

Trotskyists in the former Soviet Union commemorate centenary of Lenin's death

Our reporter
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On Sunday, January 21, the Young Guard of Bolshevik Leninists, a Trotskyist youth organization in the former Soviet Union, held an event to commemorate the centenary since the death of Lenin at the age of 53, in 1924.

After a minute of silence honoring the great revolutionary leader, the meeting was addressed by Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International and a leading member of the German section of the ICFI, the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*. Schwarz stressed at the outset:

The very fact that this meeting is taking place in the former Soviet Union proves that a hundred years of efforts by the Stalinists to turn Lenin into a harmless icon, to mummify and falsify him, as well as those of the anti-communists (including Putin) to demonize him, have failed. Lenin is highly relevant today. Even its most vehement defenders can no longer deny that global capitalism is in deep crisis.

He then reviewed the current political situation, stressing that the “Third World War has already begun” and emphasizing the relevance of Lenin’s analysis of imperialism and his insistence on the need to build an independent revolutionary party of the working class. He stated,

Lenin’s book on *Imperialism* is one of the most topical writings today. Lenin demonstrated that imperialism is not simply a specific bourgeois policy, but represents a new, the highest stage of capitalism. ... Capitalism, Lenin concluded, could not be reformed, it had to be overthrown. Moral appeals and pressure on the imperialists to adopt a more peaceful policy could only generate illusions and curb the revolutionary energy of the masses. Lenin understood that the same objective processes that had led to world war also created the conditions for proletarian revolution. His entire perspective was based on the conclusion that the war and the contradictions of imperialism would drive the masses into revolution.

But while the intensification of the class struggle was an objective, spontaneous process, its outcome—i.e., the question of the victory or defeat of the revolution—depended on the existence of a conscious proletarian leadership. No one understood this question as sharply as Lenin; herein lies his unique historical role and his genius as a Marxist.

After Peter Schwarz, Clara Weiss, the national secretary of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US,

addressed the meeting. She stressed the central role that the defense of Lenin’s conception of a revolutionary vanguard party and the fight for Marxism in the working class had played in the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against revisionist and opportunist tendencies. She quoted James P. Cannon, the author of the Open Letter, who noted in 1954, in the first stages of the struggle against Pabloism,

We alone are unconditional adherents of the Lenin-Trotsky theory of the party of the conscious vanguard and its role as leader of the revolutionary struggle. This theory acquires burning actuality and dominates all others in the present epoch. The problem of leadership now is not limited to spontaneous manifestations of the class struggle in a long drawn-out process, nor even to the conquest of power in this or that country where capitalism is especially weak. It is a question of the development of the *international* revolution and the socialist transformation of society. To admit that this can happen automatically is, in effect, to abandon Marxism altogether. No, it can only be a *conscious* operation, and it imperatively requires the leadership of the Marxist party which represents the conscious element in the historic process. No other party will do.

The meeting was then addressed by four leaders of the Young Guard of Bolshevik Leninists. Ostap Rerikh, the head of the organization, spoke to the extraordinary historical and international role of Vladimir Lenin and the fact that the continuity of his legacy was represented only by the ICFI and its supporters in the former Soviet Union.

“Our organization,” he said, “is the only force in the entire post-Soviet space 100 years after Lenin’s death that can actually claim to be the true successor and representative of Leninism and Bolshevism.”

Rerikh denounced the political opportunism of the Russian Pabloites and figures like Boris Kagarlitsky, who has close ties to the Pabloite movement and has been functioning as an adviser for the Russian oligarchy for decades, while portraying himself as a “socialist.” Rerikh also pointed to the role of Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). Even as they are promoting extreme Russian chauvinism and racism and defending all the crimes of Joseph Stalin, the KPRF still frequently cites Lenin, and Zyuganov went to see Lenin’s grave. Rerikh stated,

The cause of liberating the proletariat from the yoke of capital is not the cause of Kagarlitsky and Zyuganov and their henchmen, but the cause of the proletariat itself, which must realize the historical tasks that time has already set for it, which must be familiar with the experience of the past battles of the proletariat:

with their victories and their defeats. ... The Leninist perspective consists in the struggle for an independent proletarian party that will fight against all manifestations of opportunism and revisionism that see the workers as subjugated to the bourgeoisie rather than liberated. The Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists defends this perspective by seeking to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in the former USSR and to revive Trotskyism and therefore Leninism. Our great cause is to link the working class of Europe and America with the post-Soviet working class so that together they can take on world capital by learning the lessons of history. This is the essence of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which seeks to nurture the revolutionary consciousness of the working class and connect it with the workers of all countries.

In his contribution, Andrei Ritsky, another leader of the YGBL, highlighted that Lenin's struggle against national opportunism and his study of imperialism during World War I were the political basis for his acceptance of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in 1917. He noted,

Lenin's understanding of imperialism was the starting point that then ensured his alliance with Trotsky in 1917 and for the rest of his life. Trotsky, who by that time was better able than before to recognize the need for complete organizational separation from the opportunists, now managed to become "the best Bolshevik" (Lenin).

Many of Lenin's critics, past and present, have accused him of being "elitist" and "ruthless." The essence of these accusations has always been to cover their opportunism before the masses. These critics always hid behind a democratic phrase in the style of petty-bourgeois radicals. Lenin, in contrast to them, was a real authority among the masses. He earned his authority by his tireless struggle against bourgeois ideology and its apologists. He was not afraid of the masses and did not hide from them, because he had nothing to hide and conceal. Lenin's style is above all honesty and clarity. Lenin fought for socialist consciousness not for the sake of later renouncing it, but to raise the working class to the level of its historical task arising from its socioeconomic position in capitalist society.

He concluded,

Today, the YGBL faces great challenges in reviving Trotskyism in the former Soviet Union. Such a revival cannot be done without internalizing Lenin's policies and linking them to contemporary political reality. Lenin's intransigence and clarity are needed more than ever in our endeavor.

Let the centenary of Lenin's death be a day of revitalization of Leninist principles around the world and in the former Soviet Union. The rising international working class needs them to expand and consolidate its struggle against imperialism and war, against pandemic and inequality.

After Ritsky's speech, Lev Ustinov reviewed the political development of Lenin, beginning with his turn to Marxism, based on the writings of Georgi V. Plekhanov, the "father of Russian Marxism," in the 1880s and

early 1890s. Like Ritsky, Ustinov discussed the seminal importance of Lenin's struggle against the betrayal of the Second International, which, in its majority, endorsed the imperialist slaughter of World War I. He observed, "The foundations for the future Communist International were laid by an anti-war conference of socialists in Zimmerwald in 1915, attended by only 31 people (!), and they later proved stronger than the entire renegade Second International."

Ustinov then noted,

Vladimir Lenin ... maintained his revolutionary optimism throughout his struggle, both in periods of the most brutal reaction and in those periods when the revolutionary situation was literally at hand, although it was something that not everyone could understand. And it is especially important for us now to learn this lesson from Lenin; namely, that we have to maintain our revolutionary optimism when the world capitalist system is being torn apart by internal contradictions, expressed in the wars that have begun and are just beginning all over the earth, not yet linked into a single world chain of conflict. When the international working class everywhere revolts against the system of exploitation, oppression and continuous wars. When in the imperialist centers of Europe and America the workers rise up against all that has just been described. According to the various apologists of the bourgeoisie, this should never have happened, because there the working class, they say, is provided with everything it needs not to go to the barricades and revolutions. Now we are witnessing with our own eyes the delusionary nature of such statements.

The last speaker, Carla, drew attention to a manuscript by Trotsky, "Truth and Falsehood about Lenin," in which Trotsky commented on a piece by the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky on Lenin. (Gorky, by then, had adapted to the Stalinist bureaucracy.) In it, Trotsky stressed that Lenin's extraordinary focus on a single goal—the socialist revolution—was the most striking feature of his personality.

In a subsequent discussion, Rerikh noted that in Russia, forces like the Stalinists under Gennady Zyuganov still seek to cover their own right-wing policies with Lenin's name. Nevertheless, he noted that, "Despite the war [in Ukraine], people are still reading Lenin and are turning to him to find answers to fundamental questions. The works of Trotsky too are again being read. And the false adherents of Lenin are discrediting themselves." It was a central task of the YGBL to study Lenin and "cleanse his name from the falsifications of Stalinism and the capitalists" and that it had to continue the struggle waged by Vadim Rogovin to restore the historical truth about the struggle of Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism. This, he concluded, was essential for building the "world party" which alone "can solve the problems of our period."

In concluding the meeting, Peter Schwarz raised the question of what would have happened if Lenin had not died as early as he did. Referencing an article by Plekhanov "On the role of the Individual in History", Schwarz noted that personalities came to occupy a central and even decisive role in the historical process whenever they were acting with a high degree of consciousness of, and in accordance with, the objective historical process and social forces. Many things indicate, Schwarz observed, that had Lenin not died in January 1924, the course of historical developments would have been different. Yet as severe a blow as his death was, it did not halt the course of the class struggle or the crisis of world capitalism.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has not only defended the legacy of Lenin but has also developed it. Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union and the phenomenon of the bureaucracy marked an important development of Marxism. And the founding of the Fourth International in 1938 was not a mere continuation of the Third International. After the Second World War, this heritage was developed above all in the struggle against Pabloism and the analysis advanced by the ICFI of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the globalization of production. Based on these analyses, the ICFI undertook significant changes in its practice. It founded the Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is today published on a daily basis and read in 150 countries.

In *What Is To Be Done?* [1902], Lenin stressed the significance of an all-Russian newspaper, *Iskra*. But the development of the means of communication and the international integration of the working class were nowhere near the level that exists today. In this regard, we are in an entirely different situation today than Lenin and Trotsky. The revolutionary crisis in the US, the center of world imperialism, is extremely far advanced. I think that the emergence of the American working class as a revolutionary force will have an enormous impact especially on the working class in the former Soviet Union. We have to see the study and rehabilitation of Lenin, and the fight against the abuse and falsifications of his work, in that context. The ICFI today is presented with enormous opportunities and has gained immense strength—that itself the result of the decades-long defense and development of the heritage of Lenin and Trotsky. It will be built as the conscious political leadership as the world party of socialist revolution.



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