# On the anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky

**David North**
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*On August 21, 1940, Leon Trotsky, coleader of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia and founder of the Fourth International, died of a wound inflicted by the Stalinist assassin, Ramon Mercader, the previous day. Trotsky was 60 years old. To commemorate this tragic anniversary, the WSWS is reposting an essay written by David North in 2022.*

*To learn more about the assassination, click here.*

Eighty-two years ago today, on August 20, 1940, Leon Trotsky was assassinated by an agent of the Stalinist secret police, the GPU, in his villa in Coyoacan, Mexico, where he spent the final three years of his life as a political exile. Trotsky died of the wound inflicted by the killer, Ramon Mercader, on the following day.

This anniversary does not mark a five- or 10-year interval, which, as a matter of formal custom, imparts to the observance of historical events a special significance. However, the commemoration of Trotsky's death does not require symbolic justification. The importance of the 82nd anniversary of Trotsky's death flows from the relevance of his life as a Marxist theoretician and strategist and leader of world socialist revolution.

The political conditions that existed in August 1940 resemble to an extraordinary degree those that exist today. In the final year of his life Trotsky's work was concentrated on the outbreak of World War II and its implications for the international working class, the world socialist movement and the fate of humanity. Trotsky, the most realistic political thinker of his age, was not inclined to paint the world situation in rosy colors. He confronted with brutal frankness the catastrophe that had befallen the working class as a consequence of the betrayal of the October Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy that held power in the Soviet Union and the spinelessness of the pro-capitalist Social Democratic-led labor organizations.

It is a measure of not only Trotsky's astonishing political farsightedness but also of the parallels between the conditions of 1940 and today, that he devoted an immense amount of attention to the place of Ukraine in the fate of the Soviet Union and all of Europe. Just four months before the outbreak of the Second World War, Trotsky warned:

> The Ukrainian question is destined in the immediate future to play an enormous role in the life of Europe. It was not for nothing that Hitler so noisily raised the question of creating a "Greater Ukraine." And likewise it was not for nothing that he dropped this question with such stealthy ease.[1]

Trotsky recognized the legitimacy of the striving of the Ukrainian masses for national self-determination. The formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics by the Bolshevik government in 1922, when Lenin and Trotsky were still the dominant figures, insisted on the voluntary character of the Union and opposed all tendencies to subordinate its Ukrainian component to the pressure of Great Russian chauvinism. The Declaration of Union and Treaty of Union, dated December 30, 1922, defined the USSR as "a voluntary union of equal peoples," whose formation would prove "a decided step towards the union of the workers of all countries into a World Socialist Soviet Federation."[2]

By the late 1930s, 15 years of escalating violations of socialist internationalism and bureaucratic terror and despotism had generated deep hostility among the Ukrainian masses toward the Soviet Union and created a constituency for the revival of the most reactionary political tendencies. Trotsky wrote:

> Not a trace remains of the former confidence and sympathy of the Western Ukrainian masses for the Kremlin. Since the latest murderous "purge" in the Ukraine no one in the West wants to become part of the Kremlin satrapy which continues to bear the name of Soviet Ukraine. The worker and peasant masses in the Western Ukraine, in Bukovina, in the Carpatho-Ukraine are in a state of confusion: Where to turn? What to demand? This situation naturally shifts the leadership to the most reactionary Ukrainian cliques who express their "nationalism" by seeking to sell the Ukrainian people to one imperialism or another in return for a promise of fictitious independence. Upon this tragic

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> confusion Hitler bases his policy in the Ukrainian question. At one time we said: but for Stalin (i.e., but for the fatal policy of the Comintern in Germany) there would be no Hitler. To this can be added: but for the rape of Soviet Ukraine by the Stalinist bureaucracy there would be no Hitlerite Ukrainian policy.[3]

Accounting for the passage of time and changing what needs to be changed, Trotsky's analysis remains an indispensable historical foundation for an understanding of the present war. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of a capitalist regime in Russia cannot attract the population of Western Ukraine. In the demoralized environment created by the restoration of capitalism, the political situation in Ukraine, in the words of Trotsky, "naturally shifts the leadership to the most reactionary Ukrainian cliques [i.e., that of Poroshenko, Zelensky and the neo-Nazi militias] who express their 'nationalism' by seeking to sell the Ukrainian people to one imperialism or another in return for a promise of fictitious independence." And, on the basis of Putin's bankrupt and reactionary policies, the US and its NATO allies develop their policies in Ukraine.

Trotsky advocated the formation of an independent *socialist* Ukraine. He rejected with contempt all claims that Ukrainian independence, in any politically progressive sense, could be achieved on a capitalist basis.

> 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.[4]

Today the imperialist proxy war in Ukraine is justified by propaganda in its most debased form. The hack journalists of the capitalist press, ignorant of history, function as the public stenographers of their national intelligence agencies. The vast majority of academics, even those who have studied the history of Ukraine and Russia, have fallen into line with the pro-war hysteria. These intellectual sycophants are incapable of displaying independence of thought and critical judgment. No better and probably worse are the denizens of pseudoleft organizations who posture as socialists and even Marxists as they offer deceitful and hypocritical justifications for not only the imperialist operations in Ukraine but also its preparations for war against China.

Trotsky, in his time, did not refrain from expressing his contempt for the demoralized and dishonest middle class intellectuals who capitulated in the face of political reaction. His political intransigence was rooted in a profound grasp of historical processes and confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working class. "World reaction has unquestionably assumed monstrous proportions nowadays," he wrote on the eve of World War II. "But thereby it has prepared the soil for the greatest revolutionary crisis."

These words reverberate in our own times. Eighty-two years after his assassination, Trotsky, a giant in the history of the last century, remains an immense intellectual and political presence in the revolutionary struggles of the 21st.

Trotsky, Leon. "Problem of the Ukraine." April 22, 1939. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/04/ukraine.html.

Wade, Rex A. *Documents of Soviet History*. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1993. p. 445

Trotsky, Leon. "Problem of the Ukraine." April 22, 1939. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/04/ukraine.html.

ibid

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[1] Trotsky, Leon. "Problem of the Ukraine." April 22, 1939. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/04/ukraine.html.

[2] Wade, Rex A. *Documents of Soviet History*. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1993. p. 445

[3] Trotsky, Leon. "Problem of the Ukraine." April 22, 1939. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/04/ukraine.html.

[4] ibid

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