

Part One

Trotsky's Last Year

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Eighty years ago, on August 20, 1940, Leon Trotsky—the exiled co-leader of the 1917 October Revolution and founder of the Fourth International—was mortally wounded by an agent of the Soviet Union’s secret police, the GPU. The revolutionary leader died in a Mexico City hospital 26 hours later, in the early evening of August 21.

The murder of Trotsky was the outcome of a massive political conspiracy organized by the totalitarian bureaucratic regime headed by Stalin, whose name will for all of history be synonymous with counter-revolutionary treachery, betrayal and limitless criminality. Trotsky’s assassination was the climax of the campaign of political genocide, directed by the Kremlin, whose aim was the physical extirpation of the entire generation of Marxist revolutionaries and advanced socialist workers who had played a central role in the preparation and leadership of the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of the first workers’ state in history. The three show trials held in Moscow between 1936 and 1938—judicial frame-ups that provided a pseudo-legal cover for the murder of virtually all the principal leaders of the October Revolution—were only the public manifestation of a campaign of terror that consumed hundreds of thousands of lives and dealt a shattering blow to the intellectual and cultural development of the Soviet Union and the world-wide struggle for socialism.

Driven into exile, deprived of citizenship by the Soviet Union and living on “a planet without a visa,” lacking all access to conventional attributes of power, armed only with a pen, and dependent on the support of a relatively small number of persecuted comrades throughout the world, there was no man more feared than Trotsky by the powers that ruled the earth. Trotsky—the founder and leader of the Fourth International, “the party of irreconcilable opposition, not only in capitalist countries, but also in the USSR”—exerted a political and intellectual influence that was unequalled by any of his contemporaries. He towered above them all. In an essay titled “Trotsky’s Place in History,” C.L.R. James, the Caribbean socialist intellectual and historian, wrote:

During his last decade he [Trotsky] was an exile, apparently powerless. During those same ten years, Stalin, his rival, assumed power such as no man in Europe since Napoleon has wielded. Hitler has shaken the world and bids fair to bestride it like a colossus while he lasts. Roosevelt is the most powerful president who has ever ruled in America, and America is the most powerful nation in the world. Yet the Marxist judgment of Trotsky is as confident as Engels’s judgment of Marx. Before his period of power, during it, and after his fall, Trotsky stood second only to Lenin among contemporary men, and after Lenin died was the greatest head of our times. That judgment we leave to history. [1]

Trotsky’s stature was determined not only by the fact that he analyzed, with incomparable brilliance, the world as it was. He also personified the revolutionary process that would determine its future. As he had stated during a session of the Dewey Commission that held hearings in April 1937 to investigate the Kremlin’s allegations against Trotsky—and which subsequently found the Moscow Trials to be a frameup—“My politics are established not for the purpose of diplomatic conventions, but for the development of the international movement of the working class.” [2]

Trotsky despised every form of political charlatanry, which pretends that there are easy—i.e., non-revolutionary—solutions to the immense historic problems arising out of the death agony of the capitalist system. Revolutionary politics did not achieve its aims by promising miracles. Great social advances can be achieved, he insisted, “exclusively through the education of the masses through agitation, through explaining to the workers what they must defend and what they should overthrow.” This profoundly principled approach to revolutionary politics also formed the basis of Trotsky’s conception of morality. “Only those methods are permissible,” he wrote, “which do not conflict with the interests of the revolution.” Adherence to this principle placed Trotsky, even if considered only from a moral standpoint, in absolute opposition to Stalinism, whose methods were utterly destructive of the needs of social revolution and, therefore, the progress of humanity. [3]

The premature death of Lenin in January 1924, when he was only 53 years old, was a political tragedy. The assassination of Trotsky at the age of 60 was a catastrophe. His murder deprived the working class of the last surviving representative of Bolshevism and the greatest strategist of world socialist revolution. However, the theoretical and political work that Trotsky carried out in the final year of his life—a year dominated by the outbreak of World War II—was decisive in ensuring the survival of the Fourth International, in the face of what might have proved to be insurmountable difficulties.

Trotsky was murdered at the height of his intellectual powers. Despite his sense that his health was declining, there was no sign of a diminishment of his political energies. Even as he was producing on a daily basis political analysis and polemical essays, Trotsky was hard at work on a biography of Stalin which, even as an uncompleted work, may be justly described as a literary masterpiece.

Trotsky’s writings during the final year of his life were not only as brilliant as those of earlier periods; the scope of his analysis of the events of 1939-40 extended, in terms of enduring relevance, far into the future. No other figure of his time exhibited a comparable grasp of the state of the world and where it was headed.

For example, Trotsky was interviewed by a group of American journalists on July 23, 1939, just six weeks before the outbreak of World War II. They were anxious to know his assessment of the world situation. For the benefit of the journalists, Trotsky spoke in English. He began by recalling that he had promised a visiting American professor that he would improve his English if the American government would grant him a visa

to enter the United States. Regrettably, Trotsky observed, “it seems that they are not interested in my English.”

Though Trotsky was not satisfied with his command of English, the transcript of his remarks leaves no doubt of his mastery of the complexity of the world situation. “The capitalist system,” he stated, “is in a state of impasse.” Trotsky continued:

From my side, I do not see any normal, legal, peaceful outcome from this impasse. The outcome can only be created by a tremendous historic explosion. Historic explosions are of two kinds—wars and revolutions. I believe we will have both. The programs of the present governments, the good ones as well as the bad ones—if we suppose that there are good governments also—the programs of different parties, pacifist programs and reformist programs, seem now, at least to a man who observes them from the side, as child’s play, on the sloping side of a volcano before an eruption. This is the general picture of the world today. [4]

Trotsky then referenced the on-going New York World’s Fair, whose theme was the “World of Tomorrow.”

You created a World’s Fair. I can judge it only from the outside for the same reason which my English is so bad, but from what I have learned about the Fair from the papers, it is a tremendous human creation from the point of view of the “World of Tomorrow.” I believe this characterization is a bit one-sided. Only from a technical point of view can your World’s Fair be named “World of Tomorrow,” because if you wish to consider the real world of tomorrow we should see a hundred military airplanes over the World’s Fair, with bombs, some hundreds of bombs, and the result of this activity would be the world of tomorrow. This grandiose human creative power from the one side, and this terrible backwardness in the field which is most important for us, the social field—technical genius, and, permit me the word, social idiocy—this is the world of today. [5]

As a description of the *contemporary* “World of Today” and a prediction of the “World of Tomorrow”—that is, the world that will emerge from the crises of the present decade—it would hardly be necessary to change a single word. All over the world, with governments—combining limitless greed with limitless stupidity—incapable of responding with either competence or humanity, the question is being asked: How will this crisis be solved? Our answer is the same given by Trotsky: The solution will come in the form of a “tremendous historic explosion.” And, as Trotsky explained in 1939, such explosions are of two kinds: wars and revolutions. Both are on the agenda.

The journalists who questioned Trotsky in July 1939 were also anxious to know whether he had any advice to give the American government as to its conduct of foreign policy. Not without a trace of humor, Trotsky replied:

I must say that I do not feel competent to give advice to the Washington government because of the same political reason for which the Washington government finds it not necessary to give me a visa. We are in a different social position from the Washington government. I could give advice to a government which had the same objectives as my own, not to a capitalist

government, and the government of the United States, in spite of the New Deal, is, in my opinion, an imperialist and capitalist government. I can only say what a revolutionary government should do—a genuine workers’ government in the United States.

I believe the first thing would be to expropriate the Sixty Families. It would be a very good measure, not only from a national point of view, but from the point of view of settling world affairs—it would be a good example to the other nations. [6]

Trotsky recognized that this would not be accomplished in the immediate future. The defeats of the working class in Europe and the imminence of war would delay revolution in the United States. The entry of the United States into the coming war was only a matter of time. “If American capitalism survives, and it will survive for some time, we will have in the United States the most powerful imperialism and militarism in the world.” [7]

Trotsky made one other prediction in the July interview. In fact, it was a restatement of a political analysis of Soviet foreign policy that he had been advancing for the previous five years. Referring to the removal of the old Soviet diplomat, Maxim Litvinov, from the post of foreign minister, and his replacement by Stalin’s closest accomplice in crime, Molotov, Trotsky stated that the change was “a hint from the Kremlin to Hitler that we [Stalin] are ready to change our politics, to realize our objective, our aim, that we presented to you and Hitler some years ago, because the objective of Stalin in international politics is a settlement with Hitler.” [8]

Even at that late date, the idea that the Soviet Union would ally itself with Nazi Germany was considered preposterous by virtually all “expert” opinion. But as was the case so often in the past, events confirmed Trotsky’s analysis. Exactly one month after Trotsky’s interview, on August 23, 1939, the Stalin-Hitler Non-Aggression Pact was signed in Moscow. The final obstacle to Hitler’s war plans was removed by Stalin. On September 1, 1939 the Nazi regime invaded Poland. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. Twenty-five years after the outbreak of the First World War, the Second World War had begun.

Having repeatedly predicted the Kremlin’s turn to Hitler, Trotsky was not in the least surprised by Stalin’s treachery. The Soviet Union, he warned, would pay a terrible price for Stalin’s shortsightedness and incompetence. The dictator’s belief that he had spared the Soviet bureaucracy from the perils of war with Nazi Germany would prove to be yet another disastrous miscalculation.

* * * * *

The outbreak of war triggered a political crisis within the Fourth International that became the central focus of Trotsky’s work during the final year of his life. The concentration was not misplaced: his response to the minority faction in the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) led by James Burnham, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern was of fundamental significance not only in its defense of the theoretical foundations of Marxism and the historical advance, notwithstanding the crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy, represented by the October Revolution. Trotsky’s polemics anticipated many of the most difficult questions of revolutionary strategy, program and perspective that were to arise during and in the aftermath of World War II.

The signing of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, followed by the Soviet invasion of Poland in mid-September 1939 and Finland (the Winter War of 1939-40), provoked outrage among broad sections of petty-bourgeois radical intellectuals and artists in the United States. Many members of this large and influential social milieu had managed to come to terms with, and even support, Stalin’s annihilation of the Old Bolsheviks during the Terror and the strangling of the Spanish Revolution. The crimes of 1936-39 occurred while the Stalinist regime was still advocating an international alliance between the Soviet Union and the “Western Democracies.” The domestic

application of this orientation was the promotion by Stalinist parties of an alliance, on the basis of a capitalist program, between working-class organizations and the capitalist political parties (the “Popular Front”). Stalin’s signing of the Pact with Germany dealt, in an utterly cynical and opportunist manner, a blow to this particular form of class collaboration. The mood of the democratic petty bourgeoisie turned against the Soviet Union. To the extent that the democratic intelligentsia had uncritically and falsely identified Stalinism with socialism, the turn against the Soviet Union assumed an openly anti-communist character.

This political shift was reflected in the development of an oppositional tendency within the Socialist Workers Party and other sections of the Fourth International. The most important leaders of this tendency within the SWP were Max Shachtman—who was a founding member of the American Trotskyist movement and, next to James P. Cannon, the most influential figure in the SWP—and James Burnham, a professor of philosophy at New York University. They insisted that as a consequence of the Stalin-Hitler Pact and the invasion of Poland by the USSR, the definition of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state was no longer acceptable. The Soviet Union, they claimed, had evolved into a new form of exploitative society, with the bureaucracy functioning as a new type of ruling class unforeseen in Marxist theory. One of the terms employed by the minority to describe Soviet society was “bureaucratic collectivism.” A corollary of this new appraisal was the rejection of the defense of the Soviet Union in the event of war with an imperialist state, even if the adversary was Nazi Germany.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

For Trotsky, the demand of Shachtman and Burnham that the Fourth International revoke its definition of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state was not merely a matter of terminology. What were, Trotsky asked, the practical political consequences of the demand that the Soviet Union no longer be defined as a workers’ state?

Let us concede for the moment that the bureaucracy is a new “class” and that the present regime in the USSR is a special system of class exploitation. What new political conclusions flow from these definitions? The Fourth International long ago recognized the necessity of overthrowing the bureaucracy by means of a revolutionary uprising of the toilers. Nothing else is proposed or can be proposed by those who proclaim the bureaucracy to be an exploiting class. [9]

But the change in the definition of the Soviet Union demanded by the SWP minority had implications that went far beyond a clarification of terminology. The established definition of the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state was connected to the demand for a *political* rather than *social* revolution. Underlying this distinction was the conviction that the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy would not involve a change in the property relations established on the basis of the October Revolution. The working class, having destroyed the bureaucratic regime and reestablished Soviet democracy, would preserve the economic system based on the nationalization of property achieved through the overthrow of the Russian bourgeoisie and the expropriation of capitalist property. This fundamental conquest of the October Revolution, the critical economic foundation for the subsequent economic and cultural development of the Soviet Union, would not be abandoned.

The position of the minority proceeded from the assumption that there was nothing left from the October Revolution that was worth saving. Therefore, there was no reason to retain the defense of the Soviet Union in

the program of the Fourth International.

Trotsky raised another critical issue. If the bureaucracy represented a new class, which had established in the USSR a new form of exploitative society, what were the new forms of property relations uniquely identified with this new class? Of what new stage of economic development, beyond capitalism and socialism, was “bureaucratic collectivism” a historically legitimate and even necessary expression? The Fourth International maintained that the bureaucracy had usurped political power, which it utilized to acquire privileges based on the nationalization of property achieved through the workers’ revolution of 1917. The dictatorial power wielded by the bureaucracy under Stalin’s leadership was the product of the degeneration of the Soviet state under specific political conditions. These were, principally, the historical backwardness of the pre-1917 Russian capitalist economy, which the Bolsheviks inherited, and the protracted political isolation of the Soviet Union as a consequence of the defeat of revolutionary movements in Europe and Asia in the aftermath of the Bolshevik conquest of power in Russia.

Were these conditions to persist—that is, if the isolation of the Soviet Union were to persist as a consequence of defeats of the working class and the long-term survival of capitalism in the major centers of imperialism—the workers’ state would cease to exist. But the outcome of this process, Trotsky insisted, would take the form of the liquidation of nationalized property and the re-establishment of capitalist property relations. This outcome would involve the transformation of a powerful section of bureaucrats, exploiting their political power to steal state assets, into a reconstituted capitalist class. Trotsky had warned that this outcome was a real possibility, which could be prevented only through the political revolution—in conjunction with the socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist countries.

This careful examination of the argument over the appropriate terminological definition of the Soviet Union enabled Trotsky to identify the far-reaching historical and political implications of the changes in program raised by the SWP opposition:

The historical alternative, carried to the end, is as follows: either the Stalin regime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin regime is the first stage of a new exploiting society. If the second prognosis proves to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new exploiting class. However onerous the second perspective may be, if the world proletariat should actually prove incapable of fulfilling the mission placed upon it by the course of development, nothing else would remain except only to recognize that the socialist revolution, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, ended as a Utopia. It is self-evident that a new “minimum” program would be required—for the defense of the interests of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society.

But are there such incontrovertible or even impressive objective data as would compel us today to renounce the prospect of the socialist revolution? That is the whole question. [10]

Therefore, what was at stake was the historical legitimacy of the entire socialist project. Was Stalin’s alliance with Hitler, combined with the outbreak of the Second World War, incontrovertible proof that the working class was incapable of fulfilling the historical task assigned to it in Marxist theory? Thus, the entire dispute with Burnham and Shachtman—and, indeed, with all the many layers of demoralized petty-bourgeois intellectuals for whom they were speaking—hinged on whether the working class was, as established by Marx and Engels in their

development and elaboration of the materialist conception of history, a revolutionary class. The response given by Trotsky to this historical issue, which has dominated political and intellectual life for the last eighty years, is sufficient, almost by itself, to establish his stature as the most profound and far-sighted political thinker, equaled only by Lenin, of the twentieth century. It is, therefore, appropriate, to quote this passage in full:

The crisis of capitalist society which assumed an open character in July 1914, from the very first day of the war produced a sharp crisis in the proletarian leadership. During the 25 years that have elapsed since that time, the proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries has not yet created a leadership that could rise to the level of the tasks of our epoch. The experience of Russia testifies, however, that such a leadership can be created. (This does not mean, of course, that it will be immune to degeneration.) The question consequently stands as follows: Will objective historical necessity in the long run cut a path for itself in the consciousness of the vanguard of the working class; that is, in the process of this war and those profound shocks which it must engender, will a genuine revolutionary leadership be formed capable of leading the proletariat to the conquest of power?

The Fourth International has replied in the affirmative to this question, not only through the text of its program, but also through the very fact of its existence. All the various types of disillusioned and frightened representatives of pseudo-Marxism proceed *on the contrary* from the assumption that the bankruptcy of the leadership only “reflects” the incapacity of the proletariat to fulfill its revolutionary mission. Not all our opponents express this thought clearly, but all of them—ultralefts, centrists, anarchists, not to mention Stalinists and social-democrats—shift the responsibility for the defeats from themselves to the shoulders of the proletariat. None of them indicate under precisely what conditions the proletariat will be capable of accomplishing the socialist overturn.

If we grant as true that the cause of the defeats is rooted in the social qualities of the proletariat itself, then the position of modern society will have to be acknowledged as hopeless. Under conditions of decaying capitalism, the proletariat grows neither numerically nor culturally. There are no grounds, therefore, for expecting that it will sometime rise to the level of the revolutionary tasks. Altogether differently does the case present itself to him who has clarified in his mind the profound antagonism between the organic, deep-going, insurmountable urge of the toiling masses to tear themselves free from the bloody capitalist chaos, and the conservative, patriotic, utterly bourgeois character of the outlived labour leadership. We must choose one of these two irreconcilable tendencies. [11]

Neither Shachtman nor Burnham had attempted to work through the consequences of their perspectives. They were not even capable of predicting their own right-wing and pro-imperialist political trajectory, let alone foreseeing the course of world history. Their political thinking was guided by the most vulgar pragmatism, which consisted of improvising political responses on the basis of day-to-day impressions of “the reality of living events,” without attempting to place the events to which they were reacting within the essential world historical context. Trotsky called attention to their political eclecticism.

The opposition leaders split sociology from dialectical materialism. They split politics from sociology. In the sphere of

politics, they split our tasks in Poland from our experience in Spain—our tasks in Finland from our position on Poland. History becomes transformed into a series of exceptional incidents; politics becomes transformed into a series of improvisations. We have here, in the full sense of the term, the disintegration of Marxism, the disintegration of theoretical thought, the disintegration of politics into its constituent elements. Empiricism and its foster-brother, impressionism, dominate from top to bottom. [12]

In the course of this polemic, Trotsky, in a manner that certainly caught Burnham and Shachtman by surprise, introduced the question of dialectical logic into the discussion. Trotsky was aware of the fact that Burnham dismissed dialectics as meaningless; and that he despised Hegel, whom the pompous professor stupidly described as “the century-dead arch-muddler of human thought.” [13] As for Max Shachtman, he had no particular interest in matters relating to philosophy and declared himself to be an agnostic on the relation of dialectical materialism to revolutionary politics. In this situation, there was nothing contrived or capricious about Trotsky’s “philosophical turn.”

In a manner that exemplified its pragmatic cynicism, not to mention ignorance, the opposition asked sarcastically when Trotsky had become an expert in philosophy. How could the old revolutionary politician, who had never received a doctorate degree from an appropriately accredited academic institution, presume to lecture Professor James Burnham of New York University on matters pertaining to philosophy? To anyone familiar with the revolutionary intellectual milieu within which Trotsky’s theoretical conceptions developed and matured, the opposition’s question appears both insufferably arrogant and downright stupid.

As Trotsky acknowledged, the greatest influences on his own development as a Marxist were, in addition to Marx and Engels, such champions of dialectical and historical materialism as Franz Mehring, Antonio Labriola, and Georgi Plekhanov. Moreover, the seminal years of Trotsky’s political and theoretical education coincided with the intense struggle being waged by orthodox Marxists against opportunism, which was rooted theoretically in various forms of neo-Kantianism and the even more extreme forms of subjective idealist irrationalism associated with Nietzscheanism. He had witnessed the rightwing political evolution of Russian opponents of philosophical materialism such as Berdaiev, Struve, and Chernov.

In the course of the first decade of his political activity (1897-1907), Trotsky – through intensive study, personal experience and political struggle – had acquired a mastery of the dialectical method that was clearly expressed in his analysis of the dynamic of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and his formulation of the theory of permanent revolution.

An essential element of his refutation of Burnham’s empiricist-pragmatic outlook was Trotsky’s insistence that the dialectic of thought developed out of and reflected the dialectic of nature. In his *Open Letter to Burnham*, Trotsky explained “that our methods of thought, both formal logic and the dialectic, are not arbitrary constructions of our own reason but rather expressions of the actual inter-relationships within nature itself. In this sense, the universe throughout is permeated with ‘unconscious’ dialectics.” [14]

Many of the arguments that Trotsky made in his demolition of Burnham and Shachtman had been anticipated in several remarkable essays and lectures that he wrote in the 1920s. Almost exactly eighteen years earlier, Trotsky had placed particular emphasis on the dialectic of nature – in full conformity with the views of Marx and Engels – in a letter that was published as the introduction to the first issue of the militantly materialist Soviet journal, *Pod Znamenem Marxizma* [*Under the Banner of Marxism*]:

Human society itself, both by its historical roots and by its contemporary economy, extends into the world of natural history. We must see contemporary man as a link in the whole development that starts from the first tiny organic cell, which came in its turn from the laboratory of nature, where the physical and chemical properties of matter act. The person who has learned to look with a clear eye on the past of the whole world, including human society, the animal and vegetable kingdoms, the solar system, and the endless systems around it, will not start to hunt for keys to the secrets of the universe in ancient “holy books,” those philosophical fairy tales of primitive infantilism. [15]

Trotsky restated with exceptional clarity and beauty this Marxist conception of the dialectic of nature in his December 1939 analysis of the petty-bourgeois opposition in the SWP:

We call our dialectic, materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depths of our ‘free will’, but in objective reality, in nature. Consciousness grew out of the unconscious, psychology out of physiology, the organic world out of the inorganic, the solar system out of the nebulae. On all the rungs of the ladder of development, the quantitative changes were transformed into qualitative. Our thought, including dialectical thought, is only one of the forms of the expression of changing matter. There is place within this system for neither God, nor Devil, nor immortal soul, nor eternal norms of laws and morals. The dialectic of thinking, having grown out of the dialectic of nature, possesses consequently a thoroughly materialist character. [16]

Trotsky belonged to that rare category of truly great writers who sought and was able to express the most profound ideas in accessible language. But he did not achieve clarity at the expense of intellectual depth. Rather, the clarity is a manifestation of his mastery of the essential theoretical issues. Moreover, Trotsky’s defense of Marxism was not motivated by any sort of abstract and dogmatic pedantry. He was all too familiar with pseudo-radical poseurs who – in the doleful tradition of the Left Hegelians of the 1840s – habitually invoked “the dialectic” to cover up their insufficient empirical knowledge of the disputed subject and simply did not know what they were talking about. Rather, Trotsky insisted on the significance of dialectical thought as a method of analyzing and understanding, for the purpose of revolutionary action, objective reality.

The development of a scientific perspective, necessary for the political orientation of the working class, required a level of analysis, of a complex, contradictory and, therefore, rapidly changing socio-economic and political situation that could not be acquired on the basis of formal logic, diluted with pragmatic impressionism. The absence of scientific method, for all his pretensions to philosophical expertise, found crude expression in the manner in which Burnham’s analysis of Soviet society and policies was devoid of historical content and based largely on impressionistic descriptions of phenomena visible on the surface of society. Burnham’s pragmatic commonsense approach to complex socio-economic and political processes was theoretically worthless. He contrasted the existing Soviet Union to what he thought, in ideal terms, a genuine workers’ state should be. He did not seek to explain the historical process and conflict of social and political forces, on a national and international scale, which underlay the degeneration.

He was appropriately chastised by Trotsky:

Vulgar thought operates with such concepts as capitalism, morals, freedom, workers’ state, etc. as fixed abstractions, presuming that capitalism is equal to capitalism, morals are equal to morals, etc. Dialectical thinking analyzes all things and phenomena in their continuous change, while determining in the material conditions of those changes that critical limit beyond which “A” ceases to be “A”, a workers’ state ceases to be a workers’ state.

The fundamental flaw of vulgar thought lies in the fact that it wishes to content itself with motionless imprints of a reality which consists of eternal motion. Dialectical thinking gives to concepts, by means of closer approximations, corrections, concretization, a richness and flexibility; I would even say a succulence which to a certain extent brings them close to living phenomena. Not capitalism in general, but a given capitalism at a given stage of development. Not a workers’ state in general, but a given workers’ state in a backward country in an imperialist encirclement, etc.

Dialectical thinking is related to vulgar thinking in the same way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph but combines them according to the laws of motion. Dialectics does not deny the syllogism but teaches us to combine syllogisms in such a way as to bring our understanding closer to the eternally changing reality. Hegel in his *Logic* established a series of laws: change of quantity into quality, development through contradictions, conflict of content and form, interruption of continuity, change of possibility into inevitability, etc., which are just as important for theoretical thought as is the simple syllogism for more elementary tasks. [17]

It is worth noting that this passage reveals a striking confluence of Trotsky and Lenin’s conception of dialectical logic. In his *Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic* (which comprises a portion of Lenin’s notebooks on philosophy published in Volume 38 of the Bolshevik leader’s *Collected Works*), Lenin, commenting on Hegel, wrote:

Logic is the science of cognition. It is the theory of knowledge. Knowledge is the reflection of nature by man. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions, the formation and development of concepts, laws, etc. and these concepts, laws, etc. (thought, science = “the logical Idea”) embrace conditionally, approximately, the universal law-governed character of eternally moving and developing nature. Here there are *actually*, objectively, three members: 1) nature; 2) human cognition = the human **brain** (as the highest product of this same nature), and 3) the form of reflection of nature in human cognition, and this form consists precisely of concepts, laws, categories, etc. Man cannot comprehend = reflect = mirror nature *as a whole*, in its completeness, its “immediate totality,” he can only *eternally* come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world, etc., etc. [18]

In April 1940, the minority broke with the SWP and created its “Workers Party.” Burnham remained in its ranks for little more than one month. On May 21, he sent a letter of resignation to the organization that he had co-founded with Shachtman, in which he announced his total and absolute repudiation of socialism. Drawing the final conclusions from his rejection of dialectical materialism, Burnham wrote: “Of all the important

beliefs, which have been associated with the Marxist movement, whether in its reformist, Leninist, Stalinist or Trotskyist variants, there are virtually none which I accept in its traditional form.” [19] Upon learning of the desertion of the theoretician of the opposition, Trotsky wrote to his attorney (and SWP member) Albert Goldman, “Burnham doesn’t recognize dialectics, but dialectics does not permit him to escape its net. He is caught as a fly in a web.” [20]

Following his abandonment of the Workers Party, Burnham moved rapidly to the extreme right of bourgeois politics, became an advocate of preventive nuclear war against the Soviet Union, and was, not long before his death in 1987, awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Ronald Reagan. Shachtman’s evolution was more protracted. His “Third Camp” was defined by the slogan “Neither Washington nor Moscow.” Eventually, Shachtman abandoned his ban on support for Washington and became an advocate of the Cold War waged by the United States, which eventually entailed full support for the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and, later in the decade, the bombing of North Vietnam.

To be continued

[1] “Trotsky’s place in History,” in *C. L. R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings of C.L.R. James 1939-49*, ed. Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc (Chicago, 2018), p. 93

[2] *The Case of Leon Trotsky* (New York, 1968), p. 291

[3] Leon Trotsky “The USSR in War,” *In Defence of Marxism* (London, 1971), p. 21

[4] “On the Eve of World War II,” *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40* (New York, 1973), p. 17

[5] *Ibid*, pp.17-18

[6] *Ibid*, p. 25

[7] *Ibid*, p. 26

[8] *Ibid*, pp. 19-20

[9] *In Defence of Marxism*, p. 4

[10] *Ibid*, p. 11

[11] *Ibid*, pp. 14-15

[12] *Ibid*, pp. 114-15

[13] *Ibid*, p. 236

[14] *Ibid*, pp. 106-107

[15] “Attention to Theory,” in *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York: Pathfinder, 2004), pp. 335-36.

[16] *In Defence of Marxism*, p. 66

[17] *Ibid*, pp. 65-66

[18] *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 38 (Moscow: 1961), p. 182

[19] *In Defence of Marxism*, p. 257

[20] *Ibid*, p. 224



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