

An Anniversary of Stalinist Counterrevolution: 30 years since the end of the USSR

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On December 26, 1991, the Stalinist regime headed by Mikhail Gorbachev formally dissolved the Soviet Union. The end of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism were the culminating acts of 70 years of the Stalinist bureaucracy's betrayal of the revolution whose heritage it had usurped.

The 30th anniversary of this event has heard a chorus from both the mainstream media and academic publications, all insistently repeating a single note: "No one saw this coming." In his recently published book, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, Professor Vladislav M. Zubok of the London School of Economics writes: "Nobody, including the most sagacious observers, could predict that the Soviet Union, which had survived the epic assault of Hitler's armies, would be defeated from within, by its internal crises and conflict."

The claims that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was unforeseen exclude any reference to the analyses of the final years of the Soviet Union by the Trotskyist movement. It was not caught up in the giddy euphoria of "Gorbymania" that dominated the bourgeois media and academic Sovietology following the accession of Gorbachev to the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) repeatedly warned that Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) expressed the drive of the Stalinist bureaucracy to reintegrate the Soviet economy with the world market through the restoration of capitalism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is publishing today an extensive collection of historical documents and statements by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) that meticulously traced the inner logic of Gorbachev's policies and warned that the imminent trajectory of Stalinism was the dissolution of the workers' state.

In March 1987, the ICFI wrote in *What is Happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism*, "The shortage of technology and continuing contradictions between industry and agriculture can only be resolved through access to the world market. There are only two roads to the integration of the Soviet Union into that market—that of Gorbachev leading towards capitalist restoration and that of the world socialist revolution."

In August of 1987, speaking on the occasion of the 47th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky by an agent of the Stalinist GPU, David North, national secretary of the Workers League—the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party (US)—explained that in moving to restore capitalist property relations, Gorbachev "does not represent the repudiation of Stalinism, but arises inexorably out of the putrefaction of the bureaucracy, which is preparing actively to renounce and reject those social conquests of the October Revolution—the establishment of state ownership and the monopoly of foreign trade—which it had previously not

dared to attack." (Trotskyism versus Stalinism)

In 1989, North published *Perestroika Versus Socialism: Stalinism and the Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR*, which consisted of a series of articles published in the Workers League's *Bulletin* newspaper between March and May of that year. North demonstrated that the "opening up" of *glasnost* was not a restoration of Soviet democracy for the working class but an attempt to "forge an alliance of the most privileged and politically articulate strata of Soviet society: from the managerial elite within the most prosperous sections of state industry and the farm collectives, to the technocrats, the intelligentsia, and the avaricious petty bourgeoisie, whose numerical growth and enrichment is among the principal goals of the Stalinist regime."

Perestroika, he continued, entailed the "implementation of free market policies, the liquidation of the monopoly of foreign trade, and the legalization of private ownership of the means of production." It was through these measures, North argued, that "the counterrevolutionary logic of the Stalinist theory of 'socialism in one country' finds its ultimate expression in the development of a foreign policy aimed at undermining Soviet state property and reintroducing capitalism within the USSR itself."

The correctness of these insights, their formulation borne out by historical developments, is a powerful vindication of the scientific Marxist analysis of the class character of the Soviet Union and the role of the Stalinist bureaucracy developed by Leon Trotsky and elaborated by the ICFI.

The Russian working class, led by the Bolshevik Party and supported by a broad mass of peasants, took power in October 1917, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, and established the world's first workers' state. It was a transitional social form, no longer capitalist but not yet socialist.

The October Revolution was the most progressive event in human history, bringing about not only a tremendous advance in the conditions of the Soviet masses. The establishment of the first workers' state in history and the overthrow of capitalism provided a powerful impulse to the struggles of the working class and oppressed masses in every part of the world. It was, however, wracked by contradictions arising from the historically rooted backwardness of Russia and the economic devastation caused by a decade of world war, revolutionary upheavals and civil war. Most fundamental, the development of socialism depended upon the extension of the revolution beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, into the advanced centers of capitalism in Western Europe.

But the failure and betrayal of revolutions in the early 1920s, most tragically in Germany in 1923, extended the isolation of the Soviet Union and deepened its contradictions. The inadequacy of production necessarily entailed inequality. In his masterful 1936 book on the nature of the Soviet

Union and Stalinism, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky wrote, “The state assumes directly and from the very beginning a dual character: socialistic, insofar as it defends social property in the means of production; bourgeois, insofar as the distribution of life’s goods is carried out with a capitalist measure of value and all the consequences ensuing therefrom.”

The bureaucracy overseeing this bourgeois distribution became a privileged caste, whose relationship to social property was entirely parasitic. Joseph Stalin emerged as the leading representative of this social layer. The workers’ state degenerated under the weight of the bureaucracy, which oriented the foreign policy and economic planning of the Soviet Union behind what it conceived to be its national interests.

Stalin cloaked his policies in the claim that he was building “socialism in one country,” spinning over the bureaucracy’s interests the cobwebs of nationalism, but his autarkic policies undermined ever more acutely the immense potential contained within the social relations the bureaucracy fed upon.

In service to these ends, Stalinism transformed Communist Parties internationally into the foreign policy apparatuses of the bureaucracy. It deployed a consciously counterrevolutionary strategy of instructing workers around the globe to embrace a section of the capitalist class as progressive, dressing up the diplomatic interests of the bureaucracy as the first stage of a “two-stage revolution.”

The slaughter of the Communist Party in China in 1927 and, most catastrophically, the rise to power of Hitler in Germany in 1933 weakened the Soviet working class and strengthened the bureaucracy. The foreign policy of the Soviet regime was determined, to an ever greater extent, by Stalin’s appraisal of the national interests of the bureaucracy. The defense of bureaucratic privilege drove the Kremlin into alliances with imperialism and bourgeois regimes. The formation of “Popular Front” alliances of Soviet-backed Communist Parties with bourgeois parties in the mid-1930s and in 1939 Stalin’s entry into an alliance with Hitler established the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism.

Trotsky fought against the growth of bureaucratism from its earliest stages in 1923, opposing Stalinist nationalism with the perspective of Permanent Revolution. By 1933, when Stalin’s policies facilitated the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany, Trotsky reached the conclusion that the bureaucracy could not be reformed and had to be overthrown. To this end he organized the Fourth International.

In *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (the *Transitional Program*) written at its founding in 1938, Trotsky argued, “The USSR thus embodies terrific contradictions. But it still remains a degenerated workers’ state. Such is the social diagnosis. The political prognosis has an alternative character: Either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.”

Trotsky’s perspective was the continuation of the program of the October Revolution, summoning the Soviet working class to a political revolution to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy in defense of socialist property relations and world socialist revolution. Stalin responded with lies, purges, show trials and mass murder.

Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin, in his seven-volume series *Was There an Alternative?*, painstakingly documented the mechanisms of repression that Stalin deployed to crush Trotskyism. Stalin systematically executed hundreds of thousands, an entire generation of revolutionaries, in what Rogovin termed “political genocide.” This bloody wave of murder culminated in the assassination of Trotsky himself, in exile in Coyoacan, Mexico, on August 20, 1940, by Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader.

The impact of these crimes on the cultural and intellectual life of the Soviet Union, its political climate and vitality of spirit, was incalculably devastating. The ferocity of murder—a five-minute trial, a bullet to the

back of the head and a bill to the next of kin—had a fascistic character to it. The bureaucracy sought simultaneously to exterminate the germ of revolution and to grind the culture of the Soviet working class down to the level of their own philistinism.

Stalin died in 1953. Three years later, Nikita Khrushchev delivered a “secret speech” to the 20th Congress of the CPSU, denouncing some of Stalin’s excesses and the cult of personality. An opportunist tendency that had broken with Trotskyism, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, hailed these developments, claiming that Stalinism could be pressured to evolve in a progressive direction. De-Stalinization would render Trotskyism unnecessary. They abandoned the perspective of Permanent Revolution and any orientation to the world’s working class, in favor of tail-ending the Stalinist bureaucracy and pressuring it “to the left.”

Reality repeatedly shattered the illusions cultivated by Pabloism. Within months of his secret speech, Khrushchev sent tanks to crush the Hungarian Revolution.

The International Committee of the Fourth International was founded in 1953 on the basis of the principled defense of Permanent Revolution, in opposition to these Pabloite betrayals, sharpening its insights into the nature of Stalinism. The ICFI’s understanding of Permanent Revolution was deepened yet further in the struggle it waged in the early 1980s against the Pabloite tendencies in the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the leadership of which adapted to bourgeois nationalism and opportunist politics.

The henchmen who eventually inherited Stalin’s mantle—Brezhnev, Andropov, Gorbachev and their ilk—had no memory of October 1917. They bore the stamp of the apparatus, were marked by its unscrupulousness and mendacity, and presided over a country politically lobotomized by Stalinism. The restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union would not have been possible were it not for the political disorientation of the working class, who had been systematically deprived of knowledge of their own history and, above all, of Trotskyism.

In November 1989, in a speech at the Moscow Historical Archival Institute, David North had warned that Gorbachev’s policies meant “capitalist restoration and a horrifying decline in the cultural and social level of the Soviet Union.” Behind the backs of the Soviet working class, the apparatchiks of Gorbachev stripped away the gains of the October Revolution, securing fortunes by exposing workers to the predations of international capitalism. The outcome for the Soviet working class was a catastrophe. Every metric of social well-being, including average life expectancy, plummeted.

The restoration of capitalism and the liquidation of the Soviet Union were the final betrayals carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy. These crimes confirmed every urgent warning issued by Trotsky and the Fourth International.

When the red flag was lowered on December 26 and the Tsarist Russian emblem raised in its stead, the Gorbomania which had gripped the Western media and much of academia gave way to bourgeois triumphalism. Unable to foresee the restoration of capitalism, now that it had come about, they ignored its deeper causes. The Western capitalist powers celebrated the dissolution of the USSR as the beginning of a new era of capitalist democracy, freedom and progress.

The ICFI, based on the Trotskyist movement’s analysis of and opposition to the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution, understood that the end of the Soviet Union would not bring with it a period of peaceful capitalist development. All the contradictions of world capitalism that gave rise to the Russian Revolution not only persisted, but they would emerge ever more explosively. The central problems that confronted the working class in the 20th century would have to be resolved in the 21st.

On the basis of this perspective, the sections of the ICFI formed the Socialist Equality Parties beginning in 1995. In 1998, the ICFI launched the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is today without question the

authoritative voice of international socialism.

The past three decades have been characterized by endless war, the growth of social inequality to historically unprecedented levels, a series of economic crises, the putrefaction of bourgeois democracy and the rise of fascism. For the past two years, a devastating pandemic has led, due to the criminal policies of the capitalist oligarchs, to the death of millions of people and is fueling a growing mood of anger and opposition in the international working class.

The perspective elaborated by the ICFI prior to, during and in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union has been vindicated. It is this perspective, rooted in the entire heritage of the Trotskyist and Marxist movement, that is the necessary foundation for the building within the working class of a political leadership that will put end to capitalism and realize, on a world scale, the program embodied in the Russian Revolution.



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