

Letter to a Young Trotskyist in Russia

David North
30 June 2022

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Dear Comrade:

Thank you for your letter of 28 June and its enthusiastic response to the establishment of a new section of the International Committee in Turkey. The formal expansion of the work of the ICFI is, whatever the country or region, an important political milestone. But it is a source of special satisfaction that it has become possible to make this advance in the country where Trotsky, having been exiled from the Soviet Union, so decisively developed the struggle against the Stalinist regime on a world scale and initiated the founding of the Fourth International. During the visit with the comrades of Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu to the island of Prinkipo, one could not help but be deeply moved by the awareness of Trotsky's monumental historical achievement. But we could also draw satisfaction from the fact that we are continuing the work that Trotsky initiated on Prinkipo, and that Trotsky would have been in complete solidarity with the political principles and program of the International Committee.

The experience of our comrades in Turkey is certainly, as you write, of great significance for the development of a section of the International Committee in Russia and throughout the former Soviet Union. We worked patiently to create, on the basis of a unified conception of the entire historical experience of the Fourth International, a firm foundation for the establishment of a new section.

The resolution of the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu deserves the most careful study. The SEG's recognition of the political authority of the ICFI should not be understood in a merely organizational sense. The political authority of the ICFI is based on its historical association with the defense of the foundational principles and program of Trotskyism. The SEG resolution identified the essential historical content of the continuity of Trotskyism:

4. Only the ICFI represents the political continuity of the world Marxist/Trotskyist movement. This continuity goes back to the founding of the Left Opposition under the leadership of Leon Trotsky in 1923 to defend the strategy and program of the world socialist revolution against nationalist Stalinist degeneration. It was this strategy and program that guided the October Revolution in 1917 led by the Bolshevik Party in Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky.

5. The founding of the Fourth International in 1938 under the leadership of Trotsky after the collapse of the Communist International paving the way for the Nazis to come to power in Germany in 1933; the founding of the International Committee in 1953 by orthodox Trotskyists led by James P. Cannon of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US against the revisionist-liquidationist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel; the political struggle by the British Trotskyists led by Gerry Healy against the unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites in 1963; and the struggle of the American Trotskyists led by David North in 1982-86 against the national-opportunist degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain and the regaining

the control of the IC by orthodox Trotskyists, constitute critical turning points in this political continuity.

Continuity is not conferred upon an organization through some sort of formal proclamation, let alone in the manner of a British knighthood. A young organization must establish its continuity with the antecedent history of the Trotskyist movement by taking up the fight, in the present, against the opponents—Stalinist, Pabloite, state capitalist, social democratic, labor, petty-bourgeois radical, anarchist, bourgeois nationalist, and liberal reformist—of revolutionary Marxism. This fight is conducted on a theoretical, political, and organizational plane, and is always directed toward establishing the complete and unconditional political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie. However difficult and contradictory the process, the political movement that conducts this struggle expresses with ever increasing clarity the continuity of Trotskyism and, thereby, moves into alignment with the objective trajectory of the world socialist revolution.

Great historical events, such as those through which we are now passing, reveal the essential class nature of a political organization and the interests that it serves. Of course, the response of an organization to a great crisis is conditioned by its antecedent history. The outbreak of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia has rapidly exposed the state-capitalist and Pabloite organizations as contemptible agents of American and European imperialism. Their theory of "Russian imperialism"—closely associated with Shachtmanism and related varieties of state capitalist conceptions—now serves as an ideological justification for support to US and European imperialism and their lackeys in the Ukrainian regime.

In an attack on the International Committee, Oleg Vernyk of the Ukrainian Socialist League (USL) (an affiliate of the International Socialist League-ISL) writes:

We are well aware that in this confrontation with two imperialisms, Western imperialism and Russian imperialism, Ukraine only plays one role: the role of victim.

It is difficult to imagine a more absurd and deceitful statement. The Ukrainian "victim" is a regime that was brought to power by a coup in 2014 that was financed and organized by the United States, using local fascist organizations to provide the necessary military force. During the last eight years, the US and NATO have carried out the training and arming of the Kiev regime in preparation for war against Russia. Thousands of Ukrainian soldiers were directly trained by the United States in the years leading up to the war. In a report posted on June 25, the *New York Times* wrote:

Representative Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat on the House Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, said in an interview

that the relationships Ukrainian commandos developed with American and other counterparts over the past several years had proved invaluable in the fight against Russia.

The scale of US/NATO support for Ukraine—already measuring in the many tens of billions of dollars—is without historic precedent. According to the *Times*:

The commandos are not on the front lines with Ukrainian troops and instead advise from headquarters in other parts of the country or remotely by encrypted communications, according to American and other Western officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss operational matters. But the signs of their stealthy logistics, training and intelligence support are tangible on the battlefield.

Several lower-level Ukrainian commanders recently expressed appreciation to the United States for intelligence gleaned from satellite imagery, which they can call up on tablet computers provided by the allies. The tablets run a battlefield mapping app that the Ukrainians use to target and attack Russian troops.

On a street in Bakhmut, a town in the hotly contested Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, a group of Ukrainian special operations forces had American flag patches on their gear and were equipped with new portable surface-to-air missiles as well as Belgian and American assault rifles.

“What is an untold story is the international partnership with the special operations forces of a multitude of different countries,” Lt. Gen. Jonathan P. Braga, the commander of U.S. Army Special Operations Command, told senators in April in describing the planning cell. “They have absolutely banded together in a much outsized impact” to support Ukraine’s military and special forces.

To claim, in the face of these facts, that “Ukraine plays only one role: the role of victim” is a blatant and contemptible falsification of reality in the interests of imperialism.

The political basis of Vernyk’s endorsement of the imperialist war follows:

However, we members of the USL/ISL have as our basic principle the defense of Ukraine as a political subject, the defense of its working people, the defense of the unconditional right to self-determination of the Ukrainian people and the struggle for the preservation of the integrity of the state.

This one paragraph exposes the USL (and its ISL sponsors) as reactionary nationalists and bitter opponents of the Marxist theory of the state. It is an ABC of Marxism that the state is an instrument of class rule. How, then, can “the struggle for the integrity of the state” be reconciled with “the defense of its [Ukraine’s] working people”? Of course, Vernyk makes no mention of the fact that the Ukrainian capitalist regime is utilizing the opportunity provided by the war to abolish laws and regulations protecting workers that date back to the Soviet era. Nor does Vernyk ever explain why the alleged “unconditional right to self-determination” applies only to Ukraine as defined by the Kiev regime, but not to the predominantly Russian-speaking populations in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

The reactionary basis of Vernyk’s defense of the Ukrainian regime is

most starkly revealed in his attempt to rebrand the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its military wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, as a politically heterogeneous movement that included progressive tendencies. Vernyk writes that

in the history of the right-wing political formation of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, there were endless transformations, cracks, radical changes in its slogans, certain inclinations to the left and to the right, cooperation with Hitler and the war on two fronts, among many other events. To this we must add the creation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1943 and the massive entry to that organization in 1939 of the communists of western Ukraine that miraculously escaped total extermination by the Stalinist regime. All of this forms part of Ukraine’s history that is often characterized as extremely complex, controversial and ambiguous.

Vernyk leaves out of his discussion of this “complex, controversial and ambiguous” history any mention of the central role played by the OUN and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army as collaborators of the Nazis in the genocidal extermination of Ukrainian Jews and the mass murder of Poles. Seeking to sow political confusion, Vernyk promotes the anti-Marxist national chauvinist tract written in 1948 by Petró Poltava, who was then a leading ideologist of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. In a reprehensible attempt to politically rehabilitate the OUN as an organization that included genuinely left-wing tendencies that espoused a form of socialist-tinged nationalism, Vernyk claims that Poltava represented “a tendency towards democratization” that “was beginning to emerge within the ranks of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), toward the ideas of the left and the incitement to a simultaneous war against German national socialism and against Stalinism.”

Vernyk goes so far as to claim that Poltava’s pamphlet “annuls all the arguments of Russian propaganda and its ICFI lackeys regarding the assertion that any nationalist liberation movement in Ukraine should be considered, without exception, a far-right current and Nazi.”

Let us review the text by Poltava that has inspired Vernyk and the USL/ISL. It is titled, “Our Teaching about the National State.” The pamphlet begins with an explicit denunciation of the Marxist theory of the state and nation as “wrong and tendentious.” Poltava wrote:

Their [The Marxists’] view that nations will be able to manage without states in the future is utopian, fantastic, and lacking any basis in reality. In all Marxist theory about the state there is a clear effort to deny that the state has any significance for the people and for humanity in general, as well as any attempt to present history as nothing more than a class struggle—which, as we have already stated, is totally incorrect.

Insisting on the essentially ethnic basis of the state, Poltava inveighed against the existence of multinational states. He declared: “Obviously states of this type should not exist; they should be restructured as soon as possible.” The practical implications of this argument were demonstrated by the OUN in its genocidal attacks on Jews and Poles.

Poltava’s text is suffused with reactionary nationalist mysticism:

We nationalists believe in this eternal truth—that an independent

national state is the only form of political organization that guarantees a people the best conditions for all-round development of its spiritual and material resources. Without its own national state, that is, without a state extending over all its ethnic territory, a people cannot fully develop.

At the conclusion of the text, Poltava declared that “the Bolshevik USSR is an implacable enemy of individual subject people and humanity in general.”

Why does Vernyk draw inspiration from this reactionary anti-Marxist ideologue? Clearly, his aim is to create an ideological and political bridge to the present-day Ukrainian nationalists, falsely attributing a progressive content to the war being waged by the Kiev regime in alliance with US and European imperialism.

Toward this end, Vernyk dishonestly attempts to portray Trotsky as an ally of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism. Vernyk cites a brief passage from Trotsky’s 1939 essay, “Problem of the Ukraine,” in which he defended the slogan, in opposition to the Stalinist regime, of “*A united, free and independent workers’ and peasants’ Ukraine.*” [Italics in the original].

Vernyk conveniently and duplicitously leaves out of his discussion of Trotsky’s 1939 article any reference to passages in which Trotsky vehemently condemned any collaboration with and concession to the organizations and parties of reactionary Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism. Trotsky wrote:

The Ukraine is especially rich and experienced in false paths of struggle for national emancipation. Here everything has been tried: the petty-bourgeois Rada, and Skoropadski, and Petlura, and “alliance” with the Hohenzollerns and combinations with the Entente. After all these experiments, only political cadavers can continue to place hope in one of the fractions of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie as the leader of the national struggle for emancipation. The Ukrainian proletariat alone is capable not only of solving the task—which is revolutionary in its very essence—but also of taking the initiative for its solution. The proletariat and only the proletariat can rally around itself the peasant masses and the genuinely revolutionary national intelligentsia.

Trotsky concluded his essay with the following timely warning:

At the beginning of the last imperialist war the Ukrainians, Melenevski (“Basok”) and Skoropis-Yeltukhovski, attempted to place the Ukrainian liberation movement under the wing of the Hohenzollern general, Ludendorff. They covered themselves in so doing with left phrases. With one kick the revolutionary Marxists booted these people out. That is how revolutionists must continue to behave in the future. The impending war will create a favorable atmosphere for all sorts of adventurers, miracle-hunters and seekers of the golden fleece. These gentlemen, who especially love to warm their hands in the vicinity of the national question, must not be allowed within artillery range of the labor movement. Not the slightest compromise with imperialism, either fascist or democratic! Not the slightest concession to the Ukrainian nationalists, either clerical-reactionary or liberal-pacifist! No “People’s Fronts”! The complete independence of the proletarian party as the vanguard of the toilers!

As is to be expected from this politically bankrupt opportunist, Vernyk attempts to cover up his capitulation to the Ukrainian bourgeoisie with pathetic slanders against the International Committee. He writes that “a United States citizen, Mr. David North, has been defending the interests of Russian imperialism and its propaganda apparatus on issues related to Ukraine.” According to Vernyk, I accepted this assignment “when it became clear that official Russian propaganda no longer has sufficient informational space within the American media or any other country in the western orbit.” Does Vernyk actually imagine that such nonsense will be believed by anyone?

But I must note that his accusation has an ironic character, inasmuch as the “primal sin” of which the International Committee and I personally are guilty, in the eyes of the Pabloites, has been our relentless exposure of the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism. This included the ICFI’s work on *Security and the Fourth International*, which unmasked the agents of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Trotskyist movement. Moreover, at a time when the Pabloites were singing the praises of Gorbachev, the International Committee was warning that his policies would result in the culmination of the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution, that is, the restoration of capitalism.

The Putin regime is the reactionary resurrection of a bourgeois state that emerged out of the 1991 dissolution of the USSR. But the opposition of the International Committee to this regime, including its invasion of Ukraine, is from the socialist left, not the imperialist right.

Precisely because its opposition to the Putin regime is rooted in its antecedent struggle of the Fourth International against Stalinism and the various revisions of the Trotskyist analysis of the Soviet Union (both Pabloite and “state capitalist”), the International Committee analyzes the current war in the historical context of the dissolution of the USSR, which proved a political disaster for the Ukrainian, Russian and international working class.

The way out of this disaster, from which the present war emerged, is to be found not in alliance with US-NATO imperialism or with Putin’s capitalist regime; but only through the unified struggle of the Ukrainian, Russian and international working class against all the warring states. The working class in Russia as well as in Ukraine must uphold the principle: The main enemy is at home.

These comments on Vernyk might serve, perhaps, as an illustration of how the International Committee upholds the defense of Trotskyism. In the relentless exposure of the enemies of Marxism, the International Committee continues the great historical work of the Fourth International and, on this basis, educates the working class and prepares it for the fulfillment of its revolutionary tasks.

It is our hope that the initiative of our comrades in Turkey will serve as inspiration for the efforts of socialists in Russia and Ukraine to expand the work of the International Committee and raise the banner of Trotskyism in their countries and throughout the former Soviet Union.

With Trotskyist greetings,
David North



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