A reply to an anarchist's falsification of the Leon Trotsky commemoration on Prinkipo

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On Sunday, August 25, a remarkable intellectual event took place in Büyükada (Prinkipo), Istanbul: The Second International Commemoration of Leon Trotsky. Hosted by the Adalar (Islands) Municipality and organized with the contributions of the *World Socialist Web Site* and Mehring Yay?nc?l?k (Books), the event was entitled "Analyzing a World in Chaos from an Island of Tranquility: Trotsky on Prinkipo." Trotsky spent most of his four and a half years in Turkey, where he was exiled by the Stalinist regime in 1929, on this island and analyzed the world in chaos from this "island of tranquility."

The panel was opened by Ali Ercan Akpolat, mayor of Adalar, and moderated by Ula? Ate?çi, editor of Mehring Yay?nc?l?k and a leading member the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu (Socialist Equality Group), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Professor R?dvan Ak?n, faculty member of Galatasaray University in Istanbul, spoke about "Trotsky's years on Prinkipo."

The main speaker at the event was David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board. He gave a lecture entitled "Analyzing a World in Chaos from an Island of Tranquility." The commemoration concluded with a lively and significant question and answer session.

In his comprehensive lecture, North examined the historical and political significance and contemporary relevance of Trotsky's work on the island, especially his critical writings on the rise of fascism in Germany, in the context of the various dimensions of the deepening global capitalist crisis today. For the policy of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) under the direction of Stalin, which paved the way for the Nazis to come to power in 1933, had disastrous consequences for the German and international working class that continue to have an impact today.

The growing awareness of the historical and contemporary significance of this great Russian revolutionary, who co-led the October Revolution of 1917 alongside Vladimir Lenin, founded the Red Army that won victory in the imperialist-backed civil war, led the Left Opposition in the struggle against Stalinist degeneration in the Soviet Union and founded the Fourth International in 1938 against the collapse of the Communist International, brought a large audience to Prinkipo again this year.

The Trotsky commemoration was covered by many national and local media outlets and widely discussed on social media before and after the event. However, a former Maoist and current anarchist, Gün Zileli, who was in the audience, published an article on his website denouncing and misrepresenting North's remarks. Zileli was given the opportunity to speak at the end of the event and express his differences. But, as we will see below, his article does not mention this discussion and deliberately distorts North's statement by omitting what was said on critical issues such as the war in Ukraine.

In his article, Zileli criticizes North for giving a comprehensive and serious lecture in English. First, it should be noted that Turkish is not one of the languages North can speak. Therefore, North, the WSWS, and Mehring Yay?nc?l?k had made a Turkish translation of the speech available to all listeners in advance as an expression of respect for members of the audience who could not follow the speech in English.

Zileli also sets out to present a picture of North as an evil authoritarian figure: North, with his "stern features," spoke with "dictating, harsh emphasis." Zileli was "disheartened" by North's "eyes and gaze as cold as the Arctic Ocean." While the article quotes North's speech incompletely and distorts his views, this invented figure of Mephistopheles is intended to create prejudice against him.

"No jokes, no laughs!", Zileli complained, apparently expecting to see a comedian at this important commemoration event and disturbed to see a serious political leader in North. Did Zileli really expect a speech on the following critical issues to be full of jokes: the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany in 1933; the murder of hundreds of thousands of socialists by the Stalinist regime during the Great Terror of 1936-1939 in the USSR; the assassination of Trotsky by a Stalinist agent in 1940; the Holocaust and the Second World War; the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused over 27 million "excess deaths"; the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine that risks a nuclear conflict; the Israeli genocide in Gaza; and the resurgence of fascism worldwide?

In his article, Zileli says nothing about the most critical aspects of North's lecture and tries to mislead his readers with cheap polemics. However, what North, a prominent Marxist-Trotskyist politician from the United States the center of world imperialism—said, especially on the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the war in Ukraine, was of great objective significance. North, as a revolutionary who has devoted over 50 years of his life to the struggle against US imperialism on the basis of an international socialist program, embodied the reality that there are two Americas: the American ruling class, and its most powerful enemy, the American working class. North was here as a representative of the American working class.

North devoted a significant part of his speech to unconditionally condemning the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and to putting forward a socialist perspective based on the revolutionary mobilization of the international working class against this historic crime. Explaining that the Zionist project is at the root of today's genocide, he said:

> This reactionary chauvinist project has now morally implicated the Israeli population in a crime of historic magnitude. The descendants of the victims of genocide have become the perpetrators of genocide. The Israeli working class and youth must tear itself free from the reactionary ideology and politics of Zionism.

In his article, Zileli quotes North's speech out of context and accuses him of "giving advice" to Putin. In reality, North explained in detail the ICFI's approach to the war in Ukraine, especially in the Q&A session at the end of the event. He outlined the ICFI's uncompromising opposition

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not only to the US and NATO, and their proxy force in Ukraine, but also to the Putin regime in Russia and its invasion of Ukraine.

Zileli is not being honest in his article by failing to mention that he took the floor during the Q&A session of the event and explicitly took a stance in favor of the Ukrainian regime backed by the US and NATO, or that North made a comprehensive statement on this issue. In fact, both the moderator of the event and North gave Zileli the opportunity to openly express his political differences.

In his remarks, Zileli stated: "Until today, I knew that Ukraine was occupied by Russia. Here I learned this: Ukraine is invading Russia. I think this is a distortion of the fact. There is no such thing. It is Russia that started the occupation and is continuing it. Ukraine is fighting a defensive war." These words are a clear expression of approval for the unlimited political, military and financial support of the imperialist powers to Ukraine.

In his lecture, North warned that US-NATO escalation against Russia could provoke retaliation by the Putin regime, leading to a global catastrophe.

North's comprehensive response to Zileli's objection in the Q&A was a concise summary of the Trotskyist movement's approach to the Ukrainian war. We quote that response in full below:

> In the analysis of a war, the least important of all questions is who fired the first shot. Wars always have deep historical and political roots. As for the origins of the Ukraine war, I think that it is naive and incorrect to approach the war as if it simply began in February of 2022. The circumstances which led to this war have far deeper historical roots. It depends how far back do you want to go?
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> Of course, you must at least go back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, because the conflict which has arisen between Russia and Ukraine is at the very least bound up with the circumstances which arose in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union.
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> But I make the point that just two months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in December, 1991, I spoke in Kyiv in October 1991 and I warned that one of the consequences of the breakup of the USSR would be the exacerbation of national conflicts between different factions of the Russian and Ukrainian Stalinist bureaucracies.
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> I want to make the point that what I will say now is the statement of a political tendency which stands opposed to both the Ukrainian and Russian governments. Neither of them are of a progressive character.
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> Nevertheless, there is a vast amount of empirical evidence that at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, assurances were given to the Russian government that NATO would not utilize the breakup of the Soviet Union to expand its forces to the east. The fact of the matter is, since 1991, the boundaries of NATO were moved 800 miles to the east, and many of the countries that were formally either part of the Soviet Union or connected to the Warsaw Pact, which was the Soviet defensive system, were incorporated into NATO.
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> Now we can look at a more recent period. In 2014, the United States and Germany orchestrated the overthrow of the elected Ukrainian government, the so-called Maidan events. And they brought to power on this basis an extreme right-wing political force. I mean the history of Ukrainian nationalism, particularly the nationalism which arose in the western portion of Ukraine, is among the filthiest in modern history. The Ukrainian national movement associated with Stepan Bandera, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, was allied with the Nazis during World War Two.
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> There is nothing progressive about the Ukrainian national movement. And there has been since 2014, the year of the coup, almost unrelenting military conflict in which eastern Ukrainians, who are predominantly Russian speaking, have suffered approximately 14,000 deaths.
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> That does not justify, and we do not justify, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The regime of Putin is itself a reactionary capitalist regime, and as such it has sought to settle the problems posed by the expansion of NATO in a reactionary manner. It has not appealed to the working class of Russia. It has not appealed to the working class of Europe and of Ukraine. It has undertaken a war which has, in fact, played into the hands of the imperialists.

North went on to highlight the case of Ukrainian Trotskyist leader Bogdan Syrotiuk, who was arrested by the Ukrainian regime on April 25 for this principled revolutionary internationalist stand. He said:

> I would like to point out that our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, has political supporters in both Ukraine and Russia. They function under the name of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, and they advance an opposition to both Zelensky and Putin to call for the unity of Russian and Ukrainian workers.
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> And for advancing this position, the leader of the YGBL, Bogdan Syrotiuk, who lives in southern Ukraine, has been arrested by the government and held for the last three months.
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> Our opposition to the invasion of Ukraine is an opposition from the left and not from the right. The war being waged by NATO is a proxy war. The lives of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have been expended in the interests of American and European imperialism.
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> Those who have studied the foreign policy of the United States were not surprised by the outbreak of the war. Ukraine has vast geostrategic implications for American and European imperialism. Not only does it have vast raw materials which are vital to modern capitalist industry. But the defeat of Russia would inevitably lead to the breakup of the Russian state and the transformation of what is presently Russia into a whole series of mini colonies of American and European imperialism.

Zileli also writes that "Russia's aggression against Ukraine, not NATO expansionism, was the reason for the sudden decision of uninvolved countries like Switzerland [sic] and Finland to join NATO."

The ruling classes of Sweden (not Switzerland) and Finland, the "uninvolved " countries that Zileli justifies joining NATO—the imperialist war organization of which Turkey is a part—in the midst of the war against Russia, have a long anti-Soviet and anti-Russian record dating back to the early twentieth century. The Swedish ruling class has wanted to join NATO for decades and, even before becoming a member of the alliance, worked closely with the US and European intelligence services, especially against Russia. The Finnish bourgeoisie, on the other hand, has a sordid record of collaboration with the imperialist powers against the Soviet regime after World War I and World War II.

Zileli also asks cynically about North's response to John Kelly, a British academic who has written two books in the past six years denouncing Trotskyism: "Why is it our business?" But the response to Professor Kelly was entirely consistent with the main theme of North's lecture. In his

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speech, North said:

> We are not only paying tribute to the man who stands alongside Lenin as the greatest Marxist theoretician and revolutionary of the twentieth century. We are acknowledging the unique place occupied by Trotsky's political legacy in contemporary world politics.
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> To describe Trotsky's political conceptions as merely "relevant" is a vast understatement. One cannot understand the political contradictions of the present-day world—which is among other things manifested in a worldwide resurgence of fascism—without a systematic study of Trotsky's writings. His theory of permanent revolution is as essential to the strategy and practice of international socialism—that is, the struggle to secure the future of humanity—as the theories of Einstein and Heisenberg are to the comprehension of the physical universe.

In this context, North went on to respond to current attacks on Trotskyism. In fact, Zileli finds in North's response to Kelly a profound critique of the views he shares. Both Zileli and Kelly consider Trotsky and Trotskyism "irrelevant." One can't help wondering why this "irrelevant" political movement is so preoccupying to Kelly and now to Zileli.

The source for this reaction is the principled commitment of Leon Trotsky and the heirs of the political movement he founded to a revolutionary perspective and historical truth. North's remarks make this crystal clear.

In his article, Zileli also seeks to attack the holding of a commemoration event of Trotsky on a principled joint basis between the International Committee and the administration of Adalar Municipality. The political basis for this event is the principled position of the administrations of the former mayor Erdem Gül and the newly elected mayor Ali Ercan Akpolat on the historical and cultural significance of Trotsky's years on Prinkipo. This attitude was reflected in Akpolat's opening speech at the event as follows:

> We are here today for an event of historical and contemporary political importance. It has been 91 years since Leon Trotsky, the indomitable defender of the working class who fought for an egalitarian world and lost his life for this cause, left Büyükada.
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> It is also the 84th anniversary of his assassination in 1940. On this occasion, I remember him with respect.
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> Trotsky settled in Büyükada in 1929 and spent four years here on our island. He wrote the most important of his works based on a free and egalitarian world in his house on the island. His life was intertwined with the ups and downs of the class struggle. And today we will talk about the world in chaos in the light of Trotsky's dream, struggle and works.
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> We have an internationally important historical and cultural heritage left by Trotsky that has been neglected for many years. Our aim is to restore the house where Trotsky lived on Büyükada and turn it into an international library and museum house. Our research and work in this direction is ongoing. Wouldn't it be great if this house, which has been abandoned to its fate for years, is transformed into a cultural center that opens its doors to the whole world?
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> As I conclude my speech, I respectfully salute Leon Trotsky and all revolutionaries who fought and paid a price for a better world.

World Socialist Web Site and the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu welcome the strong sentiments expressed in these words and this principled stand for the preservation of Trotsky's historical and cultural legacy. We will continue to support the initiative to commemorate Trotsky with an annual international intellectual event on Büyükada, where he spent four years, and to restore the Trotsky House in a manner worthy of this great revolutionary and make it a cultural center accessible to workers, youth and intellectuals from all over the world.

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