

Preface to the Russian edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*

Vladimir Volkov
2 August 2018

Mehring Verlag has now published the book In Defence of Leon Trotsky by David North in Russian. It is available in e-book format as well as in printed form and can be ordered here. The original English edition was published in 2010 by Mehring Books and in a German translation by Mehring Verlag. In 2013, a second, extended English edition was published, on which this Russian translation is based. It can be ordered here.

This publication is of great importance to the Russian working class. Understanding the role Leon Trotsky played in the twentieth century is fundamental to the revival of the heritage of Marxism in the countries of the former Soviet Union, and to the fight to build the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.

The World Socialist Web Site is publishing here the Preface to the Russian edition, by Vladimir Volkov:

The book that we are presenting here, for the attention of a Russian-speaking audience, is in many ways unique. It is unique, above all, in terms of its content, devoted as it is to the exposure and refutation of the mountain of slanderous attacks, lies and falsifications that have been fabricated over decades against one of the two leaders of the October Revolution of 1917—Leon Trotsky—and which are now being repeated in our epoch with new force, both in Western and post-Soviet historiography.

One can state without exaggeration that the book is also unique in that it is written by an author who is not only the world's premier specialist in the field of "Trotsky studies" (Trotskovedenie) in the broadest sense of the term, including Leon Trotsky's political biography, his ideas and perspectives, as well as the circumstances of his personal fate. For over four decades, David North has played a leading role in the International Committee of the Fourth International—the organization that directly continues the traditions of the Left Opposition of the 1920s and 1930s and of the Fourth International, which was founded by Trotsky in 1938, in opposition to the counter-revolutionary Stalinist degeneration of the Comintern and the Soviet state.

David North is also the chairman of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*—the only international socialist online daily that consistently expresses and defends the perspective of world socialist revolution, which inspired the Bolshevik Party in its seizure of power in October 1917.

The fact that the author of this book is not an academic scholar, but an active politician, is a major advantage, rather than deficiency. None of the great representatives of Marxism—whether its founders, Marx and Engels, or the representatives of a later generation, such as Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg—ever separated the need for the elaboration of scientific and consistent socio-political theories from active participation in the contemporary struggle for socialism. They always strove to directly guide the political organizations of the working class.

This peculiarity flows from the very essence of Marxism. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote that hitherto the philosophers had only sought

to explain the world, in one way or another, whereas the main issue was to change it. In other words, only a social theory that bases itself on the conquests of thought throughout human history, and proceeds from the necessity of orienting toward the most advanced class forces of its time, and actually serves to express their interests, can rightfully lay claim to a genuinely scientific and progressive character. In the epoch of capitalism, this social force is the working class.

As a member of the academic milieu, one can systematically study certain historical and theoretical questions. However, at the same time, this also creates objective obstacles, which are rooted in a dependence on the dominant socio-political conditions, i.e., ultimately on the interests of the ruling capitalist elite. The latter control the state and the private sources of funding for scientific studies, and also possess many other material instruments of influence. They have a fundamental interest in ensuring that the sciences help them maintain, rather than undermine, their rule.

In this lies one of the main reasons for the deep crisis of the humanities in contemporary academia all over the world. The period in which many scholars in the West could allow themselves a relative independence is long gone. The intensification of the crisis of the world capitalist system, especially since the 1970s and 80s, has led to a major shift to the right within the academic milieu. An entire layer of former radicals and "lefts," from the time of the student and civil protests of the 1960s, has integrated itself into the better-off, upper layers of the middle class and been transformed into direct apologists for imperialism.

Today, this layer openly supports the elimination of all former social conquests and reforms; completely justifies measures to destroy basic democratic rights (including the introduction of internet censorship); and to create police states in the leading Western Europe countries and the US. In the realm of international politics, it justifies the imperialist wars being waged in the Middle East and internationally, under "humanitarian" pretexts or false slogans of "democratization."

In what has become a major phenomenon, historical questions are now placed consciously in the service of the political agenda of the powers-that-be. The search for historical truth is replaced by the fabrication of *narratives* that are false, but ideologically and politically convenient for the ruling elites.

The new campaign to slander Trotsky, which has been unleashed over the past two decades, has precisely this goal. Geoffrey Swain, Ian Thatcher, and, in particular, Robert Service, are characteristic representatives of this reactionary tendency, and North's polemics against them occupy a significant portion of his book.

The reason for the new attempts to totally discredit Trotsky is that he embodies the idea of world socialist revolution. This is true of him even more so than for Lenin, the other leader of October 1917. As a result of the peculiarities of his political biography, which was more closely bound up with purely "Russian" tasks, and also because he died relatively early, at a point when many absolutely decisive questions were just beginning to

emerge to global significance, there have been many attempts to present Lenin as a “statist” and nationally oriented figure. These have been particularly exploited to serve the needs of the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country.”

Not so with Trotsky. His contribution to the preparation and success of the October Revolution of 1917, and the creation of the Soviet state, as well as his role in the struggle against the bureaucratic degeneration of the USSR and the development of the program of world socialist revolution in the 1930s—a period of world reaction—is so multifaceted and indisputable that his political heritage and the legacy of his ideas can be falsified only by resorting to the most unabashed lies.

This makes it all the more important that not one stone is left upon another in refuting these lies, which is precisely the task of this book. It makes a major and invaluable contribution to this goal.

The defense of the theoretical and political heritage of Leon Trotsky is, at the same time, the defense of the October Revolution of 1917, the centenary of which we celebrated this year.

The October Revolution of 1917 was the most important event in world history and marked a decisive turning point. It initiated a period in which the working class consciously intervened into social life, in order to radically transform society on the basis of egalitarianism and genuine democracy, and emancipate it from all forms of exploitation and oppression.

October 1917 was the only progressive means of overcoming the insoluble contradictions of Russian society and, in this sense, it arose on a national basis. But the October Revolution was not simply a national event. It became the response to the crisis of the entire world capitalist system. As Trotsky pointedly noted, all national peculiarities are specific expressions of common international conditions.

Essentially, the October Revolution of 1917 represented the strategic plan for the reorganization of the entire world in the interests of the broadest layers of the working population. This was the only viable alternative to imperialist barbarism, war and destruction, which displayed themselves so mercilessly in two world wars, the Holocaust and other catastrophes of the 20th century.

The Bolshevik victory was secured thanks to a correct perspective, the theory of permanent revolution, which had already been formulated by Trotsky in the period of the 1905 Russian revolution, as the outcome of a prolonged intellectual development in Russian and international social democracy. While he had initially rejected it, Lenin adopted Trotsky’s theory in the spring of 1917, in his *April Theses*. This step was facilitated by Lenin’s careful study of the economic nature of imperialism during the years of the First World War.

According to the theory of permanent revolution, the proletariat and its party, mobilizing broad layers of the peasantry, are the only force capable of leading the revolution against the remnants of feudalism, in the form of landlordism and absolutism, to a decisive victory. However, the new revolutionary regime cannot limit itself to bourgeois measures. It will inevitably be compelled to infringe upon private property, and proceed to the realization of a socialist program. Success on this path depends on the possibility of relying on the latest technological conquests of the world economy. This is conceivable only under conditions of victorious proletarian revolutions in Europe.

The precondition for the success of the Russian revolution was its expansion and support on an international scale—on this, Lenin and Trotsky were in absolute agreement when they led the party in the seizure of power in 1917.

While the theory of permanent revolution was initially developed with an eye to conditions in Russia, in our epoch it has assumed universal international significance. It affirms that even the simple defense of previously made social gains and basic democratic rights is impossible unless it is undertaken on the basis of the independent revolutionary

mobilization of the working class, oriented toward the program of international socialism.

For Russia, the historical significance of the theory of permanent revolution consists also in that it provides the key to an understanding of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state. The gangrene of the bureaucratic degeneration developed when the new regime of the workers’ and peasants’ dictatorship faced prolonged isolation. The socio-economic backwardness of the economy remained, and could not really be overcome, despite the enormous successes in industrial development that Soviet society achieved after the Second World War.

The victory of Stalinism, a vicious nationalist reaction to the international perspective guiding October, cost Soviet society many unnecessary sacrifices, economic and moral exhaustion, and terrible suffering. Although these bore no direct relation to socialism, they significantly undermined the belief in it on the part of both the Soviet and international working class.

One of the most gruesome crimes of Stalinism was the bloody genocide it unleashed, in the 1930s, of an entire layer of intellectuals and workers, who represented the best Marxist cadres and embodied the living experience and culture of the revolution. The gigantic trauma of the Great Terror was not overcome until the end of the Soviet period and it contributed to the implementation of the program, initiated by Gorbachev, of capitalist restoration.

On the international arena, the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” was complemented by the conception of “peaceful coexistence with capitalism.” Instead of fighting for the overthrow of capitalist regimes by building revolutionary communist parties, the Soviet bureaucracy systematically sabotaged and suppressed the struggles of the working class around the world, hoping that, in return, it would receive guarantees from the leading imperialist powers that they would not try to forcefully overthrow the ruling regime in the USSR.

Having politically expropriated the proletariat, the bureaucracy continued to defend the nationalized property relations for a certain period of time, since it regarded them as the source of its material privileges. But in doing so, it resorted to its own methods, which demoralized the working class, suppressed its spirit, independence and initiative, and stood in direct contradiction to the tasks of building socialism.

The Soviet workers felt deep hatred for the new *nomenklatura*-aristocracy. In essence, the entire history of Soviet society, from the late 1920s to the late 1980s, is, on the one hand, a series of uninterrupted attempts by the ruling bureaucracy to create the conditions for expanding its rule to the existing property relations, and thereby guaranteeing the restoration of capitalism, and, on the other, the spontaneous attempts of the Soviet working class to find its way to the program of a new political revolution, on the basis of the socio-economic conquests that emerged out of October 1917. This program was, from the very beginning, clearly formulated and advocated by the Fourth International.

The so-called stagnation under Brezhnev, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, was an important turning point. In contrast to the still dominant conception that this was a time when Soviet society had entered a period of crisis and decline, and one in which the “communist project” had entirely exhausted itself, the main trait of this period was, in fact, a growing turn of broad layers of the bureaucracy toward the re-establishment of a “market economy.”

Influential layers of the higher echelons of the Soviet intelligentsia actively joined in this process. The most famous representatives were figures such as the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, physicist Andrei Sakharov and poet Joseph Brodsky. Regardless of the peculiarities of their individual political conceptions, they all distinguished themselves by a shared anti-communism and blind admiration for bourgeois society.

The movement of “liberal Western dissidents” that emerged on this

basis regarded itself, for a long time, as the “democratic” alternative to the official “communism.” In reality, this milieu only formulated more directly and openly what was already being discussed in secret within the bureaucratic milieu, expressing the latter’s increasingly clear proclivities.

The “dissidents” were an instrument utilized by the Stalinist bureaucracy to begin a “dialogue” with the imperialist West, while at the same time imbuing Soviet society with pessimism and disappointment regarding a socialist perspective.

Many of the dissidents, who, in the period of the “stagnation” under Brezhnev, left the Soviet Union, soon discovered that their most radical anti-Communist ideas began to be propagated from the highest echelons of the CPSU in the years of Gorbachev’s “perestroika.”

Most predecessors of today’s pseudo-left in the West fully shared the loud euphoria over Gorbachev’s “perestroika” and “glasnost.” Against this background, the International Committee of the Fourth International was the only organization in the entire world insisting that the policies of Gorbachev represented not a “renewal of socialism,” but the all-out rejection of even the pretense of Marxism, and warned that they would lead to the restoration of capitalism and the collapse of the USSR.

This analysis, which was based on the theoretical and political heritage of Leon Trotsky, was fully confirmed by ensuing events.

In a speech before a workers’ club in Kiev, on 3 October 1991, only a few weeks after the aborted August Putsch, which had been organized by the Stalinist bureaucracy’s most conservative groups, and two months before the judicial liquidation of the Soviet Union, David North said:

Those who argue that it is only necessary for the Soviet Union, or what remains of it, to enter into the world market for it to solve its present problems simply ignore a number of critical historical and economic issues... In this country, capitalist restoration can only take place on the basis of the widespread destruction of the already-existing productive forces and the social-cultural institutions that depend on them. *In other words, the integration of the USSR into the structure of the world imperialist economy on a capitalist basis means not the slow development of a backward national economy, but the rapid destruction of one which has sustained living conditions which are, at least for the working class, far closer to those which exist in the advanced countries than in the third world.* (David North: After the August Putsch: Soviet Union at the Crossroads, in: *Fourth International*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall-Winter 1992, pp. 108–109, emphasis in the original)

Looking back after the entire bitter experience of post-Soviet history, it would be extremely naïve, and in complete disregard of the facts, to suggest that the USSR could have collapsed that quickly and with such catastrophic consequences, if it had not been for a collective conspiracy of the totalitarian bureaucracy to destroy it—a conspiracy that was prepared through many decades of crimes and betrayals committed by Soviet Stalinism against the working class and socialism.

But not everyone in the Soviet Union was blinded by the demagogy and lies of the “new way of thinking.” Vadim Rogovin, the famous Soviet sociologist and historian, was among those who recognized the relationship between the fate of the Soviet Union and the perspective of socialist internationalism, as expressed in the program of contemporary revolutionary Trotskyism.

Having established close ties with the International Committee, Vadim Rogovin managed to write, within the brief period of 1992–1998, a monumental seven-volume study, under the title “Was there an alternative?”, which was dedicated to the struggle of the Left Opposition of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and of the international

workers’ movement in the 1920s and 1930s against the Stalinist bureaucratic degeneration. This work still remains an unsurpassed example of historical research—especially in light of the shameful decline in the level of historical works in contemporary Russia.

To this day, the attitude toward Trotsky remains the touchstone, dividing those who seek to search for and establish objective historical truth against the vulgar, opportunist falsifiers. There is a deep irony: before 1991, Trotsky was slandered for not having been a real Bolshevik and revolutionary. Since 1991, he has been attacked for being one of the recognized leaders of the October Revolution.

The clear majority of works that have been written about him in Russia in recent years hardly deserve mentioning because of their extremely low quality. They form a flood of contemporary *neo-Stalinism*, which corresponds to the ideological needs of the new capitalist oligarchy. In this warped presentation, the crimes of Stalin are justified as allegedly inevitable and necessary outgrowths on the path to building a great national super-power. All of these works look pathetic, even compared to the literature produced by the dabblers from the ranks of the post-Soviet school of historical falsification, which has emerged in Western historiography and is examined and exposed in detail in this book.

The year of the centenary of the October Revolution was the occasion for a new series of vicious attacks on the figure of Trotsky. The series *Trotsky*, which was aired on the First Channel of Russian television in the first ten days of November 2017, was particularly outrageous. In it, Trotsky is portrayed as a cynical and merciless Nietzschean, a devil and a “superman,” who is ready to sacrifice all for the sake of his own insatiable hunger for power. This talentless, but very expensive concoction, which was heavily permeated with anti-Semitism, embodies the deep contempt for historical—and, one might add, aesthetic—truth, which has struck such deep roots in the contemporary Russian intellectual and cultural elite.

This state of mind is sanctioned at the level of official state doctrine. As the Russian minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, is convinced, myth, too, is fact. “History is always subjective and indirect,” he asserts, openly insisting that the goal of historical sciences and culture is to create myths that the government deems convenient.

Meanwhile, many polls conducted during the centenary year of the October Revolution show that broad layers of Russian society are increasingly recognising that in Soviet history, something was tragically lost, leaving behind an open wound in the consciousness of the people. Sympathy for and a positive attitude toward the October Revolution of 1917 are also rapidly growing. These are unmistakable signs of the spontaneous emergence of the preconditions for a new revolutionary upsurge.

The author of these lines is firmly convinced that the real Leon Trotsky, and the genuine truth about the October revolution and the fate of the Soviet Union, which is indissolubly connected to his name, will find its way to a mass readership in Russia. The book by David North is an excellent companion on this path, which the working class and broad layers of the youth and intelligentsia in Russia must enter in order to finally leave behind the old lies and deceit, and to see, in their past, the answers to the questions that are so urgently posed today.

Vladimir Volkov
St. Petersburg
27 December, 2017



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact