

Introduction to the Turkish language edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*

Leon Trotsky's four fateful years in Prinkipo: 1929-1933

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This is the author's preface to the newly-published Turkish edition of In Defense of Leon Trotsky by David North. The english edition is available from Mehring Books.

There is a certain historical justice at work, however belated, in the publication of a Turkish-language edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*. Just over ninety years ago, in February 1929, Trotsky, accompanied by his wife Natalia Sedova, arrived in Turkey as a political exile from the Soviet Union. He had already spent a year in internal exile in Alma Ata in Kazakhstan, where he had been consigned following his expulsion from the Soviet Communist Party on November 14, 1927. But despite the remoteness of Alma Ata, Trotsky was able to give political direction to the Left Opposition, which he had led since 1923. His withering critiques of the domestic and international policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy continued to circulate throughout the Soviet Union.

Unable to answer Trotsky with principled arguments, Stalin was determined to silence him. The Politburo sent a representative of the GPU, the Soviet secret police, to demand that Trotsky end his oppositional activity and sever contact with his supporters. If he refused to accept this ultimatum, the GPU warned Trotsky that it would “be obliged to alter the conditions of your existence to the extent of completely isolating you from political life. In this connection, the question of changing your place of residence will arise.” [1] In a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, dated December 16, 1928, Trotsky replied defiantly to the ultimatum:

To demand that I renounce my political activity is to demand that I renounce the struggle for the interests of the international proletariat, a struggle that I have been conducting without interruption for thirty-two years, that is, throughout my whole conscious life. The attempt to represent this activity as “counterrevolutionary” comes from those whom I accuse before the international proletariat of trampling underfoot the basic teachings of Marx and Lenin, of infringing upon the historical interests of the world revolution, of breaking with the traditions and heritage of October, and of unconsciously—but therefore the more dangerously—preparing the way for Thermidor.

To renounce political activity would mean to give up the struggle against the blindness of the present leadership, which heaps upon the objective difficulties of socialist construction ever greater political difficulties that arise out of its opportunist inability to conduct a proletarian policy on a large historical scale.

It would mean renouncing the struggle against the stifling party

regime, which reflects the growing pressure of the enemy classes upon the proletarian vanguard.

It would mean passively acquiescing in the economic policy of opportunism, a policy which is undermining and destroying the foundations of the proletarian dictatorship, hampering the material and cultural growth of this dictatorship, and at the same time dealing heavy blows to the alliance of workers and working peasants, the basis of Soviet power. [2]

Trotsky contrasted the stature and role of the ruling bureaucracy to that of the Left Opposition:

The incurable weakness of the reaction headed by the party apparatus, despite all its apparent power, lies in the fact that it does not know what it is doing. It is carrying out the command of the enemy classes. There can be no greater historical curse on a faction that arose out of the revolution and is now undermining it.

The great historical strength of the Opposition, despite its apparent weakness, lies in the fact that it keeps its fingers on the pulse of the world historical process, that it clearly perceives the dynamics of class forces, that it foresees the future and consciously prepares for it. To renounce political activity would be to renounce the preparations for tomorrow. [3]

Political conditions then existing in the Soviet Union had not yet reached the point where Stalin could murder Trotsky. Several more years of the bureaucratic regime's political degeneration and unrelenting resort to repression were required before Stalin could stage the Moscow Trials and carry out the physical annihilation of the Trotskyist opposition and hundreds of thousands of Marxist revolutionaries. In 1929, Stalin had to limit his political vengeance to the physical expulsion of Trotsky from the Soviet Union. He calculated that Trotsky, once deported from the Soviet Union and isolated from his network of supporters, would be effectively silenced. Deriving his own power from the resources of the party and state bureaucracy, Stalin underestimated Trotsky's capacity to exert political influence, even under conditions of extreme isolation, through the power of his ideas.

The formal decision to deport Trotsky was taken by the GPU, on January 18, 1929. Two days later, when he was asked to sign an official document confirming that he had been informed of the deportation order,

Trotsky wrote: “The decision of the GPU, criminal in substance and illegal in form, has been announced to me, January 20, 1929.” A lengthy journey by train from Central Asia to the port city of Odessa commenced. Then he and Sedova were placed on a steamer *Ilyich* for the voyage into the Bosphorus. On February 12, Trotsky and Natalia arrived in Turkey. Before disembarking, Trotsky gave to the police who had boarded the ship the following message for transmission to President Kemal Atatürk:

Dear Sir: At the gate of Constantinople, I have the honor to inform you that I have arrived at the Turkish frontier not of my own choice, and that I cross this frontier only by submitting to force. I request you, Mr. President, to accept my appropriate sentiments. L. Trotsky [4]

Thus, began Trotsky’s final period of exile, which was to last eleven and a half years until his assassination in Mexico, in August 1940.

Following his arrival in Turkey, two months were to pass until Trotsky and Natalia were transferred to the island of Prinkipo. Except for a period of approximately nine months, between March 1931 and January 1932, when they temporarily relocated to the coastal town of Kadıköy, they lived on the island. The four and a half years in Turkey, from his arrival in February 1929 until his departure for France in July 1933, must be considered among the most significant of Trotsky’s life.

In lines that he wrote just before his exile in Turkey came to an end, Trotsky described Prinkipo as “an island of peace and forgetfulness.” [5] But the exiled revolutionary had little peace, nor was he inclined to forget the lessons that he had learned in the course of the tumultuous events in which he had played so brilliant a role. During his years in Prinkipo, which he fondly referred to as “a fine place to work with a pen,” [6] Trotsky wrote two literary masterpieces—as they can be justly described, both from the standpoint of content and form: his autobiography, *My Life*, and the three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*.

But these great works do not encompass the scope of Trotsky’s writings. Despite the remoteness of his island exile, to which newspapers and mail traveled at a glacial pace, Trotsky managed to follow and respond to world events with extraordinary acuity. The quality of his commentary leaves no doubt that Trotsky’s grasp of international geopolitics was unequaled by any of his contemporaries. He remained the greatest strategist of world socialist revolution.

The years between 1929 and 1933 were among the most consequential of the twentieth century. During these four years the capitalist system was overtaken by an economic catastrophe. The crash on Wall Street in October 1929 set into motion a global crisis that placed the survival of the capitalist system in question. The collapse of industrial production and massive rise in unemployment throughout North America and Europe led to a political radicalization of the working class. Confronted with the growing threat of socialist revolution, powerful sections of the capitalist elites looked to fascism for political salvation. It is among the greatest tragedies in history that at precisely the point when the world capitalist system was confronted with a massive systemic breakdown, the revolutionary potential of the working class was fatally undermined by the treachery, disorientation and sheer incompetence of its mass organizations.

The political epicenter of the crisis of world capitalism was located in Germany, 2,000 kilometers from Prinkipo. The brutal impact of the world depression transformed Hitler’s Nazi Party into a mass organization. Despite the danger posed by the rapid growth of fascism, the German working class was paralyzed by the policies of the Social Democratic and Communist parties. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) remained hopelessly tied to the discredited Weimar regime, ruling out any

politically independent struggle by the working class against the Nazi threat. The challenge that confronted the German Communist Party (KPD), as Trotsky insisted, was to fight for the broadest social and political mobilization of the working class against Hitler by calling for a united front with the SPD. Instead, the KPD, applying the directives of the Stalinized Third International (Comintern), categorically rejected all proposals for a United Front against fascism. [7] The KPD labeled the SPD “social-fascist,” thereby claiming that there existed no fundamental difference between the Nazi party and the Social Democracy.

Trotsky’s analysis of the counter-revolutionary dynamic of fascism and his critique of the disastrous trajectory of the Stalinist “Third Period” ultraleftism testify to his extraordinary political foresight. “Trotsky maintained during Hitler’s rise to power,” the late British historian E. H. Carr has written, “so persistent and, for the most part, so prescient a commentary on the course of events in Germany as to deserve record.” [8] As early as September 26, 1930, nearly two and a half years before Hitler was lifted into power by a clique of bourgeois political conspirators, Trotsky warned: “*Fascism in Germany has become a real danger*, as an acute expression of the helpless position of the bourgeois regime, and the accumulated powerlessness of the Communist Party to abolish it. Whoever denies this is either blind or a braggart.” [9]

One year later, Trotsky completed an essay, dated November 26, 1931, with the title: “Germany, the key to the international situation.”

The economic and political contradictions have here reached unprecedented acuteness. The solution is approaching. The moment has come when the prerevolutionary situation must be transformed into the revolutionary or—the counterrevolutionary. On the direction in which the solution of the German crisis develops will depend not only the fate of Germany herself (and that is already a great deal), but also the fate of Europe, the destiny of the entire world, for many years to come.” [10]

Trotsky foresaw with chilling precision the consequences of a Nazi victory:

The coming to power of the National Socialists would mean first of all the extermination of the flower of the German proletariat, the destruction of its organizations, the eradication of its belief in itself and in its future. Considering the far greater maturity and acuteness of the social contradictions in Germany, the hellish work of Italian fascism would probably appear as a pale and almost humane experiment in comparison with the work of the German National Socialists. [11]

To read these words today, knowing how fully and tragically they were to be confirmed by events in virtually every detail, is a painful experience. One cannot help but reflect on how many tens of millions of lives would have been saved, how much human suffering would have been averted, and how different the future course of twentieth century history would have been had the warnings of Trotsky been heeded!

There remain to this day countless petty-bourgeois academics, pretending to be historians, who claim that the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky was merely a struggle for individual power; and that the victory of Trotsky and the Left Opposition over the Stalinist faction would not have had a significant impact on the development of the Soviet Union, world politics, and the fate of socialism. But such claims are clearly refuted by the consequences of the Stalinist policies, opposed by Trotsky,

which cleared the path for the victory of Nazism in 1933. Even if all other political issues are set aside and ignored—which, of course, they cannot be—the German catastrophe reveals the world historical implications of the struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism.

The Nazi victory in January 1933 marked a critical turning point in the history of the Trotskyist movement. Since the founding of the Left Opposition, Trotsky's political objective had been to bring about the reform of the Russian Communist Party and the Communist International (*Comintern*). This was the principled strategy that guided the International Left Opposition following Trotsky's deportation from the Soviet Union and the first four years of his exile in Prinkipo. But the defeat in Germany demanded a reconsideration of the International Left Opposition's policy of reforming the Communist International and its national sections.

In the months that followed Hitler's victory, Trotsky waited to see if any criticism of the policies pursued by Stalin would emerge from any of the parties of the *Comintern*. On April 7, 1933 the Communist International unequivocally endorsed the policies of the KPD, which, it declared, "was completely correct up to and during Hitler's coup d'état." [12] Trotsky concluded that a new course was necessary. In the last major political statement written before he left Prinkipo, dated July 15, 1933, Trotsky called for a break with the Comintern and the building of a new International. Two days later, having finally received visas to enter France, Trotsky and Natalia boarded a ship bound for Marseilles. "For better or worse," Trotsky noted in his diary, "the chapter called 'Prinkipo' is ended." [13]

The essays contained in this book were written between 2001 and 2012. They are divided into four parts. The first part consists of two lectures that review Trotsky's extraordinary role in the history of the twentieth century and the undiminished relevance of his life struggles and ideas.

The last three parts consist of extended replies to three biographies by English historians, published between 2003 and 2009, that set out to discredit Trotsky. The methods employed by these academics consisted of distortions, falsifications, and cynically constructed half-truths. As Professors Swain, Thatcher and Service never attempted to reply to my exposure of their intellectual charlatanism, there are no new arguments that need to be examined and refuted.

Nearly a decade has passed since the publication of the first English-language edition of this book. The second edition, upon which this translation is based, was published in 2013. We are now approaching the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, whose shoulders are already sagging beneath the weight of intractable global crises. The same maladies that afflicted capitalism in the last century—social inequality, militarism, and the breakdown of democracy—are the dominant features of the contemporary world. In Germany, fascism is making a comeback. And eighty years after the outbreak of World War II, imperialist and interstate conflicts are leading inexorably to another global conflagration.

The words with which Trotsky defined the great challenge of modern history resonate as if they were written today:

All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet "ripened" for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only "ripened"; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. [14]

objective events would lead inevitably to a resurgence of interest in the life and ideas of Trotsky. This unstoppable process finds particularly gratifying expression in the fact that this volume has been translated into the Turkish language by the comrades of *Sosyalist E?itlik*, who are working in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International. Thanks to their efforts, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* will now be available in the country that gave shelter to the great Marxist revolutionary.

David North

Detroit

September 21, 2019

Footnotes:

[1] Leon Trotsky, *My Life* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931], pp. 558–59

[2] Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1928-29)* [New York: Pathfinder, 1981], pp. 458–59

[3] *Ibid*, p. 461

[4] *My Life*, pp. 565–66

[5] "Farewell to Prinkipo," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932-33* [New York: Pathfinder, 1972], p. 361

[6] *Ibid*

[7] A "united front" is a principled political agreement between mass working-class parties and organizations to collaborate in a struggle against fascism and other counterrevolutionary forces. It is not to be confused with a "popular front," which is an unprincipled subordination of working-class parties and organizations to parties of the capitalist class, in the name of defending bourgeois democracy. Trotsky vehemently opposed such alliances, which entail the renunciation of socialist revolution.

[8] *The Twilight of the Comintern 1930-1935* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 433

[9] "The Turn in the Communist International," in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* [New York: Pathfinder, 1971], p. 78

[10] *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p. 156

[11] *Ibid*, p. 160

[12] *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p. 487

[13] *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932-33]*, p. 368

[14] *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm#op>]



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When the essays in this book were being written, I was convinced that