosophical basis of Marxism, played an important role.

“Burnham, a philosopher by profession, rejected the dialectic. Shachtman, on the other hand, accepted it. However, they both wrote that no one has yet ‘demonstrated that agreement or disagreement on the more abstract doctrines of dialectical materialism necessarily affects today’s and tomorrow’s concrete political issues.’

“Trotsky turned his attention to this, as he called it, theoretical eclecticism. ‘What is the meaning of this thoroughly astonishing reasoning?’ he wrote. ‘Inasmuch as *some* people through a bad method *sometimes* reach correct conclusions, and inasmuch as some people through a correct method *not infrequently* reach incorrect conclusions, therefore ...the method is not of great importance.’

“Regarding Shachtman’s argument, that political parties and programmes were based on concrete issues, Trotsky wrote: ‘The party of the proletariat is a party unlike all the rest. It is not at all based upon “such concrete issues.” In its very foundation it is diametrically opposed to the parties of bourgeois horse-traders and petty-bourgeois rag patchers. Its task is the preparation of a social revolution and the regeneration of mankind on new material and moral foundations. In order not to give way under the pressure of bourgeois public opinion and police repression, the proletarian revolutionist, a leader all the more, requires a clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook. Only upon the basis of a unified Marxist conception is it possible to correctly approach “concrete” questions.’

“Trotsky repeatedly came back to the question of the Marxist method. Although he never wrote a theoretical textbook on dialectical materialism, *In Defence of Marxism* belongs to one of the best works that has yet been

written on this topic.

“Trotsky understood at the same time that the emergence of a petty-bourgeois opposition inside the Socialist Workers Party was not the result simply of false theoretical conceptions. The political climate inside the US had changed after the start of the Second World War.

“In the mid-1930s, many intellectuals and liberals felt themselves drawn towards the Soviet Union, when in 1935 it launched its policy of the People’s Front. With this turn, the Stalinist bureaucracy attempted to win the ‘democratic bourgeoisie,’ that is, the ruling classes of Great Britain, France and the USA, to a united front against Nazi Germany. During this time, the Communist Party of the USA supported the Roosevelt government and its ‘New Deal,’ a programme of state intervention in the economy, such as jobs creation through public works programmes. The American bourgeoisie attempted to use this to counter the radicalisation of the working class that resulted from the Great Depression and the stock market collapse of 1929.

“The non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler abruptly ended the liberal toying with the Stalinists. On December 14, 1939, the Soviet Union was expelled from the League of Nations over its invasion of Finland. After the devastating defeat of the working class in Germany in 1933 with the coming to power of the Nazis, the eruption of civil war in Spain, the Moscow show trials, and finally the eruption of World War II, petty-bourgeois elements turned away from a revolutionary perspective. The petty-bourgeois opposition in the Socialist Workers Party was a reaction to these social and political pressures.

“James Burnham proceeded into the camp of the bourgeoisie and rapidly ended up on the extreme right of American politics. In 1940, he quit the Socialist Workers Party and together with Max Shachtman founded the Workers Party. Burnham very rapidly quit this organisation, however, and in a very short period of time developed into a fanatical anticommunist.

“In 1941, he published the book *The Managerial Revolution*. In this book, he defended the thesis that capitalist society had been replaced by a new exploitative society of managers that embraced Stalinism and fascism as well as President Roosevelt’s New Deal.

“This book had lasting international influence. Equating fascism and Stalinism is up to this day a stock in trade of bourgeois politics. It is to be found, for example, in Hannah Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism, which exerted great influence in Germany and amongst layers on the left.

“In France, a line can be traced from Burnham to the so-called ‘New Philosophers,’ who began their careers on the left in the 1960s and then in the 1990s became proponents of imperialist military interventions—including those in Yugoslavia and Iraq. This group includes André Glucksmann, Bernard Henri Lévy and others. A number of these figures were influenced by the group ‘Socialism or Barbarism,’ which, under the leadership of Cornélius Castoriadis, split from the Trotskyist movement in 1949 and propagated the writings of Hannah Arendt and James Burnham in France. Burnham’s *Managerial Revolution* appeared in France with a preface written by Léon Blum, the head of the Popular Front government of 1936, and had large success. As one contemporary wrote, ‘His work was mandatory reading material in the sixties at the Science Po [political elite university] and had a major influence on the French elite.’

“Burnham went even further to the right. In 1950, he was one of the initial members of the ‘Congress for Cultural Freedom,’ an organisation drummed into life by the CIA that mobilised intellectuals for the Cold War. He advocated nuclear war against the Soviet Union and became a prominent contributor to the extreme right-wing magazine *National Review*. In its pages, he recommended among other things refusing black workers the right to vote and dropping an atom bomb on Vietnam. In the 1980s, Burnham was awarded the prestigious Liberty Medal by President Ronald Reagan.

“Shachtman’s shift to the right took place less rapidly. For nearly a decade after his break with Trotsky, he maintained his allegiance to socialism. But in 1950, at the outbreak of the Korean War, Shachtman and his followers supported the US military intervention. Shachtman eventually became a close advisor to the anticommunist bureaucracy of the American federation of trade unions, the AFL-CIO, and the US State Department. He maintained close links with the Democratic Senator Henry Jackson, a notorious warmonger who rejected any compromise with Moscow. A number of hawks in the Bush government—Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle and Elliot Abrams—originate from circles around Jackson. These men temporarily occupied senior posts in the Pentagon and were closely involved in the preparation of the Iraq war.

“Burnham and Shachtman contributed to the emergence of a form of anticommunism, which used the crimes of the Stalinism in order to discredit any sort of socialist perspective. This form of anticommunism was not only widespread in right-wing circles but also in the trade unions and social democratic circles. No lesser figure than Kurt Schumacher, the first leader of the SPD after the Second World War, described communists as ‘red-painted fascists.’

“During the period of the Cold War, this ideology exerted a powerful influence and then, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there seemed to be no limits to its use. The slogan ‘socialism has failed’ served as a mechanism for attacking each and every social gain and justifying unrestrained militarism.

“Social democratic and communist parties (or what’s left of them) and the trade unions have fully supported this. Here in Germany, the former Social Democratic-Green Party government carried out the most extensive welfare cuts since the war. Lacking any alternative perspective, the broad masses of the population were unable to repel such attacks.

“However, things are beginning to change. Resistance is developing everywhere. On the same day as we hold this meeting, one of the largest demonstrations in history is taking place in France—against government plans to eliminate protection against dismissal for young workers. Here in Germany, public sector workers have been on strike for six weeks to prevent an extension of their working times, and public hospital doctors have just voted by a 98 percent majority for unlimited industrial action.

“It is clear, however, that pressure alone will not force the governments to give way. Even if they do retreat, another government will merely take their place intent on carrying out the same policies in a slightly different form. The question of a new political perspective arises with ever-greater urgency. Such an alternative can only be based on understanding the experiences of the past century—in particular, the experience of the Soviet Union.

“Socialism did not fail in the Soviet Union, but was instead suppressed and betrayed by a corrupt bureaucracy. The Stalinist bureaucracy replaced the programme of international socialism by the nationalist conception of ‘socialism in one country’ and liquidated a whole generation of revolutionary Marxists.

“Trotsky’s writings and this soon-to-be-published book are crucial to understanding this experience and reanimating the perspective of genuine socialism: the reorganisation of society on the basis of human needs instead of the profit interests of big business. This is only possible on an international scale.

“*In Defence of Marxism* is also a valuable introduction to the Marxist method. Materialist dialectics makes possible a vivid scientific understanding of reality that is in constant change. It stands in complete contrast to the utterly lifeless and abstract dogma popularised by Stalinism.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact