

Seventy-five years since the assassination of Leon Trotsky

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Seventy-five years ago today, on August 20, 1940, Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, was assaulted with an ice pick by Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader. The attack took place at Trotsky's villa in Coyoacán, Mexico, his final place of exile. The great revolutionary died the next day from his wounds, at the age of 60.

The murder of Trotsky came at the high point of international political reaction that included the victory of fascism in Germany in 1933, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39, the Moscow Trials and Great Terror of 1936-38, and the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. The assassination of Trotsky was the response of the Stalinist bureaucracy—which, as Trotsky explained, was a political agency of imperialism—to the danger posed by the Marxist principles for which he fought. As long as Trotsky lived, Stalin would have to contend with his most implacable opponent.

Against incredible odds, however, Trotsky had managed to form the Fourth International, which has outlived the assassins who struck him down. Seventy-five years later, Trotsky's unique position in the history of international socialism is indisputable. He emerges ever more clearly as a world historical figure who not only influenced the course of the 20th century, but whose writings and ideas remain an essential guide for orienting the working class as it enters a new period of revolutionary struggle.

Trotsky's life and fate were inextricably tied to the great events of the first half of the 20th century. Trotsky and Lenin were the principle leaders of the Russian Revolution, the pinnacle of an enormous upsurge of international working-class struggle against the depredations of capitalism and the horrific slaughter of the First World War. The political theory of the revolution itself was provided by Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, forged in the midst of the 1905 Russian Revolution, which explained that the democratic tasks in underdeveloped countries such as Russia could be completed only by the working class taking power as part of a world socialist revolution.

For six years, Trotsky played an indispensable role in organizing and defending the workers' state that was established by the events of October 1917, including as Soviet Russia's first commissar for foreign affairs and as the founder and commander of the Red Army.

For his role in the Russian Revolution, which took place as he turned 38, Trotsky would have secured a place in history as one of the greatest leaders of the working class and the socialist movement. However, Trotsky would later write that it was in the struggle against the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, culminating in the founding of the Fourth International, that he made his most significant and lasting political contribution.

The conflict that emerged between Stalin and Trotsky was not a subjective fight between two individuals over personal power, but a fundamental battle waged between irreconcilable political programs. The consolidation of power by Stalin, and the bureaucratic dictatorship that he

personified, was not the inevitable outcome of the Russian Revolution. Rather, it developed out of the specific conditions of an economically backward workers' state isolated by the defeats of the world revolution. Seven years of war and imperialist-backed civil war had exacted an enormous toll on the working class, the social base of the revolution. Stalin's rise to power was facilitated by the illness and death of Lenin, who in his last year had issued a call to Trotsky for joint action to combat the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union.

Stalin articulated the interests of a conservative apparatus that usurped power from the working class and repudiated the essential link between the revolution in Russia and the international class struggle. The program of "socialism in one country," first articulated in 1924, was based on the false and anti-Marxist claim that socialism could be achieved in the Soviet Union independent of revolution outside the borders of Russia. It legitimized the subordination of the international working class to the national interests of the Soviet bureaucracy and served to justify policies that produced the defeat of the British General Strike of 1926 and the crushing of the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27. Trotsky later recalled in his autobiography, "The sentiment of 'Not all and always for the revolution, but something for oneself as well,' was translated as 'Down with permanent revolution.'"

In his critique of Stalinism, Trotsky developed a theory of world socialist revolution that proved immeasurably more far-sighted than the pragmatic maneuvers of the Stalinist bureaucrats. Based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution, the Left Opposition that he founded in 1923 insisted that progress toward socialism within the Soviet Union depended on the development of the world socialist revolution. In a passage written in 1930 that applies with even greater force today, Trotsky explained:

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follow, on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.

The repudiation of socialist internationalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy required a campaign of historical falsification aimed at obliterating Trotsky's political influence and denying the connection between the perspective for which he fought and that which had guided the Russian Revolution itself. This was coupled with an ever more direct and violent

campaign against Trotsky and his supporters.

In November 1927, Trotsky was expelled from the Russian Communist Party, followed one month later by the expulsion of all supporters of the Left Opposition. In January 1928, he was exiled to Alma Ata, in the mountains of present-day Kazakhstan. One year later, in February 1929, Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union and took up temporary residence in Prinkipo, Turkey. Confronting what he later called “a planet without a visa” due to the combined hostility of the Stalinists, social democrats and the imperialist powers, Trotsky was forced to move from Turkey to France in 1933, to Norway in 1935, and, finally, to Mexico in 1937.

In the eight years between Trotsky’s expulsion from the Soviet Union and his arrival in Mexico, the working class experienced a series of defeats produced by the treachery of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies. The victory of fascism in Germany in 1933 was followed by the strangulation of revolutionary uprisings in France and Spain, where the working class was subordinated to the political rule of the capitalist class under the banner of the “Popular Front.”

In the aftermath of the rise of Hitler to power—a monumental catastrophe for the German and international working class that was made possible by the disastrous policies of the Communist International—Trotsky issued a call for the formation of a new, Fourth International. He warned that the gains of the Russian Revolution could be defended only through a political revolution to overthrow the nationalist bureaucracy.

Terrified by the threat that Trotsky and the Fourth International represented, Stalin resorted to ever more brutal violence and repression, within the Soviet Union and internationally. While the Moscow Trials of 1936-38 were directed at all political opposition to the Stalinist regime, its principle targets were the supporters of Trotsky. Hundreds of thousands of socialists—the product of an immense tradition of revolutionary culture in Russia—were massacred in a political genocide.

The massive violence required to defend the regime constituted irrefutable proof that Stalin’s rule was not a continuation of the Russian Revolution, but its gravedigger. Stalinism and genuine Marxism, Trotsky wrote in 1937, were separated “not simply by a bloody line but a whole river of blood.”

Trotsky waged a fearless campaign to expose the show trials and the political crimes of Stalinism. In response, the Stalinist GPU (state secret police) worked systematically to physically liquidate Trotsky’s closest supporters and cothinkers. Among those murdered by Stalinist agents were Erwin Wolf, one of Trotsky’s political secretaries, in July 1937; Ignace Reiss, who had defected from the GPU and declared his support for Trotsky, in September 1937; Trotsky’s son and close collaborator Leon Sedov in February 1938; and Rudolf Klement, secretary of the Fourth International, who was kidnapped and murdered in July 1938.

These assassinations were made possible by agents of the GPU who had penetrated the Trotskyist movement, including Mark Zborowski, who had wormed his way into the confidence of Sedov and served as his secretary.

Yet, so long as Trotsky lived, the Stalinist regime could not rest. 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.”

Despite extraordinarily difficult circumstances—including the murder of Klement only two months before—the Fourth International held its Founding Congress in September 1938. The founding document, written by Trotsky, warned: “The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ‘ripened’; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis

of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.”

The war drive of imperialism threatened to ignite once again a wave of revolutionary upheavals. It was precisely for this reason that world imperialism, through its Stalinist agents, sought to decapitate the leadership of the Fourth International. In an essay written in October 1938, Trotsky drew the connection between the impending war and the violence directed at the Trotskyist movement:

At the beginning of the last war, Jean Jaurès was assassinated, and at the end of the war, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg... The work of exterminating the internationalists has already commenced on a world scale prior to the outbreak of the war. Imperialism no longer has to depend on a ‘happy accident.’ In the Stalinist Mafia it has a ready-made international agency for the systematic extermination of revolutionists... Through its Stalinist gangsters imperialism indicates beforehand from what side mortal danger will threaten it in time of war. The imperialists are not mistaken.

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939, as world opinion was concentrated on the catastrophe in Europe, was seen by the Stalinist regime as an opportunity to escalate the campaign to assassinate Trotsky. A first attempt on his life was made on May 24, 1940 by an assassination team headed by the Stalinist painter David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Trotsky and his wife Natalia survived the assault, but Trotsky knew it would not be the last attempt. “I live on this earth not in accordance with the rule but as an exception to the rule,” Trotsky wrote with remarkable objectivity two weeks later. “In a reactionary epoch such as ours, a revolutionist is compelled to swim against the stream. I am doing this to the best of my ability. The pressure of world reaction has expressed itself perhaps most implacably in my personal fate and the fate of those close to me. I do not at all see in this any merit of mine: this is the result of the interlacing of historical circumstances.”

Then, on August 20, 1940, Trotsky was felled by Mercader, a Stalinist agent posing as a supporter of the Trotskyist movement.

In 1975, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched an investigation into the circumstances behind Trotsky’s assassination that exposed the extent of GPU infiltration into the Trotskyist movement. The investigation documented not only the role of Zborowski, but also that of Sylvia Callen (who worked as a secretary for James Cannon, the national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist movement in the US); Robert Sheldon Harte (who was on guard detail on the night of the first assassination attempt); and Joseph Hansen (Trotsky’s secretary and guard at the time of his assassination, and the future leader of the SWP during the period of its political degeneration).

The Security and the Fourth International investigation was denounced and opposed by the SWP and all the political renegades from the Trotskyist movement. Subsequent material released from the archives of the Soviet Union, however, has confirmed many of the conclusions drawn by the ICFI about the individuals who helped prepare and implement this greatest of political crimes.

At the time of his death, Trotsky was the greatest representative of a tradition of classical Marxism that emerged out of the revolutionary upsurge of the first decades of the Twentieth Century. His assassination dealt an immense blow to the international socialist movement, yet he left behind a political and theoretical legacy that laid a firm foundation for the development of the Fourth International. Indeed, in the last years of his life Trotsky grappled with questions that would emerge as the central political issues facing the socialist movement following the Second World

War.

In founding the Fourth International, Trotsky had to combat not only the Stalinists and imperialists, but a whole layer of petty-bourgeois intellectuals who, from the defeats of the 1930s, drew the conclusion that the working class was incapable of carrying out a socialist revolution. To justify their own abandonment of the fight for socialism, they foisted onto the working class responsibility for the treachery of its leadership. “If we grant as true,” Trotsky wrote, “that the cause of the defeats is rooted in the social qualities of the proletariat itself, then the position of modern society will have to be acknowledged as hopeless.”

The demoralized repudiation of socialism and the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class were to emerge repeatedly in the decades after the Second World War. Within the Fourth International, they found expression in the form of Pabloism, which was an adaptation to the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies and to the bourgeois nationalist movements.

Amidst the intensification of class conflict, these forces have moved sharply to the right, seeking ever more directly to assume the mantle of state power, as they have done in Greece. One can only imagine how Trotsky would have marshaled his literary skill and immeasurable wit to excoriate the selfish and self-obsessed upper-middle-class layers of today, how he would have exposed the rotten politics of Syriza and Podemos, how he would have flayed intellectual charlatans and pseudo-left celebrities like Slavoj Žižek.

What Trotsky understood and expressed with unequalled clarity was the decisive role of leadership. The essential lesson he drew from both the positive achievement of the Russian Revolution and the defeats that followed was that the victory of the socialist revolution and, therefore, the survival of mankind, required a relentless struggle to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership. This fundamental truth was to be demonstrated again and again in the decades after his death.

The centrality of the crisis of revolutionary leadership meant that the political struggle was the highest task. Trotsky had nothing but contempt for those who evaded their political responsibilities under the banner of personal freedom. “Let the philistines hunt for their own individuality in empty space,” he declared in a speech marking the founding of the Fourth International. “Yes, our party takes each one of us wholly. But in return it gives to every one of us the highest happiness: the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on his shoulders a particle of the fate of mankind, and that one’s life will not have been lived in vain.”

The enduring significance of Trotsky is reflected in the relentless assault on his historical reputation. Yet those who blackguard Trotsky today will not succeed. History has vindicated Trotsky’s analysis of the death agony of capitalism. The power of his ideas and the historical tradition that he represented have stood the test of time. The movement that he founded has proven to be the only genuine and viable revolutionary tendency.

Above all, the basic task for which Trotsky fought remains the central issue facing the working class today: the building of a revolutionary leadership.

These principles live on in the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. The anniversary of his assassination must not only be an occasion to pay tribute to his memory, as fitting as this is, but to honor this memory through an intensification of the struggle to build the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.



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