

Jacobin glorifies Dolores Ibárruri, Stalinist executioner of the Spanish Revolution

Part two

Barry Grey
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This is the second part of a two-part article. Part one was posted on December 23.

In 1996, David North, the chairman of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, gave a lecture at Michigan State University titled, “The Long Shadow of History: The Moscow Trials, American Liberalism and the Crisis of Political Thought in the United States.” (The lecture is included in the book *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* published by Mehring Books).

North analyzed the reasons why the vast bulk of the American liberal intelligentsia supported the Moscow Trials. He noted that the correspondent of the *New York Times* in Moscow, Walter Duranty, declared his confidence in the legitimacy of the trials and the confessions of the defendants, as did the US ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph Davies. Likewise, the two most influential organs of American liberalism, the *Nation* and the *New Republic*.

In the midst of the Great Depression and the triumph of fascism in Italy and Germany, North explained, many liberal intellectuals and academics in the US looked to the Soviet Union as a counterweight to the fascist menace. Stalin, for his part, cultivated support among these layers by downplaying the threat of socialist revolution and lending their anti-fascism a socialistic coloration. The political, theoretical and, one might add, moral poverty of liberalism in the epoch of capitalism’s death agony was expressed in the willingness of liberals to set aside their democratic scruples and any concerns for historical truth and vouch for the legitimacy of judicial frame-ups of life-long revolutionaries that rivaled or surpassed the hideous spectacles carried out in the courts of Hitler’s Germany.

North explained:

The liberals’ uncritical admiration for Soviet accomplishments did not signify an endorsement of revolutionary changes within the United States. Far from it. Most liberal intellectuals were inclined to view an alliance with the USSR as a means of strengthening their own timid agenda for social reform in the United States, and of keeping fascism at bay in Europe. The Soviet Union was no longer feared as a spearhead of revolutionary upheavals. The liberals understood that the defeat of Trotsky had signified the Soviet Union’s abandonment of international revolutionary aspirations. By the mid-1930s the Stalinist regime had acquired an aura of political respectability.

In examining the liberal response to the Moscow Trials, one more important political fact must be kept in mind. Just one month before the beginning of the first trial, the Spanish Civil War erupted in July 1936. Spain was threatened with fascism, whose victory would certainly lead to the outbreak of World War II.

Soviet Russia was seen as the most important ally of the Republican, anti-fascist forces. Few liberal intellectuals were inclined to examine too carefully the real significance of Stalinist politics in Spain. For the most part, they ignored the manner in which the Stalinists were destroying, through political terror, the revolutionary movement of the working class and ultimately guaranteeing the victory of Franco. On the surface—and few liberals cared to look beyond it—the Soviet Union seemed to be the rock upon which all the hopes of “progressive forces” depended for the defeat of fascism in Spain. (David North, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Oak Park, MI, 2014, p. 47)

In the United States, the implementation of the Popular Front program took the form of the Communist Party’s endorsement of the government of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and its role in politically subordinating the newly formed CIO industrial unions to the Democratic Party.

This issue, the subordination of the workers’ movement to the Democratic Party, was, and remains to this day, the central political problem in the development of the labor movement in the United States. The global breakdown of capitalism triggered by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 rapidly assumed the form in the US, already the dominant industrial power in the world, of a devastating social crisis. Virtually overnight, millions of workers and small farmers were reduced to penury and the prospect of starvation.

Capitalism was discredited. It became a dirty word on the lips of masses of people, including sections of intellectuals. The Soviet Union, less than a decade after the October Revolution, became a pole of attraction and inspiration for millions. In the American ruling elite, its existence loomed as a constant reminder of the danger of socialist revolution in the United States.

Roosevelt’s New Deal reflected the conclusion by more far-sighted sections of the ruling class that they would have to spend a portion of the vast financial reserves of American capitalism on a program of limited social reforms to save their system from being overthrown. This, however, was not sufficient to prevent an eruption of class conflict once the initial shock within the working class from the social collapse had begun to wear off. The year 1934 saw general strikes in three cities: Toledo (Ohio), San Francisco and Minneapolis, the last of which was led by Trotskyists, then organized in the Communist League of America.

These semi-insurrectionary battles were followed by the formation in 1935 of the Committee for Industrial Organization, headed by mineworkers’ leader John L. Lewis and other union leaders who split from the conservative craft-based American Federation of Labor. The

AFL opposed the organization of unskilled workers in auto, steel, electrical, rubber, communications and other sectors, and the establishment of mass industrial unions.

The movement for industrial unions raised the question of a break with the big business parties. The founding convention of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1935 voted for the formation of a labor party.

By the beginning of 1937, a wave of sit-down strikes was sweeping through basic industry, inspired by the Flint sit-down strike, which forced General Motors to recognize the UAW. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was born out of this explosive eruption of the American working class.

The Communist Party used its substantial influence in the new industrial union movement, including within the leadership, to prevent it from assuming an independent political form by breaking with Roosevelt and the Democrats. In this, it allied itself with Lewis and other pro-capitalist bureaucrats.

Under conditions of the Depression and the preparations of the imperialist powers for another world war, a political break by the American working class with the capitalist parties had immense revolutionary implications, not only in the US, but also internationally. For precisely that reason, the Stalinized CP in the US, in line with the Popular Front policy of the Kremlin, worked to prevent it.

The Democratic Party—the oldest capitalist party in the US, the former bastion of the Southern slavocracy, and at the time the chief enforcer of Jim Crow segregation—had already for decades served as the ruling class' main political mechanism for containing and emasculating social protest movements. The anti-Wall Street, small farmer-based Populist movement of the turn of the century had been rendered harmless by being channeled behind the Democratic Party. So too had anti-imperialist and anti-monopoly protests of the early 20th century.

The bulk of the liberal intelligentsia in the Depression years, fearing the growth of fascism but frightened by the prospect of a working class revolution, lined up behind Roosevelt and the Democrats. They were attracted by the CP's open adoption of class collaboration and American nationalism and its de facto repudiation of social revolution.

In 1935, the Communist Party abruptly dropped its Third Period attacks on Roosevelt as a "fascist imperialist" and declared itself to be nothing more than the continuator of the American democratic tradition. Claiming that the CP represented "twentieth-century Americanism," party head Earl Browder told a mass meeting, "We are an American party composed of American citizens. We view all our problems in light of the national interests of the United States."

At the May 1938 Tenth National Convention of the CPUSA, the hall was decorated with American flags and the delegates sang the "Star Spangled Banner."

In their perversion of Marxism to accommodate the counterrevolutionary, nationalist policy of the Soviet regime and block the emergence of an independent political movement of the American working class, the US Stalinists made use of various strains of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology—pragmatism, individualism, nationalism, anti-intellectualism—that had played a prominent role in American thought and politics.

In his last writings, Trotsky stressed the critical importance of the fight for the insurgent movement of the American working class to take an independent political form. On this basis, he urged the American Trotskyists, then organized as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), to adopt the demand for the CIO to break with the Democrats and establish a labor party, linking this demand with the revolutionary socialist Transitional Program adopted by the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938.

In an unfinished manuscript titled "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," found in his desk following his assassination by

Stalinist GPU agent Ramon Mercader on August 20, 1940, Trotsky wrote:

In the United States the trade union movement has passed through the most stormy history in recent years. The rise of the CIO is incontrovertible evidence of the revolutionary tendencies within the working masses. Indicative and noteworthy in the highest degree, however, is the fact that the new "leftist" trade union organization was no sooner founded than it fell into the steel embrace of the imperialist state. The struggle among the tops between the old federation and the new is reducible in large measure to the struggle for the sympathy and support of Roosevelt and his cabinet. (Leon Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, New York, 1975, p.73)

In a discussion with SWP leaders in May of 1938 on the labor party slogan, Trotsky said of the new industrial union movement:

If the class struggle is not to be crushed, replaced by demoralization, then the movement must find a new channel, and this channel is political. That is the fundamental argument in favor of this slogan. (Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, New York, 1977, p.163-164)

In his 1996 lecture, David North explained the connection between the pro-Sovietism of the US liberal intelligentsia in the pre-war years and its turn to the most ferocious Cold War anti-communism and anti-Sovietism after the war. The same political and theoretical superficiality and opportunism, the same light-minded attitude to historical truth that made them apologists for Stalin's crimes in one period, led in the next to blaming those crimes not on Stalin's betrayal of socialism and Marxism, but rather on the socialist and revolutionary project itself. Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship, it was claimed, was the inevitable outcome of the October Revolution, of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

Trotsky's defense of revolutionary socialism and internationalism and his implacable struggle against Stalinism were either ignored or declared to be nothing more than an internal squabble among contenders for control over an inherently despotic regime.

North said:

There was a dramatic change in the attitude of the liberal intelligentsia to the Soviet Union between 1936 and 1946. And yet, there was a definite political and theoretical continuity between the pro- and anti-Soviet positions. When they supported Stalin against Trotsky, and then Truman against Stalin, the liberal intelligentsia proceeded from the identity of Stalinism and Marxism.

This placed the liberal intelligentsia in a politically and intellectually untenable position. On the basis of the facile formula that Stalinism equals Marxism and socialism, the liberals left themselves only two alternatives: The first was to oppose Stalinism from the right as supporters of American imperialism; the second, to serve as apologists of Stalinism. *The New Republic* wound up in the first camp; *The Nation* in the second. (David North, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Oak Park, MI, 2014, pp. 57–58)

By subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party and bourgeois liberals, the American Stalinists played a critical role in the post-war subordination of the labor movement to US imperialism and its Cold War offensive against the Soviet Union. The CIO leadership and Democratic Party turned savagely against all left-wing and socialist elements in the labor movement, purging the unions by means of an anti-communist witch hunt. This set the stage for the decline and eventual collapse of the trade unions, and their eventual transformation into direct agencies of the corporations and the capitalist state.

The DSA and Cold War anti-communism

The DSA is historically rooted in a right-wing split-off from the Fourth International and the Socialist Workers Party led by Max Shachtman, a founding member of the Trotskyist movement in the US and one of its leading propagandists and writers. Shachtman, along with New York University Professor James Burnham and Martin Abern, a member of the SWP National Committee, reacted to the August 1939 Stalin-Hitler nonaggression pact by renouncing the Fourth International's defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism and claiming that the USSR was itself an imperialist state.

Shachtman soon adopted the position of Burnham that nothing remained of the historic gains of the October Revolution. The Soviet Union had become a new form of class society, which Burnham called "bureaucratic collectivism," and the Stalinist bureaucracy had evolved into a new ruling class. This was part of a broader tendency that came to be known as "state capitalism." It threw overboard the Fourth International's analysis of the Soviet Union under the Stalinist dictatorship as a "degenerated workers' state." Despite Stalin's crimes and depredations, the Soviet Union was still based on the nationalized property relations established by the October Revolution and could be saved from capitalist restoration through a political revolution of the Soviet working class to overthrow the bureaucracy and restore proletarian democracy and the revolutionary program of world socialist revolution.

As Trotsky explained in a series of brilliant polemics written in the course of the 1939–1940 faction fight within the SWP, collected under the title *In Defense of Marxism*, at the heart of the politics of the minority faction led by Shachtman was a rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class and the denial of any possibility of socialist revolution.

The demoralized perspective of Shachtman and Burnham reflected within the SWP the rightward lurch of an entire layer of petty-bourgeois intellectuals who had been sympathetic to Trotsky but moved rapidly to repudiate the October Revolution and revolutionary socialism and line up behind American imperialism as the Roosevelt administration prepared to enter the Second World War. Shachtman became the leader of a petty-bourgeois faction that split from the SWP in the spring of 1940. Within weeks of the split, Burnham renounced socialism and rapidly became the ideological leader of American anti-communist conservatism. Shachtman's evolution was more protracted, but the logic of his petty-bourgeois politics led him by the end of the 1940s to embrace Cold War anti-communism. He became a political adviser to the AFL-CIO and, before his death in 1972, a supporter of Nixon's bombing of North Vietnam.

In whitewashing Stalinism and the American CP, the DSA is not renouncing its anti-Soviet and anti-communist roots. Its founder, Michael Harrington, a political protégé of Shachtman, was a supporter of the Cold War, the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy. The DSA continues to denounce the Soviet Union from the right and identify the October Revolution with the despotic Stalinist regime established on the

basis of its betrayal.

The underlying anti-communism of the DSA and state capitalist groups around the world has never prevented them from blocking with Stalinist tendencies in opposition to Trotskyism and the political independence of the working class. What *Jacobin* and the DSA today find laudatory in the history of the CPUSA is precisely its counterrevolutionary role during the Popular Front period of the 1930s—when it supported the bloody destruction of the Spanish Revolution, the Moscow Trial frame-ups and executions, and the subordination of the CIO to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party.

The glorification of Ibárruri by *Jacobin* and the DSA is by no means an aberration. It is part of a calculated promotion of Stalinism and the American Communist Party as models for radicalizing workers and youth today. In recent months, *Jacobin* has brought forward Stalinist figures from the 1960s and 1970s such as Angela Davis and published flattering articles on the supposedly revolutionary legacy of the Communist Party USA.

Just this month, on December 5, *Jacobin* published a review of a new book on Amazon (the review was headlined "Resisting Amazon Is Not Futile") crediting "Communist Party leader" William Z. Foster with publishing a monograph based on the 1919 steel strike that "became a road map not just for the CIO's industrial organizing successes of the 1930s, but for leading contemporary organizing struggles." Foster played a leading role in the strike, which was ultimately defeated, but went on to become a loyal Stalinist functionary, defender of the Moscow Trials and ferocious opponent of Trotskyism, heading up the CPUSA from 1945 to 1957. He published the monograph on steel in the fateful year of 1936.

In August of 2017, *Jacobin* published an article by founding editor and publisher Bhaskar Sunkara and DSA National Vice Chair Joseph M. Schwartz titled "What Should Socialists Do?" The article presented the role of the CPUSA during the Popular Front period as a model for today. The authors wrote:

In the final analysis, socialists must be both tribunes for socialism and the best organizers. That's how the Communist Party grew rapidly from 1935–1939. They set themselves up as the left wing of the CIO and of the New Deal coalition, and grew from twenty thousand to one hundred thousand members during that period... the Popular Front was the last time socialism had any mass presence in the United States—in part because, in its own way, the Communists rooted their struggles for democracy within US political culture while trying to build a truly multiracial working-class movement.

Last year, Sunkara published *The Socialist Manifesto*, which purports to outline a strategy for building a mass socialist movement in the United States. In it, he praises the CPUSA's support for Roosevelt and the Democratic Party during the Depression and disparages Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas' opposition to Roosevelt and his decision to run an independent presidential campaign in 1936. He writes:

In the 1936 presidential election, workers around the country were making a rational decision to support the Democratic Party, hungry to continue Roosevelt's reforms and recognizing the institutional barriers to independent politics. Thomas' cohort couldn't offer a strategy to overcome any of those barriers or even a way not to counterpoise themselves to the best New Deal reforms. They just had slogans about opposing capitalist parties. Ironically, the more fringe Communist Party was better able to

relate to Roosevelt supporters...

The question today is whether we can bring the Left into the mainstream—modulating our rhetoric, rooting ourselves in everyday life—while building a project of independent working-class politics that can be more than liberalism’s loyal opposition. In other words, can we make *socialism* twenty-first century Americanism, without losing our soul in the process (or dressing up like Paul Revere)? (Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*, New York, 2019, pp. 179, 181)

Sunkara goes on to criticize William Z. Foster and the CP for endorsing Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party presidential campaign in 1948 instead of supporting Harry Truman. He criticizes the CP not from the left—for promoting Wallace as a diversion to undermine growing sentiment in the working class at the time for a break with the Democrats and the establishment of a labor party—but from the right—as an ill-advised departure from the CP’s previous support for the Democrats.

Why does the DSA turn to Stalinism today? It must be seen within the context of, and as a response to, an accelerating breakdown of American and world capitalism and the opening up of a new period of socialist revolution.

The DSA is an appendage of the Democratic Party. It has nothing in common with genuine socialism. It responds to the visible disintegration of American democracy, the turn of substantial sections of the ruling class to fascism and dictatorship, the growth of militarism, the ever more grotesque levels of social inequality, the discrediting of all the institutions of capitalism, the growth of mass anti-capitalist sentiment and, above all, the resurgence of the class struggle in the US and internationally by turning to the most reactionary political forces and traditions.

All of these processes and contradictions have been immensely exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has fatally and irreversibly undermined the legitimacy of capitalism in the eyes of billions of workers around the world and tens of millions in the United States.

In many respects, the current crisis of capitalism is more acute than that triggered by the eruption of World War I, which led to the October Revolution and the establishment of the first workers’ state in history, and the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary convulsions that dominated the ensuing three decades, including the years of Depression and World War II.

Since that period, all the mass labor bureaucracies and parties upon which the bourgeoisie relied—Stalinist, social democratic, openly pro-capitalist as in the US—have disintegrated. The working class has grown immensely in numbers and become far more globally interconnected, ensuring that the new wave of mass working class struggles will assume an international form.

The center of this world crisis is American capitalism, which has undergone a dramatic decline since the 1930s, 1940s and the period of post-war boom. It long ago lost its position as the industrial powerhouse of the world. Decades of deindustrialization and financialization have compounded the parasitism of American capitalism and produced the starkest expression of decay—the staggering growth of social inequality.

Most critical and frightening of all, from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie and its subsidiary agencies such as the DSA, is the immense growth in the influence and authority of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, within the American and international working class, as well as among the youth and progressive sections of the intelligentsia.

The middle-class opponents of socialist revolution who control the DSA are all too aware of the growth of the readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*, particularly among workers. They are frightened by the

increasing authority and influence within the working class of the Socialist Equality Parties in the US and around the world, reflected in the growth of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees independent of the pro-corporate trade unions. They look with horror on the WSWS’s dismantling of the *New York Times*’ attempt, via its “1619 Project,” to promote racist politics and divide the working class by falsifying American history and denying the progressive legacy of America’s two great democratic revolutions—the American Revolution and the Civil War.

There is a strong element of a circling of the wagons in the turn by the DSA and *Jacobin* to the filthy legacy of Stalinism. It is directed above all against our movement, which embodies the revolutionary traditions and program of Marxism and the October Revolution. In the new period of socialist revolution, Trotskyism and the ICFI will become a pole of attraction for millions of working people looking for a way out of capitalist barbarism.



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