

# Historic discovery of Left Opposition manuscripts from the early 1930s

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In February 2018, some 30 hand-written documents of imprisoned members of the Trotskyist Left Opposition from the years 1932-1933 were found in the Verkhneursk prison in the Southern Urals of Russia. Most of them were written in notebooks. The documents were discovered during maintenance work under the planks of the floor in chamber No. 312 of the prison.

Only a small portion of the Trotskyist opposition's literature that was written in the Soviet Union in this period has hitherto been known. The Stalinist secret police, the OGPU-NKVD, did its best to destroy the documents produced by the Trotskyists. Only a few of them made it across the border, where they could be published in the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, which was edited by Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Left Opposition, and his son Lev Sedov.

The discovery of these documents is of major historical and political significance. The contents of the three documents published so far are a powerful vindication of the decades-long struggle of the Trotskyist movement, which founded the Fourth International in 1938, against counterrevolutionary Stalinism. Their publication constitutes a major blow to the Stalinist and post-Soviet schools of falsification, which, for decades, have sought to slander, belittle and silence the Trotskyist movement.

The documents confirm that the Left Opposition, even after it was expelled from the Communist Party and thrown behind bars, remained a formidable force. As the historian Alexander Fokin, who teaches at Chelyabinsk State University and is among those working to publish these documents, noted:

In historiography, the view has been entrenched that after 1927, after the defeat of Trotsky, the Left Opposition in Russia de facto ceased to exist. But this discovery proves that even the Stalinist prison could not break these people—they organized and continued the struggle. Based on the manuscripts, it is clear that they were indeed striving to create a certain alternative program for the development of the USSR.

The Left Opposition emerged in the fall of 1923, in the last period of Lenin's life and amid the aborted German revolution, when the growth of bureaucratism in the Soviet state and the Communist Party was already arousing opposition within the party and the working class as a whole. The backwardness of the Russian economy, the inheritance of tsarism, and the delay of the international, and especially the European, revolution strengthened conservative, nationally oriented layers in the party and state apparatus. They found their ideological justification in the theory of "socialism in one country," which was advanced by Bukharin and Stalin in late 1924 in direct opposition to the internationalist spirit and perspective of the October Revolution of 1917.

During the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the mid-1920s,

the Left Opposition criticized the dominant faction within the party leadership, headed by Stalin and including centrist and right-wing forces, for adapting to the petty-bourgeois and aspiring bourgeois Nepmen and to the kulaks (rich peasants), as well as for blocking proposals to accelerate industrialization and for suppressing inner-party democracy. In foreign policy, the Trotskyists condemned the increasingly opportunist line of the Comintern, which led to a series of devastating defeats of the working class, including in Great Britain and China.

In the fall of 1928, the right-wing course of the official leadership of the Bolshevik Party was replaced by an ultra-left zig zag. One of the reasons for this was a grain crisis provoked, as the opposition had foreseen, by the unwillingness of the kulaks to sell grain to the state at unfavorable prices. After a period of slow industrialization and increasing reliance on market mechanisms, the Stalinist leadership shifted to the other extreme—a chaotic and adventurist policy of super-industrialization and violent collectivization of agriculture.

As a result of the extreme sharpening of the inner-party struggle, Trotsky and Zinoviev, along with some 8,000 oppositionists, were expelled from the party at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927. From this point on, the repression against the Left Oppositionists steadily rose. The penalty of exile was replaced by prison sentences, and the conditions of imprisonment grew ever more cruel. As the historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin emphasized, "[T]he foundations of the bureaucratic-centrist political regime, which protected itself from any attempts to carry out socialist renewal, were laid in the struggle of the ruling factions against the Left Opposition." (V. Z. Rogovin, *Vlast' i oppozitsii*, Moscow: 1993, p. 118)

Along with the political prisons in Yaroslavl and Suzdal, the Verkhneursk Prison, whose building had been constructed in the 1910s, became a center for the incarceration of expelled dissidents, including the Bolshevik-Leninists, as the Trotskyist oppositionists called themselves.

Among the best known figures in the Verkhneursk political prison were the former Politburo members Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, the former head of the Gosbank (State Bank) and vice-head of the VSNKh (Highest Council of the Economy), Georgii Piatakov, the former secretary of the Comintern, Karl Radek, the former editor-in-chief of the *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, Aleksandr Slepov and his friend, the writer Dmitrii Maretskii, who was the brother of Vera Maretskaia, a famous Soviet film star in the 1930s. The prisoners also included small groups of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and representatives of other political tendencies.

A list of 117 names of imprisoned Bolshevik-Leninists, published in the *Bulletin of the Opposition* in March 1931, included some of the most outstanding representatives of international Trotskyism at the time: Fedor Dingelshedt, a leading theoretician of the Left Opposition; Viktor Eltsin, the editor of Trotsky's *Collected Works* in Russian; Man Nevelson, the husband of Leon Trotsky's younger daughter, Nina Bronstein, and a leading oppositionist in his own right, Musia Magid, and Igor'

Poznansky, one of Trotsky's former secretaries and among his closest collaborators.

Of perhaps the greatest significance among the published documents is the Bolshevik-Leninists' theses on the "Fascist Coup in Germany" from April 1, 1933. (Click here to download the full Russian text.) Written just two months after Hitler was placed in power by a conspiracy at the highest echelons of the German bourgeoisie and state, it offers a sharp analysis of the origins of German fascism and the tasks facing the working class throughout Europe. The document begins by placing the rise of Nazism in the context of the crisis of world capitalism:

The state-organized counterrevolutionary coup that just occurred in Germany, the March counterrevolution, is an event of the greatest historical significance. The imperialist world war has not solved any of the contradictions of capitalist society. On the contrary, it extraordinarily intensified and deepened them, bringing them onto a higher stage... The world economic crisis has deeply shaken the foundations of capitalist society. Even an imperialist leviathan such as the USA has trembled under its blows.

The document emphasizes that the decision of German capitalism to place fascism in power signified an escalation of the counterrevolution internationally. The German bourgeoisie, the Bolshevik-Leninists argue, had decided to destroy whatever concessions it had been forced to make in the wake of the betrayed 1918/19 revolution of the German workers and sailors.

A significant portion of the document deals with the betrayal of the German Communist Party (KPD) and its historical implications. Sharply attacking the KPD for having sown illusions in the supposedly "socialist" elements of the program of National Socialism, for having oriented German workers more toward the Nazi party, for having glorified the rise of fascism as "a left radicalization of the masses," all the while opposing a united front with workers from the Social Democratic Party, it states:

The lack of opposition of the leadership of the German Communist Party to the fascist coup is only the decisive and final link in the chain of betrayals of the world revolution that international Stalinism has committed over the prolonged period of the preceding years. This betrayal of the international revolution... will go down in history along with the date of August 4, 1914 [when the German Social Democracy approved war credits for the German government.]

... In rejecting the international permanent revolution, it [the bureaucracy] feeds the counterrevolution. The bureaucracy of the USSR has constantly cleared the way for world reaction to crush the communist movement. The USSR is isolating itself from the world proletariat just as the latter is being isolated from the proletariat of the USSR.

The Bolshevik-Leninists not only criticized the KPD for its policies. They summarized the alternative that had been provided for years through the analyses and statements of the Left Opposition, and especially Leon Trotsky, of the situation in Germany. Then they put forward bluntly the only correct policy that would have been able, if implemented by the Comintern internationally, to shift the situation and balance of forces in favor of the working class:

In light of the growing danger of a fascist coup, the revolutionary leadership of the communists was obliged to:

Strengthen day in and day out the anti-fascist front of the working class;

Carefully prepare a general strike for its immediate realization in response to any attempt at a fascist coup;

Carefully prepare everything possible for the arming of the workers at the moment of the assault of the c[ounter]-revolution;

Mobilize the best forces of the world communist movement to help the German proletariat;

Mobilize the Red Army of the USSR for the active support of an anti-fascist onslaught of the German working class;

Declare openly and courageously to proletarian public opinion in Germany that it is not alone in its heroic struggle with fascism, that the proletariat of the USSR will help it crush the c[ounter]-revolution with all the resources the country has [at its disposal], including with armed forces, that have been awaiting this historical moment in full mobilizational readiness, that the Russian proletariat will fulfill its duty toward its German brothers with the same decisiveness with which the latter fulfilled theirs toward Russia in 1918.

In not even attempting to fulfill these "elementary international revolutionary responsibilities," the Bolshevik-Leninists declared, "international Stalinism has prepared and conditioned this giant world defeat of the proletariat. *In this way, it has completed its own betrayal of the revolution. In this way, the Comintern has crossed itself out from the list of revolutionary factors, having become the tail-end, the left-wing of social democracy.*" [Emphasis in the original.]

The document bluntly sums up the dangers confronting the working class. "The internal and external contradictions will push the government of fascist Germany on the path toward external aggression, and on the historical plane, against the USSR, for there is and can be no other way for the prolonged consolidation of the counterrevolution but through war."

However, the Nazi regime would last not decades, but years, the Bolshevik-Leninists predicted, and the working class would enter into revolutionary struggles, including in Germany itself:

The German working class constitutes half of the country. We are living in an epoch of wars and revolutions, when the political experience of the masses grows quickly, when all processes of social life are moving at sevenfold speed, when classes cannot remain for a long time in a state of confusion or passivity, no matter how cruel the defeats they had suffered.

The document concludes:

The world revolution is entering into one of its most dramatic phases. To explain this to the workers of the entire world, to mobilize the workers, to make sure that the working class understands the causes that have led to this phase, that it understands that the victory of the proletariat is impossible under the Stalinist regime, not just here [in the Soviet Union], but that it is also made more difficult in Europe, that international Stalinism is one of the decisive barriers that the working class needs to crush in order to overcome the giant wave of world reaction—this is our primary task. And we are obliged to fulfill it with all the possibilities and in all forms that we have at hand.

The theses were signed by 30 imprisoned Trotskyists, including: Dingel'shtedt F., Kariakin M., Papirmeister P., Shinberg B., Novikov P., Abramskii A., Portnoi M., Bodrov M., Papirmeister Ya., Fel'dman, Nevel'son M., Kessel', Borzenko, Blokh, Kugelev, Kozhevnikov N., Zاراikin, Papirmeister S., El'tsin V. B., Danilovich L., Khugaev K., Brontman, Vashakidze, Gogelashvili, Topuria, Efremov, Shiptal'nik, Sasorov, Kholmenkin, Shvyrov.

The document is, in every respect, extraordinary. Cut off from the International Left Opposition and imprisoned, the Soviet Trotskyists offered an analysis that on all critical points completely coincided with that of Trotsky, adding aspects and emphases that are important for a comprehensive historical assessment of 1933. While not yet calling for the Fourth International—a call Trotsky himself would issue only later that year—there is no question that, judging by this document, the leading Soviet Trotskyists would have supported and contributed to the building of the Fourth International. Moreover, distribution of such documents in Europe and especially in Germany, amid the total collapse of the old leaderships, would have had a huge impact on the consciousness of thousands if not millions of workers.

The published documents so far are only a tenth of what has been found. Among the discovered manuscripts are several notebooks under the common title: “The crisis of the revolution and the tasks of the proletariat.” Other documents bear titles such as: “A unified or ambiguous revolution?” “On the results of the discussion on permanent revolution,” “The theory of permanent revolution and the theory of socialism in one country,” “On the theoretical foundation of the Leninist opposition and Stalinist national-socialism,” “Basic questions of the economy and policy of the transitional period,” “Theses on economic policy (for a general and collective discussion).”

These documents underline, illustrate and, in some sense, concretize the scale of the historical crime that the Stalinist bureaucracy committed in first isolating these cadres from the Soviet and international proletariat and then murdering them in the political genocide of the Great Terror. It is precisely because the Stalinist bureaucracy recognized that their political line resonated with the living experiences of the working class internationally and clearly articulated its historical and political tasks that it repressed them with historically unprecedented ferocity.

Starting in 1933, the oppositionists were carried off to labor camps, and by the end of 1936 they were virtually all in the two most awful places—the camps of Kolyma in Eastern Siberia and the camps of Vorkuta near the Polar circle in the very north of the Urals.

Here many died of hunger, disease or forced labor, or were executed. Fearing that an upsurge of the working class internationally would benefit the Trotskyist movement, the Stalinist bureaucracy moved to escalate its repressions and launched the Great Terror, in which no less than 20,000 to 30,000 Soviet Trotskyists and hundreds of thousands or even millions of Communists and socialist intellectuals were killed. Virtually all of those from the Verkhneursalsk political isolator were among those murdered.

There is no question that the cadre that was destroyed by Stalin would have played a central role in leading the revolutionary movements against fascism that erupted within the European working class both on the eve of World War II and in the early 1940s. The mass terror of Stalinism against the Trotskyist and communist movement, soon abetted by the horrendous murder rampage of Nazism, provided the conditions under which these movements could be manipulated politically and brought under the control of Stalinism.

These documents powerfully vindicate the Trotskyist struggle against the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy. Every element of their analysis was confirmed by events. No one, having read these documents, can argue that the Left Opposition was an insignificant political force in the Soviet Union. Every line in these documents is imbued with revolutionary optimism, tenacity and foresight, and a proud, hardened

fighting spirit.

The Trotskyist movement was and has always been, as the Bolshevik-Leninists emphasized, first and foremost an international tendency. This is why, whatever the horrendous crimes of Stalin and whatever the extraordinary losses the Trotskyist movement had to suffer, it could not be either defeated or destroyed as a political tendency.

The Fourth International was founded in 1938 in Paris amid the greatest wave of counter-revolutionary terror in world history. It was, as David North put it in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Trotsky's victory over Stalin. In the end, it was the Stalinist bureaucracies, their mass parties and apparatuses, that ingloriously collapsed in 1989-91, while the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, has proceeded to build what is now the most widely read socialist website on the Internet, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Significantly, the discovery of these documents was broadly covered in the Russian media, with leading news outlets, including the business daily *Kommersant* and the *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* reporting on it. *Kommersant*, one of the most widely read newspapers in Russia (as of 2013, it had a daily circulation of between 120,000 and 130,000) printed two of the documents in full in its online edition (the first two discussed in this article) and interviewed a series of historians about them.

There is a profound sense in Russian society that this historical material and the questions it raises are important, not just for archivists, but from a contemporary political standpoint. Hundreds and thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people in Russia will have read these documents by now. Many of them will be impressed by the degree of historical and political clarity, sharpness and foresight the Trotskyists evinced in them.

We urge the readers of these documents to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and discuss these questions with us. The International Committee of the Fourth International represents the sole continuation of the heroic struggle of the Soviet and international Left Opposition. It has fought over decades to defend the Trotskyist perspective of international socialism and its analysis of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism, which these documents so powerfully illustrate.

Earlier this year, the ICFI published the Russian translation of David North's *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, which constitutes a major contribution to an understanding of the basic historical and political issues that were bound with the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution, the struggle for Trotskyism and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification.

Buy this book and help us distribute it as widely as possible! Contact us if you are interested in working with us on these historical questions on a principled basis!



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