

Preface to the Turkish-language edition of *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*

David North
6 October 2021

The following is the preface written by David North to a new Turkish translation of his essay, Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism, written in 1982 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the political assassination of Tom Henehan. North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

The essay is available in English from Mehring Books. Also available from Mehring Books are remarks delivered by David North to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Henehan's assassination, "A Tribute to Tom Henehan: 1951 to 1977."

In the process of writing, authors are often taken in a direction that they had not originally intended. This was the case in the writing of the essay, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, whose translation into Turkish by the comrades of Sosyalist E?itlik I heartily welcome.

I wrote this essay in the autumn of 1982 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the political assassination of Tom Henehan, a leading member of the Workers League (predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States).

On October 16, 1977, Comrade Henehan was murdered by two gunmen as he presided over a social event sponsored by the Young Socialists, the youth movement of the Workers League, in New York City. The attack was entirely unprovoked. The two assailants burst into the venue of the social event and deliberately created a commotion. As Henehan approached the entrance of the social club to determine what was happening, he was shot five times by one of the assailants. Another member of the Workers League, Jacques Violot, was shot by a second assailant as he rushed to Tom's assistance. The two gunmen then fled the premises.

Despite his own serious injuries, Violot managed to drive Henehan, who was still conscious, to a nearby hospital. Though Tom was taken into an emergency room, the attending physicians, for reasons that were never explained, did not attempt surgery to stop his internal bleeding. Tom died in the emergency room approximately 90 minutes after arriving at the hospital. He was just 26 years old.

The murder of Tom Henehan was a political crime that deprived the American and international working class of a selfless, dedicated and immensely capable fighter. Though he had been in the movement only four and half years, Tom was admired by his comrades in the Workers League and throughout the International Committee of the Fourth International. Born in Wisconsin on March 16, 1951 and raised in Michigan, he joined the Workers League in the spring of 1973 while still a student at Columbia University in New York. Tom's decision to join the Workers League came after the wave of student radicalism had subsided, and as affluent middle-class youth, having dabbled in protest politics, were turning to careerism and self-serving lifestyle and identity politics.

But Tom Henehan was attracted by the Workers League's political orientation to the working class and the emphasis it placed on the party's

roots in the historical struggles of the world Trotskyist movement, dating back to the 1920s. His education as a Marxist took place as the Workers League was passing through a critical period in its own political development. In 1974, Tim Wohlforth, who had founded the Workers League in opposition to the Socialist Workers Party's break with the International Committee of the Fourth International, rejected the principles and program that he had defended for the previous 14 years and rejoined the SWP. Wohlforth's renegacy found no support within the cadre of the Workers League, the youthful membership of which had been recruited and educated on the basis of the International Committee's opposition to the US Socialist Workers Party's abandonment of Trotskyism, exemplified in its reunification in 1963 with the Pabloite United Secretariat.

The Workers League responded to Wohlforth's betrayal by intensifying its study of the history of the Fourth International and assimilating the theoretical and political issues raised in the protracted struggle against Pabloite revisionism.

As the fifth anniversary of Comrade Henehan's assassination approached, it had been my intention to concentrate on his political work and pay tribute to his outstanding contribution to the building of the Workers League. However, the review of Tom's life raised critical questions: How are those who join the Trotskyist movement educated? Through what process is a Marxist-Trotskyist cadre developed? What is the relationship between the daily activity of the revolutionary party and the history of the Fourth International?

These questions had acquired exceptional urgency in the context of a growing crisis in the International Committee of the Fourth International. In the weeks preceding the drafting of the essay commemorating the anniversary of Tom's assassination, I had begun work on an extensive critique of the drift of the Workers Revolutionary Party—at that time the most experienced and leading section of the International Committee—toward the opportunist politics of Pabloism. The relations that the WRP had developed, starting in the mid-1970s, with a series of bourgeois nationalist movements and regimes in the Middle East and Africa entailed a fundamental break with the strategic orientation defined by Trotsky in his Theory of Permanent Revolution. At the same time, the policies pursued by the WRP within Britain assumed a blatantly opportunist character, with sycophantic apologies for the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy being published with ever greater frequency in the party's organ, *The News Line*.

The retreat of the Workers Revolutionary Party from the Trotskyist strategy of establishing the political independence of the working class, which its principal leaders—Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter—had defended against Stalinism and Pabloite opportunism in the 1950s and 1960s, was covered over with fraudulent invocations of dialectical materialism. What Healy called the "practice of cognition" was an eclectic combination of subjective impressionism and unrestrained pragmatism, which he attempted to endow with the appearance of

profundity through the pretentious use of pseudo-Hegelian jargon. Moreover, the WRP leaders' focus on "philosophical method"—entirely unrelated to political analysis and which had absolutely nothing to do with Marxism—was aimed at undermining the study of Trotsky's writings and the critical documents that comprised the heritage of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Once the drafting of the tribute to Henehan began, it was unavoidable that the theoretical and political issues with which I was preoccupied in the developing critique of the WRP would find expression. The tribute to Tom Henehan, five years after his death, required the defense of the principles, program and genuine Marxist method upon which his own training as a revolutionary cadre had been based. Thus, the honoring of Tom's life assumed the form of an initial elaboration of a critique of the Workers Revolutionary Party's betrayal of Trotskyism. The articles did not specifically reference the Workers Revolutionary Party. But Healy, Banda and Slaughter certainly did not fail to notice the political implications of my tribute to Tom Henehan, which was clearly directed against their opportunist falsification of Marxist theory. They would have been particularly offended by the following observation:

Revisionists and political charlatans of all descriptions invariably base their politics and policies on the most immediate and practical needs of the hour. Principled considerations, i.e., those which arise out of a serious study of the history of the international workers' movement, knowledge of its development as a law-governed process, and, flowing from that, a constant critical reworking of its objective experiences, are utterly foreign to these pragmatists. Their motto in politics is "anything goes—as long as it brings some success." Insofar as they evince an interest in history, it is simply to exploit a quotation torn out of context or to disguise their present opportunism with purely ceremonial references to the past achievements of the Trotskyist movement, or, what is more likely, of Trotsky as an individual.

Nor would Healy and Slaughter—the two principal exponents of the WRP's falsification of method—have been pleased with the following statement:

Without a real knowledge of the historical development of the Trotskyist movement, references to dialectical materialism are not merely hollow; such empty references pave the way for a real distortion of the dialectical method. The source of theory lies not in thought but in the objective world. Thus the development of Trotskyism proceeds from the fresh experiences of the class struggle which are posited on the entire historically-derived knowledge of our movement.

Though my critique was directed against the WRP's distortion and falsification of dialectics, I was not unmindful of the danger that my criticism might be misrepresented and exploited in political bad faith by opponents of the International Committee to discredit dialectics and undermine the philosophical foundations of Marxist politics. Therefore, I emphasized the essential link between the dialectical method, applied in a manner consistent with the materialist conception of history, and the work of Leon Trotsky.

Those who seriously and systematically study the writings of

Leon Trotsky, and this is essential for the theoretical development of every cadre in the Workers League and the International Committee, will discover the enormous richness of the dialectical method. It would be wrong, of course, to mechanically reduce the whole content of the struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism to the question of dialectics against metaphysics, independent of an examination of the social forces whose interests were, and continue to be, manifested through these historical battles. However, there is no question but that every stage in the development of the struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy required a deepening of the dialectical materialist method against the subjective idealist metaphysics of the bureaucracy. Philosophy is partisan; that is, theory is a class question. Stalin's eclecticism and idealism, which made him initially vulnerable to the pressures of social forces hostile to the proletariat, became anchored, at a certain point in the development of the world crisis, in the material interests of the Soviet bureaucracy and, thus, of world imperialism.

I also sought to clarify the relationship of materialist dialectics to the work of the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International, founded in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution:

Under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the dialectical method, treated as a "dead dog" by Kautsky and the majority of the Social Democratic leaders, was revived, enriched, and restored to its rightful place in the Communist International—as the methodological foundation of the science of Marxist strategy, political perspectives and revolutionary action. In an epoch of civil wars, of abrupt "overnight" changes in the political situation, of day-to-day shifts in the relations of class forces on a world scale, of sudden movements on the political battlefield from left to right and from right to left, only the dialectical method has been proven equal to the historical task of the proletariat. As Marx would have written: dialectics is not a lancet for academic debate but a weapon of class war. It is not the passion of the head; it is the head of revolutionary passion. It is in this spirit that the International Committee of the Fourth International trains the cadre of the world Trotskyist movement today.

The first two parts of *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism* were published in the issues of the *Bulletin*, the twice-weekly organ of the Workers League, dated October 15 and 19, 1982. On Friday, October 22, 1982, I personally informed Healy of my opposition to his idealist falsification of Marxist methodology. There immediately followed a series of explosive meetings with Healy.

Upon returning to the United States, I wrote the third and fourth parts of the essay, which were published in the November 23 and December 14, 1982 issues of the *Bulletin*. At this point the theoretical and political implications of the essay, i.e., its fundamental critique of the WRP's opportunist repudiation of the heritage of the Fourth International, was clearly understood by the WRP leaders. At a meeting held in London on December 18, 1982, Slaughter, who had expressed agreement with my criticisms of Healy's "practice of cognition" in October, abruptly reversed course and denounced me as an American pragmatist.

In response, I cited several passages in *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism* devoted to the issue of method, and I asked that Slaughter explain precisely how they evinced sympathy for pragmatism. He chose not to take up the challenge.

The essay was never published in *The News Line*. The opportunist

degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party accelerated, culminating in the political disintegration of the organization and its break with the International Committee and Trotskyism in February 1986. In the aftermath of the split, the essay was widely circulated in the International Committee and published in the press of all its sections.

The older generation of comrades in the Socialist Equality Party and International Committee who worked with Tom and treasure his memory will share my satisfaction that this tribute has now found its way, through the efforts of a new generation of fighters for socialism, into the Turkish language. The emerging generation of Trotskyist revolutionaries throughout the world will draw inspiration from the example of Tom Henehan. This new edition testifies to the growing worldwide influence of the principles and program of the International Committee of the Fourth International that Tom sacrificed his life to defend.

David North

October 5, 2021



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact