Preface to the Turkish-language edition of

Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism

David North
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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.”

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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, Jacque Vielot, 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, Vielot 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 hospital, 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.

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.

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

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