

Preface to the Turkish edition of *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*

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When this book was published in 2014, the conception that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe represented the irreversible triumph of capitalism still dominated political discourse. Of course, the bourgeois euphoria and triumphalism of the early 1990s had already been substantially undermined by the military debacle of the United States' "War on Terror," the economic crash of 2008, and the eruption of the mass demonstrations and strikes that brought about the fall of the Mubarak regime in 2011. But even if the "End of History" that had been predicted by Francis Fukuyama had failed to materialize, the strategists of the bourgeoisie—and especially those working within the academic community—continued to discount the possibility of the resurgence of a mass socialist movement that threatened the survival of world capitalism.

But the events of the last five years have dealt a shattering blow to this complacent and false perspective. The world capitalist system confronts an existential crisis. The renewal of interest in and mass support for socialism—even in the North American citadel of global capitalism—is publicly acknowledged. Donald Trump's hysterical declaration, in the spring of 2019, that socialism would never triumph in the United States, was widely interpreted as an expression of fear, rather than confidence in the future of American capitalism. The great economic, political and social contradictions that led to wars and revolutions in the twentieth century remain, in essence, the central problems of the twenty-first. Of course, the last several decades have witnessed extraordinary technological advances. But these developments have only intensified the central contradictions that led to the catastrophes of the past century: namely, the incompatibility of a highly interconnected world economy with the existing system of

national states; and the conflict between the objective processes of social production and capitalist property relations, based on private ownership of the means of production. The perspective that inspired the October Revolution of 1917 retains a burning actuality in the present historical period. The global crisis that arises out of these fundamental historical contradictions can be solved only through the conquest of political power by the global proletariat.

In the context of the historical origins of the modern Turkish state, its place in contemporary international geopolitics, and the economic, political and social contradictions of this vast and complex country, the publication of the Turkish edition of *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* is extremely timely. The "unfinished" tasks of the past century dominate every aspect of the contemporary political life of Turkey.

The modern Turkish republic is itself a product of the international crisis unleashed by World War I. The Ottoman Empire, rent by the intense economic and geostrategic pressure of the imperialist powers, had entered into the maelstrom of the World War in 1914 on the side of Germany and Austria. The war resulted in the disintegration of the old Ottoman regime. The victorious European imperialist powers, Britain, France and Italy, invaded Turkey, together with their Greek and Armenian allies, intent on partitioning Turkey and reducing it to colonial status.

The young Soviet republic, led by Lenin and Trotsky, published the secret treaties that exposed the plans of British, French and Russian imperialism to carve up the Ottoman Empire. It also came to the aid of Turkey's heroic struggle against London and Paris. However, the assistance rendered by Soviet Russia to Turkey did not

determine the class character of the state founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The new Turkey was established on a capitalist basis. But, as foreseen by Trotsky in his theory of permanent revolution, the bourgeois regime was unable to resolve the intractable international and national contradictions that confront states with a belated capitalist development in the imperialist epoch.

Despite all the desperate and oppressive measures taken to consolidate bourgeois rule in Turkey and modernize the country, the same historical issues that produced the breakdown of the Ottoman regime, and confronted the state established under Atatürk, remain. It has never been able to break out of the cycle of inescapable dependence upon and frustrated conflict with the major imperialist powers. It is compelled to maneuver between the imperialist powers, and thus is forced, in the final analysis, to choose between a limited number of bad, anti-democratic and self-defeating alternatives. The hopes of the present Turkish government that it will secure, through relations with China and Russia, a reliable counterweight to the imperialist pressure of the United States and Europe, will end in new disappointments.

Haunted by the fragility of its state, the bourgeoisie is incapable of advancing a democratic and progressive response to the grievances of the national minorities within Turkey, above all, the Kurdish people. But the suppression of the democratic aspirations of the Kurdish minority exposes not only the unviability of the existing capitalist state in Turkey, but the historical bankruptcy of the entire nation-state system throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. The Kurdish question—by virtue of the fact that its resolution affects the fate of a large number of states in the region—is of an intrinsically international character. Thus, efforts to resolve this “national question” on a *national* basis are doomed to failure. This applies not only to the policies pursued by the bourgeois states in the affected regions, but to the strategies of the various Kurdish organizations. Their efforts to achieve self-determination are fatally compromised by their generally unscrupulous, opportunist and thoroughly reactionary dealings with the United States and other imperialist powers.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy placed the Middle East and Central Asia at the center of the global counterrevolutionary operations of the US government and its European imperialist allies. They have waged nearly three decades of war and proxy conflicts in the region. The human cost, with millions of dead and wounded, and tens of millions of refugees

driven from their homes, is staggering. Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen have already been devastated by these brutal interventions.

These lines are being written in Berlin, exactly eighty years after Nazi Germany invaded Poland, thus beginning the second imperialist world war of the twentieth century. On the very eve of this somber anniversary, the leaders of the world’s major imperialist powers met for the G7 summit in the French resort town of Biarritz, which was placed on lockdown and surrounded by a small army of riot police to suppress protests. Clashing over a multitude of economic, political and military issues, these bourgeois leaders did not even attempt to agree on a common summit statement. It was evident to everyone that they are presiding over a social system that is dysfunctional and careening towards an economic and political disaster.

In September 1939, Trotsky addressed himself to the enormous challenges posed to the working class in an era of war and social revolution. He wrote, “The question consequently stands as follows: Will objective historical necessity in the long run cut a path for itself in the consciousness of the vanguard of the working class; that is, in the process of this war and those profound shocks which it must engender, will a genuine revolutionary leadership be formed capable of leading the proletariat to the conquest of power?” This is the question that must be answered, not only with words but with deeds, in the twenty-first century.

It is my hope that *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* will contribute to the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Turkey. Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to the comrades of Sosyalist E?itlik, who are working in political solidarity with the International Committee, not only for having made the publication of this edition possible, but also for their determined efforts to bring the program of Trotskyism—that is, the Marxism of the twenty-first century—to the advanced workers and youth of Turkey.

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Berlin

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Eighty years after the outbreak of World War II



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