

From the archives of the International Committee of the Fourth International

On the Founding of the Left Opposition

David North
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To initiate its commemoration of the centenary of the founding of the Left Opposition on October 15, 1923, the WSWS is re-publishing an editorial by David North which introduced the first-ever English-language publication of key documents related to the founding of the Opposition on the pages of the International Workers Bulletin in 1993.

At the time, the ICFI was commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Left Opposition under conditions of capitalist triumphalism and the early stages of what would become a thirty-year period of uninterrupted wars by US imperialism. In December 1991, barely two years earlier, the Stalinist bureaucracy had dissolved the Soviet Union. It was the culmination of its decades-long betrayal of the internationalist program of the October revolution, which included the massacre of generations of socialists in the political genocide of the 1930s and the assassination of Leon Trotsky in August 1940 in Mexico. A central component of the Stalinist reaction against October was the systematic falsification of history. Leon Trotsky and the leaders of the Left Opposition were not only murdered, but also erased from the history books. Many of the most important documents of the Marxist opposition to Stalinism were either destroyed or kept behind lock and key in closed sections of archives and libraries.

Toward the end of the Soviet Union, the bureaucracy felt compelled to publish a portion of this documentary record. It was not until 1990—over 66 years later—that the full text of the letters sent by Leon Trotsky to the party leadership on October 8 and October 23, 1923, as well as the Declaration of 46, the founding document of the Opposition, were published in Russian in the journal Izvestiia TsK KPSS (Herald of the Central Committee of the CPSU). Only the International Committee undertook an effort to translate and publish them to make them available to an international working class audience. The translation and publication of these documents became a major component of the IC's response to the collapse of Stalinism: the systematic struggle to re-establish a Marxist consciousness in the working class, based on the defense of the historical truth about the fight of Trotskyism against Stalinism.

In contrast to all other political tendencies that claimed to be socialist or "Trotskyist," the International Committee assessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union not as the end of socialism, but as the culmination of the Stalinist betrayal of October and a new stage in the crisis of world imperialism. In a report to the 12th Plenum of the International Committee of the Fourth International on March 11, 1992, David North explained that the October Revolution had arisen out of the decades-long struggle of the Marxist movement in Europe and Russia for socialist consciousness in the working class. By contrast,

the development of the revolutionary political consciousness of the working class, the transformation of an oppressed and exploited mass into a conscious historical force. ... It falls upon the Fourth International, led by the International Committee, to reestablish within the working class the great political culture of Marxism. That is the only foundation upon which a genuine revolutionary workers movement can be built.

Based on this assessment, the ICFI initiated a close intellectual collaboration with the Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin, who would go on to write seven volumes on the history of the Opposition, initiate the 70th anniversary commemoration of the Left Opposition, and play a critical role in the struggle against the post-Soviet school of historical falsification.

Thirty years later, this struggle has been fully vindicated. The world is in the grips of the early stages of a new imperialist redivision of the world, which has begun with the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. On the most fundamental historical level, this war is the outcome of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution. The question of whether there was a socialist alternative to Stalinism has today become the question of whether there is a socialist alternative to capitalism.

Over the coming weeks and months, the WSWS and the ICFI will celebrate the founding of the Trotskyist movement a century ago by publishing these and many other hitherto unavailable documents, as well as with meetings and other educational initiatives. The assimilation of this history will be indispensable in the fight to impart the emerging mass movement of the international working class against imperialist war and capitalism with a Marxist leadership and consciousness.

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This month marks the seventieth anniversary of the beginning of a political struggle of epochal significance. On October 8, 1923, Leon Trotsky addressed a letter to the members of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). Writing with a bluntness that stunned the letter's recipients, Trotsky declared that the party was being destroyed by a process of bureaucratization that had concentrated immense power in an apparatus that systematically suppressed internal democracy. He warned that the party, weakened by a bad political regime, was losing the capacity to deal with the worsening economic crisis that threatened the survival of the Soviet state. With words whose prescience can only now, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, be fully appreciated, Trotsky declared: "The party is entering into what may be the most crucial epoch in its history, carrying the heavy burden of the mistakes made by our leading bodies."

Stalinism set out to destroy the greatest conquest of Marxism:

The effect of the letter was that of a political bombshell. To those who knew that it was their leadership and methods that were the objects of its harsh criticism — the informal “triumvirate” of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin, whose unprincipled faction dominated the RCP Politburo — Trotsky’s letter was seen as a declaration of war. But to others, among whom were to be found the most outstanding Marxist leaders in the period of the revolution and civil war, the letter of October 8 was an inspiration. In terms of his political and moral authority among the most class-conscious sections of the Soviet and international working class, Trotsky’s stature was exceeded only by Lenin. Thus, Trotsky’s criticisms of the bureaucratization of the party and state, coupled with a trenchant analysis of the mistakes in economic policy, provided a focus for the discontent that was spreading throughout the party ranks. One week later, on October 15, a document that became known as the Declaration of the 46 was delivered to the Politburo of the RCP. Building upon Trotsky’s letter, the Declaration called for measures to reinvigorate party democracy and thereby establish the political conditions necessary for overcoming the grave problems that endangered the Soviet Union. The publication of the Declaration, whose signatories included such outstanding figures as Preobrazhensky, Piatakov, Serebriakov, Muralov, Smirnov, Boguslavsky, Sosnovsky and Voronsky, marked the beginning of the political activity of the Left Opposition.

The emergence of the Left Opposition was the climax of a year of extreme tension within the Russian Communist Party. The general sense of foreboding and uncertainty was intensified by the illness of Lenin, whose political activity was brought to an abrupt end by the stroke he suffered on March 9, 1923. But even before illness removed Lenin from the scene, the RCP was in crisis. Indeed, Lenin’s stroke came just as he had concluded that the survival of the RCP depended upon an uncompromising struggle against the bureaucracy in the state and party apparatus.

The objective basis of the crisis lay in the fundamental problem of the Russian Revolution. The Russian working class had come to power under the leadership of the Bolsheviks in one of the most backward of the European capitalist states. The creation of a modern Soviet industry, not to mention its development along socialist lines, depended upon the fate of the proletarian revolution in western Europe. The Bolsheviks had hoped that their victory in Russia would soon be followed by other socialist revolutions. However, the absence within Europe of a party comparable to the Bolsheviks gave the bourgeoisie the breathing space it required to stabilize the capitalist system in the aftermath of World War I.

The ferocity of the civil war that followed the revolution — which was prolonged by the direct intervention of the imperialists on the side of the counterrevolutionary forces — ravaged the economy of the young Soviet republic. An effort to revive industry on the basis of forced requisitions from the peasantry and the militarization of labor (so-called War Communism) provoked intense hostility. Fearing for the stability of the Bolshevik regime if the workers government lost the support of the peasant masses, and recognizing the ebb in the international revolutionary movement, Lenin proposed a temporary retreat. The New Economic Policy (NEP) proposed in March 1921 permitted the peasantry to sell its produce on the market. The relaxation of restraints on capitalist enterprise led, in the short term, to an economic revival. The links between the cities and the countryside were restored. However, despite the unmistakable improvements, those engaged in Marxist analysis detected new dangers. First, in the economic sphere, the revival mainly benefited agriculture and the peasantry. The growth of industry, upon which the fate of the Soviet Union ultimately depended, remained extremely limited. The inability to spur the growth of industry within the framework of NEP found its reflection in a phenomenon to which Trotsky, with characteristic brilliance, drew attention. While the prices of agricultural goods continued to fall, those of the industrial sector were rising rapidly. In his speech to

the Twelfth Party Congress in April 1923, Trotsky illustrated the divergent movement of agricultural and industrial prices in a graph whose lines resembled an open scissors. As the prices of commodities produced by the two basic components of the Soviet economy moved in opposed directions, the “scissors” widened; and this “widening” exposed the danger contained in the NEP: if the terms of trade between agriculture and industry continued to deteriorate, the danger of an economic split between the countryside and the cities, and of a political split between the proletariat and the peasantry, increased.

Trotsky argued, with the notable support of Preobrazhensky, that Soviet policy should strive to lower industrial prices. This required the development of the concept of economic planning, so that the Soviet state could organize production and allocate resources in the most efficient manner. It also required placing a greater burden on agriculture to provide the resources necessary for industrial investment.

Trotsky’s analysis was a model of precision and lucidity. No attempt was made to oppose his analysis at the Twelfth Party Congress. However, it unsettled those layers within the party leadership and ranks who had, after all the years of revolutionary storm and stress, found the more relaxed environment of the NEP quite congenial. This shift in the political psychology of the RCP was connected to changes in its internal composition. The period of the civil war had exacted from the party and the working class a massive human toll. Battlefield wounds, assassinations and disease claimed many of the finest party cadre and best representatives of the Soviet proletariat. The impact of the human losses was compounded by the effect of the economic devastation on the Soviet proletariat, a class whose existence was inextricably linked to industrial production. The collapse of large sections of industry contributed to a degree of deproletarianization that objectively weakened the social basis of Bolshevism.

Yet another factor undermined the revolutionary élan of Bolshevism. The requirements of organizing and supervising a state drew significant sections of the party cadre into the regime’s administrative apparatus. Here many found themselves in a new and strange milieu. They acquired not only new habits of work, but also new privileges. The latter may not have been extravagant, especially by the standards of the capitalist world, but they were significant in an impoverished country where even a piece of fatty meat was a luxury.

Another product of the NEP contributed significantly to the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party. Along with the revival of the capitalist market came a significant relaxation of the stringent bans on the admission of elements from the old pre-Revolution upper middle classes into the party. Not only were those who were referred to ironically as “Red Managers” and “Red Industrialists” increasingly active in the direction of economic affairs, they were able to obtain a party card as well. One such individual who entered the party in this period was Andrei Vyshinsky, who had been an attorney employed by the oil trusts before 1917 and later, during the civil war, a functionary in the counter-revolutionary administration set up by Admiral Kolchak in the area under his control. This same Vyshinsky was to serve as Stalin’s chief prosecutor in the three Moscow Trials of 1936-38.

Lenin, from the earliest days of the NEP, had been acutely sensitive to these negative consequences of the retreat that had been imposed upon the Bolsheviks by unfavorable objective conditions. Frequently he referred scathingly to the “scoundrels” that were infiltrating the party — many of whom had been notorious opponents of the Bolshevik Revolution. But in late 1922, after his recovery from his first major stroke, Lenin became alarmed by signs that previously isolated indications of degeneration were assuming a distinctly political form in crucial areas of party and state policy.

First, Lenin learned in October 1922 that during his absence, the Politburo, at the initiative of Bukharin and with the support of Stalin, had

agreed to permit the weakening of the state monopoly on foreign trade. Recognizing at once the dangers to which this decision would expose the extremely fragile Soviet economy, Lenin accused its initiators of adapting themselves to the expanding influence of the “NEP-men,” that is, the petty-bourgeois traders who were playing an increasingly conspicuous role. Even a stock exchange was again in operation.

Lenin succeeded, with the support of Trotsky, in forcing the reinstatement of the monopoly. But a more serious crisis arose within a few weeks, as Lenin obtained reports that exposed the crude methods that had been employed by Stalin and his henchman, Ordzhonikidze, to compel the leaders of the Georgian Republic to accept their plan for Georgia’s integration into the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. As he studied the complaints of Mdivani and other Georgian leaders, Lenin was appalled by Stalin’s attempt to intimidate the representatives of a non-Russian nationality. Stalin’s actions brought to Lenin’s mind the brutal and hated visage of the Great Russian chauvinist bully.

Though his health was rapidly deteriorating, the Georgian incident compelled Lenin to initiate a profound reevaluation of the state of the party. The final weeks of Lenin’s political life were devoted to the dictation of an extraordinary series of notes which contained candid appraisals of the principal leaders of the party and proposals for counteracting the influence of the bureaucracy. The most remarkable aspect of Lenin’s notes was his identification of Stalin as the direct embodiment of the bureaucratic degeneration that was threatening the party. In an addition to his political testament, written on January 4, 1923, Lenin stated that “Stalin is too rude,” and recommended that he be removed from his position as general secretary.

As Lenin prepared for a decisive showdown with Stalin at the scheduled party congress, he turned for political support, as he had in the struggle over the foreign trade monopoly, to Trotsky. On March 5, 1923, he wrote to Trotsky: “It is my urgent request that you should undertake the defense of the Georgian case in the Party CC.” And later that day, after learning that his wife, Krupskaya, had been verbally abused by Stalin, Lenin wrote an angry letter to the general secretary breaking off all personal relations. This was, however, Lenin’s last political act. His health took a disastrous turn for the worse, and on March 9 he suffered a stroke that left him without the ability to speak or write.

With Lenin removed from the political scene, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin formed an informal alliance to counteract Trotsky’s immense prestige and influence. In this operation, Stalin exploited his control of the party organization. His principal weapon was his ability to make appointments to responsible positions within the party and state apparatus. This power of appointment made a mockery of internal party democracy, because those who were appointed to party posts were completely independent of the ranks. Their power depended, in the final analysis, not on their relation to the advanced strata of the working class but on the approval of Stalin.

For several months, hoping that Lenin would return to political activity, Trotsky refrained from a direct attack upon the triumvirate. But by the autumn of 1923 two factors led him to conclude that the time had come to speak out. First, the economic situation continued to deteriorate, as he had warned at the Twelfth Congress. Second, the deepening crisis in Germany, where revolution seemed on the agenda, carried with it the possibility of a sharp change in the international political situation. This was the context within which Trotsky composed his letter, whose complete text appears in English for the first time on the following pages.





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