

David North introduces the Turkish-language edition of *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century* at the Istanbul Book Fair

“A man of his time, ahead of his time and, now, of our time”

David North
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These remarks were delivered by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board Chairman David North on Sunday, November 5, 2023, at the Istanbul Book Fair in Turkey.

I am grateful to have the opportunity today to present my book, *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century*. Permit me to express my gratitude for the excellent facilities provided by the organizers of the Istanbul Book Fair for this presentation, as well as to my comrades in the *Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu* for having translated my book into Turkish, without which, of course, this presentation would not have been possible.

My book consists of essays and lectures that were written over a period of four decades. The opening section of the book consists of four essays that were written in the autumn of 1982. The book concludes with a statement that I wrote just seven months ago, in April 2023. When the first essays were written, I was a comparatively young man, with only a decade of experience in the revolutionary socialist movement. The last document is the work of a person who, somewhat to my own surprise, has passed beyond the Biblical age of 70 and has been active in the Fourth International for over a half century.

However, despite the many years that separate the writing of the book's opening and concluding sections, they are connected by the same fundamental premise, which is, as I have written in the preface, “that Leon Trotsky was the most significant figure in the history of socialism during the first four decades of the twentieth century, and that his legacy remains the critical and indispensable theoretical and political foundation of the ongoing contemporary struggle for the victory of world socialism. The events of the last forty years have powerfully substantiated this appraisal of Trotsky's place in history and his enduring political significance.”

As I reread these lines, written earlier this year, it occurs to me that the validity of this appraisal has been reinforced by the horrifying events that are presently unfolding, before the eyes of the world, in Gaza. An imprisoned population living in an area that is only 25 miles long and between 5.5 and 7.5 miles wide is being pulverized by military forces directed by the criminal regime of the Israeli state. Two thousand pound bombs and munitions laced with white phosphorus are being dropped on a defenseless population of 2.3 million people. Neither the aged nor children nor even infants are spared. Hospitals and schools are being deliberately targeted. And this is being done with the unstinting support of every imperialist regime in the world. The hypocritical self-styled champions of human rights in Washington, London, Paris and Berlin have banished the word “ceasefire” from their political vocabulary. Nothing

shall be done to interfere with the killing of Palestinians.

All over the world millions of working people and youth are marching in protest against the genocidal war that is being waged against the people of Gaza by the Israeli state and its imperialist paymasters. They are stunned by the complicity of their governments in this historic crime. How is this to be explained, let alone justified?

But what they are witnessing are the political manifestations of an epoch that Leon Trotsky defined 85 years ago as “the death agony of capitalism.” It is an era, he wrote, of “convulsions, crises, catastrophes, epidemics, and bestiality.” As the class antagonisms between the ruling elites and the working class grow ever more intense, all the “elementary moral precepts” disappear from the formulation of state policies: “Mendacity, slander, bribery, venality, coercion, murder [grow] to unprecedented dimensions.”

Trotsky wrote these words not as a moralist but as a revolutionary. He warned, in the founding document of the Fourth International, written in 1938 on the very eve of World War II: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.”

The events of the next six years were to vindicate his warnings. The fact that the war did not result in the complete extermination of civilization was not a refutation of Trotsky's perspective. The first nuclear bombs did not become available for use until 1945. Given the development of technology over the last three-quarters of a century, the catastrophe foreseen by Trotsky has now become an imminent danger.

And this brings us to the central argument advanced in my book. The contemporary world is riven by the same economic, social and political contradictions analyzed by Trotsky during his lifetime. We live in a world that Trotsky would recognize very well. He would, one can imagine, be amazed by the remarkable advances in technology; but he would understand very well the forces at work in the global economic crises, the new eruption of imperialist militarism and the intensification of the global class struggle.

Of all the major political figures of the past century, Trotsky is unique in that his work retains extraordinary contemporary relevance. Indeed, to the extent that Trotsky towered above all other—with the single exception of Lenin—political contemporaries, it can be said that he was ahead of his time. Objective conditions—particularly in the aftermath of the defeat of the German revolution in 1923 and the death of Lenin in 1924—placed him and the political tendency and program that he represented at a disadvantage.

The course of Trotsky's life—his remarkable rise to power as the co-leader of the 1917 October Revolution, his subsequent fall from political power in the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1928, and his subsequent exile and assassination in 1940—was determined by and reflected different stages in the development of the world socialist revolution. No other figure in modern history understood as well and gave such conscious expression, from the standpoint of the interests of the international working class, to the revolutionary dynamic of the epoch.

The fundamental socio-economic processes and issues of political perspective with which Trotsky dealt remain those of our time. Isaac Deutscher memorably evoked the image of a prophet in the title of his three-volume biography of Trotsky. There are legitimate grounds for objecting to the use of the biblical metaphor. And yet, as a literary device, this description of Trotsky was justified. For he was both a man of his time, ahead of his time and, now, of our time.

At this point, it should hardly be necessary to argue that history has totally vindicated the struggle waged by Trotsky against the Soviet bureaucracy and the totalitarian regime identified with the name of Stalin. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 confirmed his indictment of Stalin as the gravedigger of the October Revolution and Trotsky's warning that the bureaucratic regime, unless overthrown in a political revolution, would destroy the USSR and reintroduce capitalism.

Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist regime would be sufficient to secure his place in history. In the face of relentless persecution, Trotsky defended revolutionary principles against a murderous regime. But it is essential to understand the issue of world historical significance that underlay Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism, which was centered on his opposition to the anti-Marxist and reactionary theory of "socialism in one country."

Trotsky's place in history is that of the greatest theorist and strategist of world socialist revolution. The theory of permanent revolution, which he first formulated in 1906, not only foresaw that the democratic revolution in Russia would necessarily assume the form of a socialist revolution that would be actualized as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Trotsky recognized—and this is where his political genius found its most brilliant expression—that the proletarian struggle against capitalism and imperialism developed as a global process. The struggle of the working class, in both the advanced and less developed countries (this is, those with a belated capitalist-bourgeois development), had to be based on an international, rather than national strategy.

In 1928, writing from exile in Alma Ata (prior to his expulsion from the Soviet Union), Trotsky wrote in his critique of the program of the Stalinist-controlled Third International:

On August 4, 1914, the death knell sounded for national programs for all time. The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. An international communist program is in no case the sum total of national programs or an amalgam of their common features. The international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts. In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.

Two years later, in his most complete formulation of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, Trotsky explained the trajectory of the revolutionary process in the modern epoch:

The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.

This perspective has been substantiated by the subsequent course of 20th century history. In fact, present events testify to the life-and-death implications of Trotsky's global perspective. The crimes of the Israeli government are rooted ideologically and programmatically in the claim that the solution to the historic persecution of Jewish people was to be found in the nationalist vision of Zionism. The socialist movement waged an unrelenting struggle, spanning decades, against Zionist ideology. Trotsky warned repeatedly of the tragic consequences that would flow from the Zionist project. And now, 75 years after the establishment of the Israeli state, the Zionist utopia has degenerated into a hellish regime, resorting to genocidal policies that were employed by the Nazis against European Jewry 80 years ago. But the reactionary character of Zionism is reproduced in all other forms of nationalism. It is a perspective that has been superseded by the global development of the productive forces and the internationalization of the class struggle. The nation-state as a vehicle for the progressive development of humanity is over. The survival of civilization is now bound up entirely with the overthrow of capitalism and the nation-state system and the transition to a world socialist federation.

Trotsky is the towering figure of both the 20th and 21st centuries. It is my hope that *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century* will contribute to the study of his life and work, and, above all, to the building of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.



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