

Leon Trotsky's years on Prinkipo

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The following is the speech by Ula? Ate?çi to “An Island at the Center of World History: Trotsky on Prinkipo” on Sunday, August 20. The event was held on Prinkipo, an island in the Sea of Marmara off the coast of Istanbul, Turkey. It honored Trotsky's four-year exile on the island, from 1929 to 1933.

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It is a great honor to speak today at the commemoration of the fateful years that the great revolutionary Leon Trotsky spent here between 1929 and 1933, on the 83rd anniversary of his assassination by a Stalinist agent.

Leon Trotsky's exile from the Soviet Union to Turkey in 1929 involved much more than the personal fate of a major political figure. Trotsky, alongside Vladimir Lenin, was the principal leader of the October Revolution of 1917. Along with Lenin, his name was synonymous with the revolution, both in the Soviet Republics and around the world.

It was Trotsky who founded and led the Red Army, which defended the Soviet Republic against the White forces and all-out intervention of the imperialist powers which aimed to destroy the young workers' state.

In the years leading up to 1917, it was Trotsky who, with his theory of Permanent Revolution, clearly foresaw the objective development of the Russian Revolution and developed a coherent international socialist strategy.

He played an irreplaceable role in ensuring the continuity of the Marxist movement to this day by succeeding in 1938 in the struggle to found the Fourth International, which he first called for from Prinkipo on July 15, 1933.

It was no accident that in 1923 Trotsky led the Left Opposition, which included many prominent Bolshevik leaders. The Left Opposition continued the struggle against bureaucratic corruption that Lenin himself had initiated before his death, for which he sought Trotsky's support.

The Left Opposition was the defender of the political principles of the October Revolution of 1917 and the strategy of world socialist revolution. It represented the historic interests of the Soviet and international working class.

The economic and social devastation caused by the Civil War that followed the revolution and the temporary defeat of revolutions across Europe created conditions that allowed the growing consolidation of the bureaucracy within the party and state apparatus.

The nationalist social interests of the bureaucratic caste of which Stalin, the general secretary of the Party, was the main representative, found expression in the so-called theory of “socialism in one country,” proclaimed in 1924.

David North has described the conditions Trotsky faced in the Soviet Union before 1929. Trotsky's exile to Turkey was carried out in complete secrecy by Stalin and the secret police, the GPU. The Stalinist bureaucracy feared the reaction of the Soviet working class to this onslaught on the October Revolution and its co-leader.

Trotsky, his wife Natalia and his son Lev Sedov arrived in Istanbul on

February 12 on the ship *Ilyich*. He spent most of the next four-and-a-half years in Prinkipo, until he left for France on July 17, 1933. His presence and tireless work made this an island at the center of world history.

While the official leadership of the international Marxist movement was based in Moscow, its real political center was Prinkipo. Visitors came here from all over the world, including the United States, Germany, France and China. And letters came from everywhere. According to one account, there were Trotskyist groups in around 30 countries in that period, which made Trotsky very busy answering their letters.^[1]

When Trotsky arrived in Istanbul, he first stayed at the Soviet Consulate for a while. Soon he moved to the Tokatlıyan Hotel in Beyoğlu, and then to a house in Bomonti, Şişli. Then the Trotsky family moved to Prinkipo, where they would spend most of their years in Turkey.

Their first address was the İzzet Pasha mansion. After a fire broke out there, they briefly stayed at the Savoy Hotel on the island. In the period between late March 1931 and January 1932, they moved to Moda, Kadıköy. Then they moved to the Yanaros mansion in Prinkipo, which became their last address until they left the country in July 1933.

Trotsky spent these critical years working intensively in Prinkipo, writing masterpieces and organizing the Left Opposition in the Communist International all over the world. From here he organized the publication of the *Bulletin of the Opposition* in the Soviet Union.

However, according to the records, we know that he had the opportunity to visit different places in Istanbul, including the Beyoğlu, Sultanahmet, Cağaloğlu, Eminönü, Beyazıt and Arnavutköy districts.

In Prinkipo, he became “very intimate with the sea of Marmara.” For some rest, he went fishing with his “invaluable tutor,” named Charolambos, whose “father and grandfather and great grandfather, and the grandfather of his great-grandfather, were fishermen.”^[2]

Trotsky and this young Greek fisherman spoke a new language, a combination of Turkish, Greek, Russian and French words. Trotsky noted that he called out “in Turkish the names of the more common operations,” and that “Chance observers have concluded from this that I command the Turkish language freely.”^[3]

As David North mentioned, Trotsky sent a letter to Turkish President Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) before he set foot in Istanbul. He soon received a reply signed by the Governor of Istanbul, Muhittin Bey, informing him that he was free to leave the country, that he could change his residence and that measures were being taken to ensure his safety. Trotsky was under threat not only from the Stalinist GPU, but also from the White Russian émigrés his Red Army had defeated in the Civil War.

Seeing that the official promises made to him were kept, Trotsky was to express his satisfaction with the hospitality he received in Turkey. In an interview here, according to Ahmet Ükrü Esmer, editor-in-chief of the daily *Milliyet*, Trotsky expressed his interest in Turkish politics and showed his writings on Turkey dating back to the 1908 revolution.^[4]

In an article in 1909 dealing with the developments in Turkey and the Balkans together, Trotsky wrote that “victory for the revolution will mean the victory of democracy in Turkey, democratic Turkey would be the foundation of a Balkan federation...”^[5]

In 1910, he explained that the only progressive way to achieve the unity

of the Balkan Peninsula was “from below, through the peoples themselves coming together—this is the road of revolution, the road that means overthrowing the Balkan dynasties and unfurling the banner of a Balkan federal republic.”^[6] And this road could only be realized through the united revolutionary struggles of the working class, not by the Balkan bourgeoisie.

As a correspondent in the region during the Balkan Wars exposing war crimes, Trotsky warned that these wars could only be a prelude to a devastating Europe-wide war. The accuracy of this warning was proven by the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

In the same interview with the daily *Milliyet*, Trotsky reminded the interviewer of his support for the Turkish national independence war, when he sent General Frunze to Ankara as a representative of the Red Army. He said he followed “Turkey’s struggle for independence with great interest and was very pleased with this happy outcome.”^[7]

After arriving in Istanbul, Trotsky applied for visas to many European countries, including Germany, France and Britain, but was denied. The reason why the European powers did not accept Trotsky was that they saw in him the embodiment of the specter of revolution.

This fear, which Hitler would also express in 1939, was not without reason. Trotsky was the principal strategist of the world socialist revolution. And that strategy was based on his theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky wrote the “Introduction to the First (Russian) Edition” of his *The Permanent Revolution* in Prinkipo. In the chapter entitled “What is the Permanent Revolution?” he summarizes the basic theses of this theory, which guided the October Revolution of 1917 and must still guide the program of the world socialist revolution.

In his first thesis, he advances an argument that is still valid today:

The theory of the permanent revolution now demands the greatest attention from every Marxist, for the course of the class and ideological struggle has fully and finally raised this question from the realm of reminiscences over old differences of opinion among Russian Marxists, and converted it into a question of the character, the inner connexions and methods of the international revolution in general.^[8]

He elaborated a global theory of the epoch in which we still live, the epoch of imperialist war and socialist revolution. According to Trotsky:

With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy and national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses.^[9]

Today, if one looks at the situation in countries with a belated capitalist development, from the Middle East to Asia, from Africa to Latin America, one sees that these tasks still await their complete and genuine solution.

One of the foundations of the theory of Permanent Revolution was the international character of the socialist revolution. Trotsky emphasized that “Internationalism is no abstract principle but a theoretical and political reflection of the character of world economy, of the world development of productive forces and the world scale of the class struggle.”^[10]

The revolution in the East or in countries with a belated capitalist development and the revolution in the West were inseparable parts of the

world revolution. The Soviet Union was no exception. As Trotsky wrote:

The socialist revolution begins on national foundations—but it cannot be completed within these foundations. The maintenance of the proletarian revolution within a national framework can only be a provisional state of affairs, even though, as the experience of the Soviet Union shows, one of long duration. In an isolated proletarian dictatorship, the internal and external contradictions grow inevitably along with the successes achieved. If it remains isolated, the proletarian state must finally fall victim to these contradictions. The way out for it lies only in the victory of the proletariat of the advanced countries.^[11]

These prophetic words were confirmed when the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. But this final betrayal of the October Revolution by Stalinism has neither disproved Marxism nor changed the character of the epoch. The falsity of the claims of an era of “peace, democracy and prosperity” that accompanied capitalist triumphalism was rapidly exposed. We are still living in the same era of war and revolution.

“Without a proletarian revolution, a new world war is inevitable,”^[12] Trotsky wrote in 1934, five years before the Second World War. In 2014, the Fourth International, which was founded by Trotsky in 1938 and led by the International Committee since 1953, declared: “Another imperialist bloodbath is not only possible; it is inevitable unless the international working class intervenes on the basis of a revolutionary Marxist program.”^[13]

The war in Ukraine raging just north of the Black Sea, a few hundred kilometers from here, is a concrete and alarming example of the accuracy of Trotsky’s analysis of our epoch. Born out of the same global contradictions of capitalism and one of the devastating consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO’s war against Russia has already caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and massive destruction. Moreover, it threatens the entire human civilization with the catastrophe of a global conflict.

There is only one way out of this dangerous maelstrom: The unification of workers all over the world on the basis of an international socialist program against war and the imperialist-capitalist system that produces it. The decisive role of this struggle over the fate of humanity makes Leon Trotsky, who dedicated his life to solving this fundamental question, a living political figure of our time.

[1] Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile*.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932-1933]* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), p. 313.

[3] Ibid., p. 316.

[4] Ömer Sami Coşar, *Troçki İstanbul’da* (İstanbul: Türkiye ?? Bankası Kültür Yayınları?, 2019), pp. 45-46.

<https://www.trotskyisttheoryandpractice.org/2009/01/1909-turks.htm>

[6] Leon Trotsky, “The Balkan Question and Social Democracy”

[7] *Troçki İstanbul’da*, p. 46.

<https://www.trotskyisttheoryandpractice.org/archive/trotsky/1931/1931pr10.htm>

[9] Ibid.

<https://www.trotskyisttheoryandpractice.org/archive/trotsky/1931/1931pre.htm>

[11] Ibid.

<https://www.trotskyisttheoryandpractice.org/archive/trotsky/1934/1934w406warfil.html>

[13] International Committee of the Fourth International, “Socialism and the Fight Against Imperialist War,” URL: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/07/03/icfi-j03.html>



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