

David North introduces Turkish-language edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* at Istanbul Book Fair

Our reporter

11 November 2019

On Sunday, David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party of the United States, addressed a Turkish audience at the Tüyap International İstanbul Book Fair, live via video conference.

North was introducing the Turkish-language edition of his book, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, which has just been published by Mehring Yayınları (Mehring Books). Mehring Yayınları held a stall at the book fair to announce the publication of five works by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), including *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, also by North, *Why Are They Back?*, by Christoph Vandreier, *Why Study the Russian Revolution?*, by the ICFI, and *1968: The General Strike and the Student Revolt in France*, by Peter Schwartz.

North's speech, which was translated live into Turkish, is published in its entirety below. Afterwards, he was able to directly respond to questions from the Istanbul audience. Audience members asked North to elaborate on the perspective of the Trotskyist movement in relation to countries of a belated capitalist development, and to speak on how the fight for socialism needs to be conducted in the working class in the United States.

In response to the latter question, North declared that it was impossible to have “a realistic understanding of the world situation today,” or “elaborate revolutionary strategy in any country, if you fail to recognize that the center of the crisis of world capitalism is in the United States.” The American working class, he noted, “is potentially a massive revolutionary force,” while the crisis of American imperialism underlay its explosive eruption of military aggression over the last thirty years. “The invasion of Iraq; the bloody interventions throughout the Middle East, in Libya, in Syria; the threats against Iran; the involvement in endless attempts to destabilize country after country; all arise from a desperate attempt to offset its economic decline through the reckless, and ever-more brutal use of military power,” he said.

North pointed to the growing signs of political radicalization and social struggles by American workers and youth and the growing support for socialism. “We believe that our responsibility, as revolutionists in the United States, is to fight against the pernicious influence of nationalism, and explain to the American workers that they must view the working class of other countries as their brothers and sisters, identify with and support the progressive struggles of workers and youth all over the world, and see them as their own,” he said.

“We believe that the revolutionary movement of the present world is composed of interconnected struggles. There is no country that is an island. Economy is globalized. Politics is globalized. The class struggle is globalized. The greatest source of optimism that we can have today in the future of socialism is that the concept of world socialist revolution acquires a tremendous actuality. The fact that I can address you today,

utilizing this technology, shows the potential that exists to effect the unification of the international working class, on the basis of Trotskyist, Marxist theory.”

Speech by David North introducing *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*

I am honored to present *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* at the Istanbul Book Fair. This occasion resonates with history. Just over ninety years ago, in February 1929, Trotsky arrived in Istanbul as a political exile. He had been expelled from the Soviet Union, on account of his refusal to abandon the political struggle that he had waged since 1923, as the leader of the Left Opposition, against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Communist Party, the Third International, and the Soviet regime headed by Stalin. The four years that Trotsky spent in exile in Turkey, living for most of that time on the Island of Prinkipo, were among the most significant and productive of his life. Between 1929 and 1933, Trotsky produced two literary masterworks: his autobiography, *My Life*, and his monumental three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*.

But these works hardly encompassed the full scope of his political activity. Despite his physical isolation, on an island located 1,700 kilometers from Berlin, Trotsky's analysis of the political crisis in Germany and his efforts to rouse the working class against the rising threat of Nazism, not only were unequalled in their time, but still remain the essential theoretical and strategic foundation for the contemporary struggle against the resurgence of fascism. And it was during the final months of his exile in Turkey that Trotsky—in the aftermath of the Stalinist betrayal that led to the victory of Hitler in January 1933—issued his call for the building of the Fourth International.

In July 1933, Trotsky departed Turkey. During the remaining years of his life—as his exile continued in France, Norway and, finally, Mexico—the fight for the Fourth International was the central focus of Trotsky's work. The political perspective that underlay his unrelenting concentration on this historic project was explained concisely by Trotsky, in the opening sentence of the programmatic document that he prepared for the founding congress of the Fourth International in September 1938: “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.”

Trotsky explained that the world capitalist system was beset by a crisis. “Mankind's productive forces stagnate,” he wrote.

“Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social

crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another.”

Trotsky presented in the starkest—and most accurate—terms the alternatives that confronted humanity: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.” But how was the victory of socialism to be secured? How was the objective potential for socialism to be realized? This required the creation of the essential subjective conditions for the victory of the working class, that is, the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution. “The historical crisis of mankind,” Trotsky wrote, “is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.”

This historical background is necessary to understand the political context out of which the book that is being presented today, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, emerged. Trotsky was assassinated by an agent of the Soviet secret police, then known as the GPU, in August 1940. His death was the political culmination of the Great Terror, launched by Stalin and his criminal henchmen against the entire generation of Marxist intellectuals and workers who had secured the victory of the October 1917 Revolution.

The Terror had been prepared and was accompanied by a campaign of historical falsification of monstrous and almost unfathomable dimensions. In order to politically legitimize the bureaucratic regime, justify its repudiation of the principles of the October Revolution, and cover up its betrayals of the working class, Stalin was compelled to falsify every aspect of the history of the Russian Revolution and to distort, beyond recognition, Marxism as the theoretical foundation of socialist revolution.

The central target of the Stalin School of Historical Falsification was Trotsky. The assault on Trotsky’s place in the Russian Revolution was driven by two fundamental considerations. First, an accurate account of Trotsky’s practical contribution to the victory of the October 1917 Revolution and the defeat of the counter-revolution in the Civil War of 1918–21, was incompatible with the narrative required by the Stalinist bureaucracy to justify its usurpation of political power.

Second, Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution—which provided the strategic foundation of the Bolshevik conquest of power in 1917 and the internationalist perspective of world socialist revolution advanced by the new Soviet regime—was diametrically opposed to the reactionary nationalist program of “socialism in one country,” advanced by Stalin after Lenin’s death in 1924.

Therefore, the entire political and ideological legitimacy of the Stalinist regime and its associated parties throughout the world, depended upon upholding the falsification of Trotsky’s ideas and actions. Even after Stalin’s death in March 1953, his successors were unable to repudiate the lies that were used to criminalize Trotsky and Trotskyism. In his “Secret Speech” of February 1956, at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s crimes excluded any acknowledgment of Trotsky’s true role in the history of the Soviet Union. The edifice of anti-Trotskyist lies was kept intact.

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and initiated his policy of Glasnost (“Openness”), 45 years had passed since the assassination of Trotsky. The bureaucracy allowed access to state archives containing a mass of documents that established, irrefutably, the criminal character of the Moscow Trials and the Stalinist regime’s homicidal persecution of Trotskyists. But the Gorbachev regime still refused to sanction the rehabilitation of Trotsky.

Since the 1920s, the Stalinist bureaucracy had branded Trotsky as an agent of imperialism bent on the destruction of the Soviet Union. As late as November 1987, Gorbachev denounced Trotsky as “an excessively self-assured politician who always vacillated and cheated;” and praised Stalin

for having “safeguarded Leninism in an ideological struggle” against Trotskyism. This vicious attack on Trotsky and Trotskyism was delivered by the cynical and hypocritical general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party even as he was implementing his pro-market perestroika and clearing the way for the restoration of capitalism and the liquidation of the Soviet Union.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union had so completely vindicated Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism that it might have seemed reasonable to expect that the lies of the Soviet bureaucracy would finally be consigned to the dustbin of history; that there would be a new and honest assessment of Trotsky’s place in Soviet and world history, and that the political farsightedness and moral stature of his struggle to liberate Marxism and socialism from the perversions introduced by Stalinism would be, at long last, forthrightly and generously acknowledged.

But nothing of the sort was to take place. The end of the USSR was followed almost immediately by a new international campaign against Trotsky and Trotskyism. The Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification rapidly emerged, producing works that amalgamated the old lies of the Stalinist bureaucracy with the traditional Cold War anti-communist narrative of right-wing historians in the West.

The teaching of history does not take place in a political, let alone moral vacuum. In the politically reactionary and intellectually demoralized environment that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the quest for a successful academic career trumped the defense of historical truth. The Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification made many recruits. In a period of intellectual backsliding, as Trotsky said so well, the force of political reaction not only conquers. It also convinces.

But the question remains: What political necessity was served by the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification? Why was there any particular need for lies about Soviet history and the role of Leon Trotsky? Had not the dissolution of the Soviet Union discredited and disproved Marxism, Bolshevism and the perspective of socialist revolution? Had not the “End of History” arrived?

The claim that the October Revolution and the entire socialist project were doomed to failure was based on one central assumption: that the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 followed inexorably from the 1917 Revolution. Or, to state the argument somewhat differently: Stalinism was the inevitable product of Marxism and Bolshevism. There was no alternative to the Stalinist regime.

But the struggle of Trotsky and the Left Opposition is the historical refutation of the argument that there was no alternative to Stalinism.

Unable to deal honestly with the historical and political implications of the Trotskyist opposition—that is, to admit that the victory of the Left Opposition over the Stalinists would have placed the Soviet Union and the world socialist movement on a very different and progressive (i.e., revolutionary socialist) trajectory—the reactionaries required lies to cover over the contradictions, gaps and flaws in their arguments.

Their falsifications took various forms. Some claimed that the Trotskyist opposition in the Soviet Union was insignificant and posed no threat to Stalin. Others argued that Trotsky’s differences with Stalin were of no particular importance, and that their conflict was merely a power struggle between two ambitious men. And others asserted that Trotsky, had he remained in power, would have been worse than Stalin.

The dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union initially inspired a wave of giddy triumphalism within the ruling elite. The specter of socialism had at last been vanquished. But as the years passed and the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, the persistence of international geopolitical tensions, domestic political crises, global economic instability and clear indications of rising social discontent, raised doubts within bourgeois academic circles about the finality of capitalism’s victory.

Was there not a danger that socialism would reemerge and acquire a

mass constituency in the working class? But what form would this take? What vision of socialism, distinct from the discredited dogmas of Stalinism, might emerge to inspire the working class and youth?

It was in this new atmosphere of growing uncertainty that the specter of Leon Trotsky began to haunt the ruling elites. They recalled the enormous political and intellectual impact of the publication, a half-century earlier, of Isaac Deutscher's monumental three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky—*The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast*—on the generation of youth who were radicalized in the 1960s. Was it not possible that Trotsky's vision of world socialist revolution would inspire workers and youth radicalized by the deepening crisis of contemporary twenty-first century capitalism?

This fear gave rise to a new genre of pseudo-history. The doctrine of preemptive war, embraced by imperialist strategists, found its academic counterpart in the writing of what can best be described as preemptive biographies. This involved the intellectually corrupt and dishonest use of the biographical format to discredit a historical personality.

This was precisely the purpose of the biographies of Trotsky written by three British historians—Professors Geoffrey Swain, Ian Thatcher and Robert Service—that were published between 2003 and 2009. As I wrote in the Introduction to the first edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, “the biographies make a travesty of the historical record. Not one of these works observes the standards of serious scholarship. This appalling and inexcusable deficiency arises from the fundamental purpose of these books: to completely discredit Trotsky as a historical figure.”

In replying to these malicious pseudo-biographies, my aim was to expose and refute the slanders against Trotsky advanced by these academics. But it was also my intention not only to expose the lies, but also to introduce readers to Trotsky's life, and to explain why his ideas retain such extraordinary relevance as the theoretical and political foundation of revolutionary socialist strategy in the contemporary world.

In the few years that have passed since the initial publication of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, the resurgence of socialism is no longer being viewed as merely a remote possibility. We are witnessing throughout the world the revival of class struggle as a globally interconnected process.

Observing this rising movement, bourgeois commentators are already acknowledging its revolutionary implications. But they also note that the movement remains, at this point, “leaderless.” That is, none of the traditional parties or trade unions that once claimed the allegiance of workers are able to exert influence, let alone, control the growing wave of mass struggle.

But the “leaderlessness” of the present movement is a transitional phenomenon. As the working class passes through different experiences, it will begin to separate the true from the false, distinguish between the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left and the genuine Marxist revolutionaries, and clarify in their own minds the strategy of socialist revolution. In this process of revolutionary education, the ideas of Leon Trotsky and the program of the Fourth International will play a gigantic historical role. It is my hope that *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, which will now be available in the Turkish language, will contribute to this historic process.



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