Part One

Trotsky’s Last Year

David North
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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 extermination 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 socialist 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 unfinished 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, pacific 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

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.

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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—ultraleaflets, 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]
Human society itself, both by its historical roots and by its
temporary 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
collection of 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 quantitate 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,
or 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]

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

[6] Ibid, p. 25
[8] Ibid, pp. 19-20
[9] In Defence of Marxism, p. 4
[10] Ibid, p. 11
[14] Ibid, pp. 106-107
[16] In Defence of Marxism, p. 66
[17] Ibid, pp. 65-66
[19] In Defence of Marxism, p. 257
[20] Ibid, p. 224

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