

The International Committee's response to the "End of History": The March 1992 Plenum of the ICFI

David Walsh
16 September 2019

This lecture was delivered by David Walsh, Arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site, at the Socialist Equality Party (US) Summer School on July 26, 2019.

The subject of this presentation is how the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) responded to the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the accompanying claims that this event signaled the refutation of Marxism and the death of the working class, socialism and even history.

On March 11, 1992, eleven weeks after the legal dissolution of the Soviet Union, the International Committee of the Fourth International began a plenum—a meeting of leading members—the twelfth since the split in 1985–86. In an opening report, David North addressed what the end of the USSR represented “within the context of the objective historical experience of the working class.” The report provided a broad view of the historical, intellectual and political development of socialist consciousness, and the problems that had emerged in that process over the previous century and a half.

The 12th Plenum report argued that the spontaneous movement of the working class and the intensification of the class struggle, as indispensable as they were, did not *by themselves* create the conditions for the development of genuinely revolutionary conditions. The report drew significant conclusions about how the crisis of perspective and revolutionary leadership could be overcome and what the immense responsibilities of the ICFI were. It was a report and a meeting with vital, long-lasting consequences.

The plenum in March 1992 was critical in laying the basis for concentrated efforts on fundamental historical questions: defending the October Revolution; exposing the genocide of the Marxists that occurred in the USSR; answering the lie that Stalinism was socialism and proving there was an alternative to the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy.

Central to the opening report was this proposition:

To answer the lie that Stalinism is Marxism requires that we expose the deeds of Stalinism. To know what Stalinism is one has to show whom Stalinism murdered. We have to answer the question: against what enemy did Stalinism strike its most terrible blows? The greatest political task of our movement must be to restore historical truth by exposing the far-reaching political significance of the crimes which Stalinism carried out.

The 12th Plenum directly led to various initiatives, including an offensive that continues against the “Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification.” This includes Martin Malia, Richard Pipes, Dmitri

Volkogonov, Geoffrey Swain, Ian Thatcher and Robert Service. It also embraces the ongoing struggle against reactionary German historian Jörg Baberowski and the neo-fascist danger. In 1994, the ICFI published Nadezhda Joffe's *Back in Time*. Particularly critical was the translation and publication of the writings of Vadim Rogovin, the Russian Marxist historian and sociologist, and author of a multi-volume study of the Trotskyist opposition to the rise of the Stalinist regime within the USSR. Rogovin also delivered an international series of highly successful lectures between 1995 and 1998.

David North commented, at the time of the Marxist historian's death in 1998, that Rogovin's work would “for decades to come, dominate historical literature on the subject of the Stalinist terror. A work of such monumental dimensions defies any attempt at cursory summation. But this must be emphasized: what sets Vadim's work apart from virtually all others is his insistence that the principal purpose and function of the terror was the elimination of the Trotskyist opposition to the Stalinist regime.”

Historians had minimized, if not denied, “the centrality of the struggle against Trotsky and his ideas. ... Vadim rejected these views which, he argued, underestimated the potency of the Marxist tradition within the Soviet Union and the depth of revolutionary sentiments among broad segments of the people. ...What then, was the ultimate purpose of the terror? ‘The Great Purge of 1937–1938,’ wrote Vadim, ‘was needed by Stalin precisely because only in this way was it possible to rob of vitality the strengthening revolutionary movement of the Fourth International; to prevent it from turning into the leading revolutionary force of the epoch; to disorient and demoralize world public opinion, capable otherwise of becoming receptive to the adoption of ‘Trotskyist’ ideas.’” (“In memory of Vadim Z. Rogovin,” David North, December 15, 1998)

The *Security and the Fourth International* investigation and exposure, the subject of one of Cliff Slaughter's first *public* attacks on the International Committee in November 1985, took on even greater meaning as the party deepened the offensive to establish the truth about Stalinism's political devastation, and expose and defeat all those who apologized or covered up for it.

The emphasis on the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness also led to concerted efforts to develop the work of the party in the sphere of art and culture. The translation and publication in 1998 of the volume of essays, *Art as the Cognition of Life*, by Aleksandr Voronsky, the Soviet critic and member of the Left Opposition, killed by Stalin in 1937, was a tremendously important event. It is one of the most crucial works produced in the 20th century on the questions of art and social life.

The International Committee consciously dedicated itself to reconstructing the international socialist political culture that had been so ravaged by Stalinism. The opening report at the March 1992 meeting

argued that it was not possible “to rebuild the international Marxist movement without mounting this offensive” for historical truth and that exposing the crimes of Stalinism was “an essential part of overcoming the damage they caused to the development of social and political thought.”

The 12th Plenum report was a milestone in the development of the ICFI, but it didn’t come out of the blue. It was the bringing to bear on the new situation, created by the dissolution of the USSR, of the entire history of the Trotskyist movement, from its earliest days in the 1920s, through the founding of the Fourth International, the struggle against Pabloism, later the campaign taken up by the British Trotskyists, in particular, against the degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party, and still later, the struggle conducted by the Workers League against the Workers Revolutionary Party leadership, and the genuine renaissance of Marxism produced by the IC majority’s historic, liberating purging of national-opportunist elements in 1985.

The Soviet Union was formally dissolved in Moscow, at the Kremlin, on December 26, 1991, a Thursday.

On the previous day, December 25, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, declaring that his office no longer existed. That evening at 7:32 p.m., the Soviet flag, with its familiar hammer and sickle, was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time and replaced with the pre-revolutionary Russian flag, which had been the official emblem of autocratic, semi-barbaric Russian Tsardom, from 1696 until the October Revolution.

As an obedient agency of imperialism, and not a ruling class that would have fought tenaciously and ruthlessly to cling to power to the bitter end (and even beyond!), the bureaucratic caste, in its final historic act of betrayal, simply signed over the country and the fate of its 293,000,000 citizens to capitalist interests.

According to the official, wishful, i.e., lying, version of things, the historical process had reversed itself by three-quarters of a century, or more. The physical remains of the October Revolution, that deviation from the “normal,” bourgeois course of development, were no more. The memory of the Revolution could be slandered and, if possible, wiped out. The ruling classes could get back to business as usual. Peace on earth would prevail and democracy flower.

However, events over the past quarter-century and more, have not confirmed that hopeful, sunny prognosis.

On January 4, 1992, a Saturday, nine days following the official dissolution of the Soviet Union in Moscow, David North presented to a party membership meeting of the Workers League in Detroit a comprehensive examination of what had brought about its demise. As part of that analysis, *The End of the USSR*, he made these points:

The dissolution of the USSR certainly represents the culmination of Stalinism’s betrayal of the principles of the October Revolution and of the Soviet and international working class. ... The oft-repeated warnings of the Trotskyist movement, dating all the way back to the 1920s, that Stalinism would lead the Soviet workers to a catastrophe, have been profoundly and tragically vindicated. ...

A revolutionary party must face reality and state what is. The Soviet working class has suffered a serious defeat. The bureaucracy has devoured the workers state before the working class was able to clean out the bureaucracy. ...

Though it raises great dangers, the smashup of the Soviet bureaucracy also clears the decks. The greatest source and material foundation of corruption and opportunism has been put out of business. ... Now all those who based themselves upon Stalinism have lost their credibility within the working class. (*The End of the USSR*, January 1992)

The March 1992 plenum carried forward and deepened this work, as I will attempt to explain.

How was it possible that when everyone else was losing his or her head, the ICFI retained its? Bourgeois triumphalism and boastful stupidity, on the one hand; the petty-bourgeois left sitting on the ground and mournfully telling “sad stories of the deaths of kings,” on the other.

The International Committee had prepared itself, in particular, through the historic conflict with the Workers Revolutionary Party leadership from 1982 to 1985, for these events. In that struggle, every fundamental question, including the character and history of the Stalinist regimes, arose and was fought out.

The ICFI had defended the Soviet Union, China and the Eastern European states against the attacks of imperialism and had, with equal vigor, warned about the dangers of capitalist restoration, flowing from the policies and practices of the bureaucracy itself. When that process exhausted itself, the ICFI recognized it, carried out an intense internal discussion and took the necessary steps, theoretically and practically.

To explain the ability of the IC to come to terms with the demise of the USSR, one has to turn, first of all, to the immense foundations put in place by Trotsky, and the perspective developed by the International Left Opposition and the Fourth International on the fate of the USSR.

As events unfolded in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the IC pointed out that no bourgeois expert or academic, even after the coming to power of Gorbachev in 1985, had predicted the Stalinist government would reject the principle of central planning, repeal all restrictions on private ownership of the means of production, proclaim the market to be “the highest achievement of civilization” and seek the complete integration of the USSR into the structures of world capitalism.

Indeed, in 2011, *Foreign Policy* magazine acknowledged somewhat shamefacedly, “In the years leading up to 1991, virtually no Western expert, scholar, official, or politician foresaw the impending collapse of the Soviet Union.”

In 1936, however, writing as an isolated and endangered political exile in Norway, Leon Trotsky had warned that the policies of the Stalinist regime, far from having assured the triumph of socialism in the USSR, were actually preparing the soil for the restoration of capitalism.

Trotsky, our party explained, strove to devise a concept of the Soviet Union that reproduced its features in a living way and revealed the possible direction of its development. He concluded that the USSR was a “transitional” society, whose final destiny had not yet been determined. If the workers could oust the Stalinist rulers in a political revolution, restore Soviet democracy and regain control of the state, the Soviet Union could still evolve in the direction of socialism. However, if the bureaucratic caste retained power and continued to suppress the working class politically and sabotage the possibilities of the economic structures created by the October Revolution, the calamitous reversion to capitalism was also a possibility.

This understanding was spelled out in the founding document of the Fourth International, *The Transitional Program*:

The USSR ... embodies terrific contradictions. 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. (*The Transitional Program*, 1938)

This conception was elaborated on and defended by the ICFI, as

previous lectures have explained.

In addition to the bourgeois experts, the petty-bourgeois left was almost universally convinced of the imperishability of the USSR. It is perhaps difficult today for people not politically conscious at the time to grasp, but the permanence of the Soviet Union was taken for granted by Pabloite, anarchist and state capitalist groupings alike, including by those who formerly made bloodcurdling criticisms of Stalinist tyranny.

Leading British state capitalist Chris Harman, in his 1988 work, *From Stalin to Gorbachev*, made no reference whatsoever to the possibility of capitalist restoration. The “Russian leadership,” wrote Harman complacently, “swings from one policy to another and back again, to the accompaniment of bitter rows inside the bureaucracy itself. These can make it increasingly difficult for the bureaucracy to impose its will on the rest of the population.”

Indeed, by the 1980s, skepticism toward Trotsky’s analysis had become widespread within the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party itself.

I recall a discussion in 1983 in which, to my amazement, Mike Banda, the general secretary of the WRP, told me that Trotsky’s warning was wrong. The eternal survival of the USSR was a historically ‘settled question.’ But didn’t this mean, I asked Banda, that the analysis of Stalinism upon which Trotsky had based the decision to found the Fourth International was wrong? Banda offered an evasive reply to my question. But within less than three years, Banda was to repudiate Trotsky, denounce the Fourth International, and proclaim his admiration for Stalin. (“Twenty years since the dissolution of the USSR: The capitalist crisis and the radicalization of the working class in 2012,” David North, January 30, 2012)

The dissolution of the USSR in December 1991 represented a fundamental turning point in the history of the workers movement. Since November 1917, when the Russian working class, led by the Bolshevik Party, established the first workers state in history, the social, political, intellectual and cultural development of the international working class had been inextricably linked to this central event of modern world history.

The social character and political destiny of the Soviet Union had been a preoccupation of the Fourth International throughout its history. In countless struggles within the Trotskyist movement, the ‘Russian Question’ had been the focus of intense struggle and controversy. This was recognized by James P. Cannon, the leader of the Socialist Workers Party, at the outset of the conflict with the Shachtman-Burnham faction in October 1939.

The Russian question is with us once again, as it has been at every critical turning point of the international labor movement since November 7, 1917. And there is nothing strange in that. The Russian question is no literary exercise to be taken up or cast aside according to the mood of the moment. The Russian question has been and remains the question of the revolution. ... It was said once of a book—I think it was Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*—“Who touches this book, touches a man.” In the same sense it can also be said, “Who touches the Russian question, touches a revolution.” Therefore, be serious about it. Don’t play with it. (“Speech on the Russian Question,” James P. Cannon, October 15, 1939)

Perhaps no one born after 1980 can appreciate the extent to which

postwar politics and culture were dominated by the presence of the Soviet Union. For my generation, the existence of the USSR and what Soviet policy was—and what US policy in relation to the USSR was—were central facts (and concerns, frankly) of everyday life: the Cold War, the arms race, the space race, nuclear testing, the Berlin Wall, the U2 spy plane crisis, defectors, the Cuban missile crisis, Nikita Khrushchev supposedly banging his shoe on his desk at the United Nations, the Kitchen Debate between Khrushchev and Richard Nixon, the missile gap, the pianist Van Cliburn in Moscow, summit meetings, détente, the “Red Menace” vs. the “Free World,” James Bond, John Le Carré, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Ugly American*, *The Quiet American*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *On the Beach*, *Fail-Safe*, *The Russians Are Coming*, *The Russians Are Coming*, “Eve of Destruction,” “Masters of War,” the “Evil Empire,” cultural exchange, sports rivalries, Olympic boycotts, spy trials and trades ...

By December 1991, as the Fourth International had foreseen and forewarned, the policies of the anti-Marxist and nationalist Stalinist bureaucracy had destroyed the USSR. The international working class had suffered a major defeat. The ICFI intervened in the Soviet Union and East Germany, made visits, addressed audiences, corresponded, published and distributed its material. The ICFI, as David discussed the other day, brought the perspective of Trotskyism to the Soviet population, publishing a theoretical journal in Russian and organizing numerous trips to the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. (Some of this is discussed in the *Political Chronology* in the December 31, 1990 report to the Workers League National Aggregate.)

So, as David North’s report to the Workers League 15th National Congress in August 1991 argued, when the ICFI appraised events in the Soviet Union, it did so as an already active force in the Soviet Union. A number of months earlier, the IC had written a letter to a correspondent in Kirov—a medium-sized industrial city. In response to the correspondent’s question about Boris Yeltsin, the IC had written: “While Gorbachev is the leader of the bourgeois restoration faction within the bureaucracy, Yeltsin is presently the leader of the emerging Russian comprador bourgeoisie.

Our correspondent placed this letter in the newspaper of the local soviet. As a result, no less than three consecutive issues of the newspaper were devoted to a denunciation of the letter. The newspaper carried an interview with an academician turned entrepreneur. He “proceeds to recite the traditional litany of Stalinist slanders against Trotskyism. ... Thus, he refers to Trotskyism as a ‘misanthropic, cannibalistic ideology,’ and in typical Stalinist fashion, draws an amalgam between Trotsky, Mao and Pol Pot. So this old Stalinist hack—who is now working on the stock exchange in Kirov—is using what he learned among the Stalinists to denounce the Trotskyists.” (*After the August Putsch: Where is the USSR Going?*, “Trotskyism Vindicated: The Collapse of Stalinism and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” Report by David North to the Workers League Fifteenth National Congress, August 29, 1991)

In the months following the demise of the Soviet Union, none of the Pabloite, state capitalist or academic left organizations and trends was able to put forward a credible or coherent assessment of the meaning of this world-historical event. Either they could not bring themselves to acknowledge that the USSR no longer existed or they acted as though the abyss had opened beneath their feet.

Sam Marcy, a veteran member of the SWP, broke with that movement in 1959 and founded the pro-Stalinist, pro-Maoist Workers World Party. In July 1990, he confidently informed his readers, in a headline, “Why counterrevolution won’t succeed in the USSR.” The Spartacist group of James Robertson alternated convulsively between hysterical wishful thinking and hysterical despair—hysteria, in any case.

The Sheila Torrance ‘fragment’ of the Workers Revolutionary Party *still to this day* contends that Russia and China are workers states, deformed or otherwise. In its May Day 2019 statement, Torrance’s *News Line* promised that the imminent “victory of the world socialist

revolution” would mean “the working class taking the power in all of the major capitalist states through social revolutions, and the bureaucracies being replaced in the deformed workers states, including Russia and China, by political revolutions of the working class with power restored to workers soviets.”

In 1992–1993, bourgeois triumphalism ruled the day.

In January 1992, Francis Fukuyama, at the time a neo-conservative academic and a former US State Department official, published *The End of History and the Last Man*.

Fukuyama argued that the last serious alternative to bourgeois liberalism had vanished. The West had defeated fascism, and now Communism was disappearing. Regimes that still referred to themselves as Communist were carrying out political and economic reforms that would carry them in the direction of the liberal order.

Fukuyama wrote:

All countries undergoing economic modernization must increasingly resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of a centralized state, urbanize, replace traditional forms of social organization like tribe, sect, and family with economically rational ones based on function and efficiency, and provide for the universal education of their citizens. Such societies have become increasingly linked with one another through global markets and the spread of a universal consumer culture. Moreover, the logic of modern natural science would seem to dictate a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism. (Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, January 1992)

This was echoed in many forms. It is painful to read the gloating stupidities that were churned out by Western academics in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union. Seemingly every journal devoted to politics, current affairs or culture felt obliged to publish a special issue devoted to the supposed rout of socialism. The word “End” or “Death” or “Fall” or a synonym had to be included somewhere in the title.

The literary intelligentsia chimed in, just as ignorantly.

At a conference organized in April 1992 by the *Partisan Review* magazine, for example, novelists Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow and Doris Lessing and well-known critic Susan Sontag, along with assorted former Eastern European “dissidents,” hobnobbed with arch-reactionary historian Richard Pipes from Harvard and their host Lynne Cheney, then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the wife of one of the major war criminals of our time, Dick Cheney.

All those in attendance of course took the wickedness of Bolshevism for granted, but just for good measure, they also pronounced anathema on the French Revolution and Jacobinism.

Within this layer, an irrevocable political, intellectual and moral collapse occurred.

In July 1993, Tim Wohlforth, the former leader of the Workers League in the US, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, who broke with the Trotskyist movement in the mid-1970s, announced his support for US military action in Bosnia in an article entitled “Give War a Chance.” Addressing himself to a wide layer of former antiwar protesters, who were now promoting imperialist military intervention, Wohlforth asserted: “We must put on our marching shoes, unfurl our banners and raise our fists in the air, demanding military action when it is morally required.”

The desertions on the left commenced as soon as the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe began to unravel in 1989 and 1990. The ICFI, until the very end, made clear its unswerving opposition to the Stalinist regime, its commitment to the defense of the gains the working class had made and its hostility to capitalist restoration. The Marxists are always the last to

leave the battlefield. The petty-bourgeois left simply abandoned the field in droves and headed for greener pastures.

Eric Hobsbawm, the British academic and longtime Stalinist, wrote an essay, “Goodbye to All That” in October 1990. He spoke for many:

It is much easier to see 1989 as a conclusion than as a beginning. It was the end of the era in which world history was about the October Revolution. ...

If there was no significant movement to overthrow capitalism worldwide, revolutionaries still hoped that its contradictions and those of its international system made it vulnerable—perhaps one day fatally vulnerable—and that Marxists, or at any rate socialists, would provide the alternative to it.

All this is now over. ... Those of us who believed that the October Revolution was the gate to the future of world history have been shown to be wrong.

One of the most morbid statements came from Frank Furedi, of the then-Revolutionary Communist Party in Britain whose ultimate origin was as a faction in Tony Cliff’s International Socialist group.

In such a bleak political landscape only irrationalism, apathy and fear can flourish. The new subjective outlook which has developed out of the experience of defeat immobilises those with the potential to change the world. ...

To put matters bluntly, it seems that the prospects for human progress are worse than at any time this century. Not even in the dark days of fascist triumphs did the prospects for social transformation and the creation of a new society appear so remote. Marxism and working class politics are temporarily of no consequence to the flow of history.

Furedi, a truly appalling figure, and his co-thinkers at *Living Marxism* have ended up at *Spiked*, the extreme-right internet magazine funded in part by the Koch brothers.

If one had the stomach for it, and one doesn’t, fortunately for all of you, thousands of examples from dozens of countries could be cited. This was the atmosphere in these circles and it helps explain the current mood on university campuses.

A useful work, *Intellectual Radicalism after 1989: Crisis and Re-orientation in the British and the American Left* by Sebastian Berg (2017), traces the evolution of left academia following the collapse of Stalinism.

This is typical of the responses to the collapse of the Soviet Union. G. A. Cohen, Canadian-British philosopher and “analytical Marxist,” made no secret of his feelings in the *New Left Review* in 1991: “It is true that I was heavily critical of the Soviet Union, but the angry little boy who pummels his father’s chest will not be glad if the old man collapses. As long as the Soviet Union seemed safe, it felt safe for me to be anti-Soviet. Now that it begins, disobligingly, to crumble, I feel impotently protective toward it.” What can one say about this pathetic comment—except that it has nothing whatsoever to do with Marxism?

Summing up, Berg, without meaning to, paints a devastating picture of these “socialist intellectuals.” The events of 1989–91 “brought them close to central tenets of social democracy. ... They left behind the idea of revolution as a violent rupture or as abrupt comprehensive change affecting all dimensions of public life. ... The retrieval and rehabilitation of thinkers such as [Karl] Kautsky and [Eduard] Bernstein also testify to this reorientation. Similarly, the continuing insistence on the centrality of the

national state as an arena of political struggle revealed an acceptance of existing institutions ...

“Marxism had been ‘cut to size’—and they applauded the diminution and welcomed the new climate of openness which fostered the search for new visions and sources of inspiration. ... Ethical reflections became even more necessary; the adoption of a weak form of historical materialism not only reinforced the principle of contingency but abandoned—or at least qualified—the dialectical principle.”

In short, every core precept of Marxism was thrown out and replaced with the concerns of the “alienated,” discontented professional middle class.

A striking feature about this general phenomenon is that not a single one of the thousands of analytic Marxists, structural Marxists, neo-Marxists, post-Marxists, eco-Marxists and so forth chose to recognize the correctness of the Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism and the Soviet Union, during or after the 1989–91 period. Not one of them, as far as I know, contacted us and said, “It turns out you were right.”

As the IC explained at the time, the disoriented and demoralized repudiation of socialism, in many cases, flowed from an unwillingness or inability to examine previous positions and perspectives. A good many who were eager to “abandon and curse Marxism” had no desire to confront the issues behind the demise of the Soviet Union.

The previous appeal of Stalinism and the other bureaucracies for these forces had not stemmed from a misunderstanding. For certain layers, to borrow Trotsky’s phrase, it is *always* “more convenient to lean on the bureaucracy than on the truth.” This is one of the dirty secrets of left-radical politics during the period in which the Stalinist apparatus, in particular, exerted great influence and also dispensed funds. Directly or indirectly, virtually the entire left milieu depended on bureaucracy, the Stalinists, social democracy or the trade unions. A professor or radical journalist or trade union official could eat well by attending the right conferences, writing reviews, delivering remarks, carrying out research and so on.

A small glimpse into Stalinist corruption: Michael David-Fox, in “Communism and Intellectuals” (2017), argues that the Moscow Stalinist regime’s “broader patterns of patronage”—including “outright economic incentives for intellectuals”—were “exported across state lines. A new form of transnational patronage emerged, in which institutions of the party-state charged with cultivating foreign intellectuals offered to favored or pro-Soviet figures such important tangible commodities ... as travel and translations, or more intangible goods such as the political prestige or access to information that might accrue from high-level Soviet ties. ... Soviet embassies, especially at first in European capitals with significant Soviet colonies such as Berlin, Prague, Paris, and London, became another vehicle.”

David North spoke about this phenomenon during the 10th Plenum of the ICFI in May 1990. He suggested that the petty-bourgeois left was moaning and groaning, but—at the heart of it—they were bemoaning the bureaucracy’s loss of control over the working class. These forces used to demand of the Trotskyists, “Where have you built anything? Where have you come to power?” Meanwhile, the Stalinists and their friends organized world peace conferences and world church conferences, seminars and festivals, where these forces did Moscow’s bidding, and this was where the big money was. “It was an international center of political prostitution,” David pointed out. “All of these people were nothing but [the Stalinists’] political pimps and they’re out of a job. That’s what they’re really moaning about.”

All this gnashing of teeth was rooted in the identification of socialism, in one way or another, with Stalinism. But, as the ICFI argued, Marxism had decades before exposed the unbridgeable conflict between the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the cause of world socialism.

In truth, the Marxists were publicly opposed to the policies of the Soviet

government for 68 of the 74 years of the latter’s existence. They were seriously persecuted for more than 60 years in the USSR, and ultimately the regime made every effort to exterminate its Marxist opponents down to the last man or woman. “We are not a government party; we are the party of irreconcilable opposition, not only in capitalist countries but also in the USSR,” Trotsky asserted in *The USSR in War* (1939).

Our party sought to prevent the restoration of capitalism, but the fact that Trotskyism recognized the possibility of such a course of events demonstrated that the continuing validity and soundness of the Marxist perspective was *not attached* to the physical existence and structure of the USSR.

But neither, of course, was it a case of simply soldiering on, unaltered and impervious, merely taking note of this or that name-change on the map. Organizations and individuals that proceeded in this manner, letting the events of 1989–91 roll off them like water off a duck’s back, or *pretending to*, in fact, inevitably absorbed the prevailing, bourgeois view of things to one degree or another. The ones who said “Nothing has happened of any significance—life goes on” were merely frightened of expressing or articulating, even to themselves, their own intense gloom and demoralization.

The 12th Plenum of the ICFI in March 1992 provided a rational, scientific and coherent analysis of the events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, based on the entire history of the Marxist movement, and offered a perspective for that movement’s future development.

David North’s opening report first established that the states organized in the Commonwealth of Independent States could no longer be defined as workers states. Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and the rest were based explicitly on the destruction of nationalized property and a commitment to capitalist private property. An era had come to end. The state created out of the first sustained effort by the working class to create a new society had ceased to exist. What were the implications of this transformation? What did it mean for the international working class and for the Fourth International?

Our movement insisted that world capitalism had not overcome, and could not overcome, its fundamental contradictions. In fact, the *objective* preconditions for socialism, the massive growth of the working class and the global integration of economic life, were far more developed than in 1917. Those general characteristics of economic life, as crucial as they were, did not exhaust the matter. There was also the question of the *subjective* preparedness of the working class to enter into a decisive struggle. The inability of the Soviet and Eastern European workers in 1989–91 to defend the surviving gains of the Russian Revolution and its extension had forcefully brought this problem home. (Introduction to *The Sky Between the Leaves*, David Walsh, 2013)

In other words, what of the subjective prerequisites for socialist revolution? Through what process would the *objective* impulses for the overthrow of capitalism find *subjective* expression in the consciousness of great numbers of workers?

After all that had come to pass in the 20th century and, most recently, what had tragically occurred in the Soviet Union, it was entirely legitimate for the IC to consider anew, with “fresh eyes”—and in a very intense and probing manner—those questions.

The struggle of 1982 to 1986 had prepared the IC, making possible a rebirth of classical Marxism, with its insistence that the masses must grasp “what is at stake” and be committed “body and soul” to the revolution, in the phrase of Frederick Engels.

How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism (1986) noted that “The great liberating ideas of Leon Trotsky are once again

firmly entrenched within the International Committee of the Fourth International.” *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (1988), in a critical passage, emphasized the struggle for principled socialist politics against the opportunists who “deny the necessity of any open struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. It is not necessary, they say, to patiently nourish the workers movement with the rich fruit of Marxist culture. Rather, it is enough to dish out a few simple demands which will supposedly entice the masses and lead them to socialist revolution without even being conscious of their ultimate destination.”

The reinforced understanding that the party needed to develop itself as the fighter for a socialist political culture in the working class became an important theme.

Discussions along these lines took place in the Workers League in the late 1980s. At Political Committee meetings in February and March 1989, for example, David North observed, “Comrades will often say that we’re building a revolutionary party ... what is this revolutionary party? ... We are fighting to build an international party of the international proletariat. That isn’t done with a few clever slogans. An enormous theoretical foundation must be built for such a movement to emerge, like the scaffolding of a skyscraper. A great deal of preparatory work must be done. ... The party must create the theoretical nourishment that will sustain and be worthy of a mass movement.” (February 12, 1989)

“What is it that separates us from everybody else in the final analysis? We oppose the bureaucracy. We fight for revolutionary consciousness in the working class. We fight ... for the political and cultural development of the working class.” (March 19, 1989)

The 12th plenum responded to the disaster in the USSR by examining the history of the workers movement and, in particular, its development in the decades leading up to 1917. The conquest of power by the Bolsheviks was not the fortuitous result of a particularly serious crisis in a tsarist Russia reeling and overwhelmed by war. Nor was it merely the product of the struggle for specific economic and political demands on the part of the Bolsheviks, as important as those were. Nor was the “level of political consciousness” that made the Revolution possible simply produced “between February and October 1917.”

This was the first critical point:

The October Revolution didn’t fall from the sky. It was the positive culmination of the class struggle as an objective historical process and the political development of the international workers movement.

The Revolution was the outcome of the immense growth in the political consciousness of the international working class in the decades that followed the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and especially in the aftermath of the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. The most advanced expression of that growth during the 46 years that separated the Commune in Paris from the triumph of the Bolshevik-led Soviets in Russia was the founding and rise of the Second International in 1889 and the emergence of mass socialist parties, including the SPD in Germany.

The report went on: “One might say that the development of Marxism and the development of the masses as a conscious political force are what gave the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century its unique characteristics.”

David North provided the striking example—which has surely stayed with anyone who first encountered the report some 27 years ago—of “a Parisian worker ... born in the year of the February Revolution and the

bloody days of 1848, who later participated as a young man in the struggle of the Paris Commune in 1871, and was only 41 by the time the Second International had been founded, [and who] could still have lived to see the conquest of power by the Russian working class in 1917 without having yet reached his seventieth birthday.”

But what of the 70-year period preceding the date of the 12th Plenum, that is, from the early 1920s to the early 1990s? What of an equivalent worker born in 1923 in any major city, what had he or she experienced?

The report noted that the October Revolution inspired a wave of revolutionary struggles in the immediate post-World War I period, but those were beaten back due to the betrayals of the social democratic parties. Those losses and reverses worsened and extended the isolation of the Soviet state, strengthening the tendencies toward bureaucracy, which in turn, thanks to Stalinist policies, produced even more disastrous, world-historic defeats in Britain, China, Germany, France, Spain and elsewhere.

The Left Opposition fought this process at every step of the way, from 1923 onward. Trotsky provided brilliant, incisive analyses of the Stalinist degeneration. Ultimately, as we know, the betrayals of the Soviet bureaucracy, including its mass annihilations of Marxists in the late 1930s, “prevented the victory of the working class in Europe and crippled the international Marxist movement.”

The events of 1991 were a historical condemnation of the entire counter-revolutionary Stalinist system, including its “theoretical” justifications and national-opportunist politics, above all, socialism in one country. The Stalinist apparatuses still existing in 1991, Communist Parties and trade unions with millions of members, ended up in a heap of rubble. The Stalinist organizations had been reduced to a wreckage of their own making.

However, to the extent that the working class was trapped by the politics of the bureaucracy, it suffered the consequences of these criminal policies. In a 2001 study, economist Steven Rosefielde calculated there were 3.4 million premature deaths in Russia from 1990 to 1998 alone, which he partly blames on capitalist “shock therapy,” unlike anything outside the conditions of a world war.

One of Stalinism’s terrible crimes was that it had so thoroughly discredited socialism that sections of workers believed they would have better conditions under capitalism. The ICFI understood that the counterrevolutionary danger could not be averted simply on the basis of the spontaneous movement of the working class—and there *was* enormous opposition to wealth inequality, privatizations and pro-capitalist measures in a society such as the USSR where, despite the bureaucracy, as a 1988 study argued, “people ... for decades have been educated with the ideals of socialist justice.”

Insofar as surveys are indicative, there is widespread scepticism [in the USSR] about unregulated markets in capital and labour. ... The analysis concludes that a Western-style market economy (capitalism) has ‘only 25–30 percent support. The majority, while not opposed to private property, want to keep it on a strictly limited scale. In January 1990 an all-Union poll on attitudes towards key terms found a 61 percent “pro” (17 percent “con”) response to the term “socialism” as opposed to a 34 percent “pro” (38 percent “con”) response to “capitalism.” (“A Future for Socialism in the USSR?,” Justin Schwartz, 1991)

It was one thing, however, for Russian workers to be generally hostile to the threats to their jobs and conditions and even a “market economy” as a whole, it was another for them to actively oppose the restoration of capitalism on the basis of a worked-out international socialist program, and fight for the destruction of the Stalinist bureaucracy in a political

revolution and the creation of workers councils, reflecting the needs of the wide layers of the population. For that, a section of the ICFI would have been necessary. Given the circumstances, that could not be accomplished in time.

The restoration of capitalism in the USSR, the 12th Plenum report argued, was “the culmination of the protracted decay and degeneration of all the organizations of the working class.”

In other words, the 70 years from 1847 to 1917, the partial life-span of our Parisian, socialist-minded worker, were characterized, albeit with many contradictions “by an immense growth of the revolutionary self-consciousness of the masses that finally found its highest expression in the Russian Revolution.” On the other hand, the politics of the post-World War II period, in particular, was rooted in the domination of the working class by bureaucracy. It was, all in all, a “period of stagnation, degeneration and decay,” although Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel and the Pabloites attempted to provide legitimacy and even a progressive role to the Stalinists, social democrats and every other dominant existing leadership.

In 1991 or 1992, the same Sheila Torrance, a leading member of the pre-split WRP as Gerry Healy’s organizational assistant, and a co-thinker of hers, Martin Booth, ridiculed the Workers League’s effort to confront the difficulties revealed by the inability of the Soviet and Eastern European working class to prevent the reintroduction of the capitalist market.

The Workers League had taken note of the fact, in a perspectives resolution, that “the disintegration of the Stalinist regimes has proceeded much more rapidly than the development of revolutionary consciousness in the proletariat.” Torrance and Booth demanded indignantly, “How is revolutionary consciousness supposed to develop outside of the actual struggle of the working class to overthrow its oppressor...?”

The heart of their position, that “revolutionary consciousness” could be nothing more than the expression of the spontaneous movement of the working class, was false and was contradicted by the historical development of Marxism, epitomized by Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), and the unfolding of the 1917 Revolution in Russia. This was the entire point, as the 12th Plenum report explained: “The level of political consciousness that made the October Revolution possible was *not* produced simply between February and October 1917. It was the outcome of the protracted historical struggle for Marxism in the European and Russian working class that had spanned the previous 70 years.

If one wished to understand why the Soviet workers had *not* risen up to defend whatever remained of the conquests of 1917, one had to take into account that the previous nearly seven decades had “been characterized by relentless assaults upon the political consciousness of the masses. Stalinism set out to destroy the greatest conquest of Marxism: the development of the revolutionary political consciousness of the working class, the transformation of an oppressed and exploited mass into a conscious historical force.”

In fact, the greatest defeat brought about and imposed by Stalinism was the wholesale destruction of the revolutionary cadre, the physical destruction of the Marxists in the USSR and everywhere else the KGB could get hold of them, the deep demoralization and disorientation that resulted, and the terrible *overall lowering* of the level of working class political consciousness on a world scale.

Again, the 12th Plenum pointed forcefully to the political instability of world capitalism and the general implications of the conflict between the global development of the productive forces and the nation-state system. Indeed, the demise of the autarkic Eastern European and Soviet regimes was a confirmation of the IC’s perspective. The Stalinist-run states were the first victims of the global integration of the productive forces. The collapse of those states expressed the breakdown of the postwar order and the onset of a new revolutionary crisis.

However, the ability of the Fourth International to exploit the possibilities raised by the world crisis depends to a great extent upon our ability to understand and assimilate the lessons of the entire historical period through which we’ve passed and, on that basis, to precisely define the tasks which we confront in the present situation. It falls upon the Fourth International, led by the International Committee, to reestablish within the working class the great political culture of Marxism.

Gerry Healy of the SLL-WRP had made the mistake of adopting an uncritical attitude toward the spontaneous struggles of the working class. But the development of the Marxist party as a powerful, in fact, ultimately *decisive* factor in the class struggle depends on our ability to politically educate a significant layer of workers in a scientific approach to history, above all the entire history of the Russian Revolution, Stalinism and Trotsky’s struggle for the Fourth International, as well as contemporary events.

The following passage might sum up one of the themes of this school itself and its reason for being:

The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historical setting for a truly revolutionary situation. Only when we grasp this distinction between the general objective basis of the revolutionary movement and the complex political, social and cultural process through which it becomes a dominant historical force is it possible to understand the significance of our historical struggle against Stalinism and to see the tasks that are posed to us today.

The 12th Plenum report placed immense stress on historical clarification as a crucial element in overcoming the confusion and false consciousness in the international working class “rooted in previous historical experiences through which masses have passed,” experiences they were not able to assimilate without the intervention of the party. The greatest lie used to disorient vast numbers of people was the identification of Stalinism with Marxism.

In fact, no political force in history had had such a devastating impact on the progressive development of humanity as Stalinism. The scale of the human destruction is almost unimaginable. “By 1937 1,000 Communists a day were being shot in Moscow.” They were given 10- or 15-minute trials, taken out and shot in the back of the neck. These were revolutionists, socialists, theoreticians who had given their lives to the revolution. Not only the flower of Marxist culture but its roots were obliterated.

It would be impossible to underestimate the intellectual, political and cultural destruction. We live to this day with the need to overcome the consequences of this damage.

Stalin was attempting to destroy the most dangerous social element on the planet, the conscious head, the brain of the working class. He well understood the threat, as Vadim Rogovin has demonstrated.

Marxism in Russia had deep roots and a dense, intense history. Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism, in addition to the immense influence of Marx and Engels, learned from the great radical thinkers such as Chernyshevsky, Herzen and Belinsky. The Russian Marxists undertook the education of the emerging working class from the 1890s and it was this Marxist-formed working class that made the Russian Revolution. The

immense prestige of Lenin and Trotsky among workers did not derive from their personal appeal or oratorical skills. They represented something in the historical development of the working class, the revolutionary tendency, and tens of thousands of workers had been politically educated by them and carefully followed their ideas and program.

Stalin and his accomplices set out to physically liquidate all that. “When a Trotskyist worker was found inside a factory, the KGB shot not only this individual, but every other worker in his department.”

The ICFI was charged with the responsibility of documenting the mass murder organized by the Soviet regime and discrediting the false and cynical identification of Stalinism with Marxism.

At the very center of this exposure must be the opening of the record of the Moscow Trials, the purges and the assassination of Trotsky ... When we speak of a campaign to uncover the historical truth, we see this as a task that benefits not only the working class in the narrow sense, but all of progressive humanity. What happened in the Lubyanka [prison] is the concern of all of struggling mankind. Exposing the crimes of Stalinism is an essential part of overcoming the damage they caused to the development of social and political thought.

The ICFI has pursued that effort without let-up.

The report spoke about rebuilding the international socialist culture severely damaged by Stalinism. That was a phrase we used frequently at the time. If we don't use it so much now, I believe it's simply because this notion has entered the party's bone and marrow.

But what do we mean by “the political culture of Marxism” or the “cultural development of the working class”?

Socialist culture is all that has been organized, built, written, assimilated and achieved with the conscious aim of assisting workers to grasp their objective position in capitalist society and their collective role as a force for socialist revolution, and to transform themselves from mere fodder for exploitation to the makers of history and the liberators of humanity.

The socialist movement since the late 19th century has striven to enlarge and expand the political and social outlook of the working class. All of the writings, practices and institutions produced in that struggle constitute elements of socialist culture. August Bebel, in the conclusion to *Woman and Socialism*, wrote that “the Socialist movement, especially with its literature, its newspapers, its societies and meetings, its parliamentary representation and its constantly practiced criticism on all fields of public life, has considerably raised the intellectual level of the masses.” We know that the activity of the SPD in Germany was rife with contradictions, but Bebel was no doubt correct.

At the summit of socialist culture stand the works of Marx— *Capital*, above all—the dissection of the laws of movement of capitalist society. And there are the other works by Marx and Engels on philosophy and economics, *The Communist Manifesto*, *Wage Labor and Capital*, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, *Anti-Dühring*, the historical works on the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune. There are the many irreplaceable, scientific works by Lenin, the monumental, incredibly contemporary writings of Trotsky, works by Trotskyist leaders such as James P. Cannon, and the more recent works published by the IC, *The Heritage We Defend* and *The Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Rogovin's work, Voronsky's essays. The documents of this movement, the material on the WSWS. A vast political-cultural structure and framework. This school and other activities like it are essential elements of socialist culture.

Another element of socialist culture is its attitude and relationship to artistic culture. The 12th Plenum Report inspired these paragraphs in the Introduction to *The Sky Between the Leaves*:

The growth of socialist consciousness was not only the product of the struggle for specific economic and political demands. The development of art and culture—through the work of writers, painters, musicians (often, but not always, partial to socialism) and the Marxist critics who appraised their efforts—played an immense role in shaping and broadening the outlook of the working class, of sharpening its awareness of the injustices of capitalism, strengthening and refining the workers' outrage and willingness to sacrifice and making more ardent their belief and confidence in the possibility of realizing socialism and building a society based on genuine social equality and solidarity.

Socialism required a cultural awakening among a significant section of the working class ... This awakening, however, did not occur independently of the efforts of the revolutionary party. Rather, it is the party—the most conscious section of the working class—that leads the fight for this development. The intellectual essence of socialist consciousness is a critical revolutionary attitude to the existing social relations and every-day political assumptions and concepts as they emerge and find “spontaneous” expression in bourgeois society. (Introduction to *The Sky Between the Leaves*)

This has to be seen in the context of the struggle for the general political-cultural development of the working class in opposition to capitalism, not as some effort to create an artistic-cultural haven within the existing society. The working class is forced to overthrow bourgeois society for the very reason that society does not allow it access to culture. The working class is economically oppressed—Trotsky explained in *Literature and Revolution*—and its “whole process of self-determination ... assumes an intensely one-sided, revolutionary and political character and reaches its highest expression” in the revolutionary party. Trotsky explained to a French writer on another occasion, “The task of the proletariat is not to create a new culture within capitalism, but rather to overthrow capitalism for a new culture.”

Our preoccupation, because it is the key to the development of this party as a revolutionary party, is with the political and historical education and preparation of our membership, the most advanced section of the working class, and of wider and wider sections of workers and young people in every part of the world.

Only this movement has the political vision and moral authority, as the 12th Plenum report argued, to carry out this work. This series of classes, the discussions we are having this week, demonstrate the ongoing determination of this movement to “leave no stone unturned” to establish historical truth and strengthen the foundation for a renaissance of Marxism in the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact