

# Stalinist provocateur goes unchallenged at Socialist Workers Party's "Marxism 2025" Russia Course

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At this year's Socialist Workers Party (SWP) "Marxism Festival", a revealing incident underscored the anti-Trotskyist character of this organisation.

The festival opened on July 3, with three workshops collectively titled "Russia Course". "Russia 1917: Coup or Revolution?" was followed by "Did Lenin lead to Stalin—and why does it matter?" ending with "Is there anything socialist about Stalinism?"

Despite its rejection of Trotskyism, the SWP has long sought to associate itself with Leon Trotsky as a historical figure. Tony Cliff, the group's founder, wrote of Trotsky as "a political giant" (*Trotskyism After Trotsky: The Origins of the International Socialists*, 1999) even as he opposed Trotsky's analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy and denied the viability of the Fourth International that Trotsky founded in 1938. Trotskyism was "a cul-de-sac", Cliff wrote, while "Trotskyists suffered from the psychological need to believe in miracles."

At all three workshops, the audience was mostly young, showing a thirst for knowledge about the Russian Revolution and Trotsky's fight against the Soviet bureaucracy headed by Joseph Stalin.

But in the final two presentations that dealt with the rise of Stalinism, Trotsky was mentioned just twice. None of Trotsky's writings were cited by either of the SWP's presenters. During the historical period covered by the presenters—the 1920s and 1930s—the fate of the Russian and world revolution hung in the balance. Yet Trotsky, the foremost Marxist opponent of the Soviet bureaucracy, who defended the internationalist programme of Bolshevism, was reduced by the SWP to an historical footnote.

The final presentation "Is there anything socialist about Stalinism?", was delivered by Dugald Macfarlane, an SWP recruit from the Scottish National Party. True to his nationalist pedigree, he managed to discuss Stalin and Bukharin's anti-Marxist theory of "socialism in a single country" without mentioning Trotsky or the theory of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky's theory, which viewed the Russian Revolution as the opening shot of the world socialist revolution, was the political axis of the struggle he initiated with leading Bolsheviks in 1923 through the formation of the Left Opposition, against the emerging state and party bureaucracy.

In the Q&A after Macfarlane's presentation, a Stalinist provocateur in the audience attacked Trotsky. He said: "Trotsky never had any proper positions and later on would forego any proper positions as a communist when he allied with the Gestapo."

The young audience reacted angrily at the resurrection of such long disproven lies against Trotsky. One shouted out, "Bullshit!"

Facing no challenge from the speakers' table, the Stalinist doubled down: "Valentin Olberg was a member of the Gestapo and a friend of Trotsky's, [and] was part of an anti-Soviet conspiracy with Leon Trotsky,

with Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and so on."

An audience member again shouted, "Bullshit and lies!"

Chair Jan Nielsen, a veteran SWP member, did not oppose the Stalinist. Instead, she reprimanded the audience member, "That's not how we... Comrade, that's not how we conduct debate, okay." Addressing the Stalinist in an apologetic tone, Nielsen said: "Finish your point, but you are coming to the end."

He did finish, with a grotesque paean to Stalin as "the best example of communism to the modern day."

Nielsen said "Oh dear" and moved on to other questions and contributions.

After Nielsen's remarks, the audience may have assumed that she and Macfarlane would, in their summing up of the discussion, dismiss such crude Stalinist falsifications. No, they did not. Macfarlane responded to another audience member, but the provocateur's attack on Trotsky went unchallenged.

The same Stalinist had already intervened during the previous session presented by Benji Charlton, "Did Lenin lead to Stalin?" There, the Stalinist baldly defended the Moscow Trials and denounced Trotsky.

The Moscow Show Trials and mass purges overseen by Stalin were among the greatest crimes of the 20th century. The claim they did not happen is akin to Holocaust Denial. Stalin ordered the extermination of the flower of the October Revolution, including Lenin's closest comrades-in-arms, above all the Trotskyists, who were framed up as fascists and sentenced to death by chief prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky, who demanded, "Shoot the mad dogs!" The lies concerning Trotsky and Olberg, central to the preparation of the Moscow Trials, were refuted at the time and comprehensively exposed in Vadim Rogovin's *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. (The relevant chapter is online and the volume is available from Mehring Books.)

That Charlton, a member of the SWP's student office, did not refute this outrageous claim is extraordinary. The SWP's chair could have referred audience members to the 422-page proceedings of the "Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials", held in 1937 and led by American liberal philosopher John Dewey, which concluded based on a mountain of evidence: "We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups. We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov [Trotsky's son] not guilty."

But for the SWP, such fundamental historical issues are a dead letter. Its "Russia Course" was aimed at preventing any genuine understanding of Trotsky's role—theoretically, politically and practically—in the Russian Revolution and the struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Charlton referenced the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations of 1918, the Russian Civil War of 1918-22, the theory of "socialism in a single country", the defeat of the British general strike in 1926, the Chinese revolution of 1925-27,

the opposition to Stalin, and the campaign of slanders, expulsions and extermination of Stalin's opponents while mentioning Trotsky just twice!

Charlton spoke of a "stream of blood" between Stalin and Lenin. But Lenin died in January 1924, before the theory of "Socialism in a Single Country" first appeared in print, and years before the bloody purges and Moscow Trials of 1936-1938, known officially as the "Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites".

As Trotsky wrote in his 1937 essay *Stalinism and Bolshevism*: "The present purge draws between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood. The annihilation of all the older generation of Bolsheviks, an important part of the middle generation which participated in the civil war, and that part of the youth that took up most seriously the Bolshevik traditions, shows not only a political but a thoroughly physical incompatibility between Bolshevism and Stalinism. How can this not be seen?"

In years gone by, the SWP frequently cited Trotsky on the "river of blood" between Stalinism and Bolshevism. But at Marxism 2025, his role as the foremost continuator of Bolshevism and Leninism was airbrushed out. How can *this* not be seen?

The SWP invokes Trotsky's name as a calling card to attract students to their tendency. But the SWP leadership ensures that this *never* conflicts with their overriding objective: the subordination of the working class and student youth to pro-capitalist alliances with Britain's labour and trade union bureaucracy, including its Stalinist wing, palmed off to members as the "united front".

### Anti-Trotskyist origins: state capitalism

Tony Cliff was the ideological founder of the International Socialists, predecessor of the SWP. Cliff had been a member of the Trotskyist movement since the late 1930s, but in the late 1940s, borrowing wholesale from Max Shachtman, he theorised that the Soviet Union had, by 1928, become "state capitalist" and that the bureaucracy was a new ruling class.

Trotsky opposed those who claimed the Soviet bureaucracy was a property-owning ruling class. In *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (1936) he wrote: "We often seek salvation from unfamiliar phenomena in familiar terms. An attempt has been made to conceal the enigma of the Soviet regime by calling it 'state capitalism.' This term has the advantage that nobody knows exactly what it means." Trotsky explained that while the bureaucracy had "expropriated the proletariat politically", the means of production lay in the hands of the state, creating "a new and hitherto unknown relation between the bureaucracy and the riches of the nation".

Trotsky continued, "The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy. If these as yet wholly new relations should solidify, become the norm and be legalized, whether with or without resistance from the workers, they would, in the long run, lead to a complete liquidation of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution. But to speak of that now is at least premature. The proletariat has not yet said its last word. The bureaucracy has not yet created social supports for its dominion in the form of special types of property." [See *Revolution Betrayed*, chapter 9]

Trotsky advocated a political revolution in the Soviet Union to overthrow the bureaucracy and restore workers' democratic control of the nationalised property relations, as part of the fight for world socialism. In contrast, Cliff's theory of state capitalism not only endowed Stalinism with the "historical mission" of "establish[ing] capitalism in Russia", thereby achieving "in a few decades... what the bourgeoisie of the west took about two hundred years to cover". It rejected Trotsky's evaluation

of the imperialist epoch and envisaged a new and lengthy period of capitalist ascendancy worldwide, with the working class in the USSR and Eastern Europe atomised for the foreseeable future beneath the iron heel of an "omnipotent" capitalist bureaucracy.

Cliff argued that in the rest of the world, lesser forms of "state capitalism", including military spending (described by Cliff's early collaborator Michael Kidron as the "permanent arms economy" in a further act of plagiarism from the Shachtmanites) foreclosed the possibility of capitalism's revolutionary overthrow. The post-war period belonged politically to the Stalinist, trade union and social democratic bureaucracies that could only be put under pressure by militant strikes and street protests.

Cliff won his earliest supporters during the late 1940s within the Revolutionary Communist Party, then the British section of the Fourth International, which had briefly united Gerry Healy, Cliff and Ted Grant, conducting entry work in the Labour Party. His followers adapted to the postwar re-stabilisation of capitalism and to the anti-communism of the British labour and trade union bureaucracy. Their designation of the USSR as state capitalist had the most reactionary consequences.

Notoriously, during the Korean War, the Cliff group refused to defend North Korea against US and British imperialism, declaring, "Neither Washington nor Moscow". Launched by imperialism in response to the 1949 Chinese Revolution, three million Koreans perished. In 1950, Cliff's supporters, who had been free to argue for their state capitalist line within the British section, publicly repudiated the Fourth International's position on Korea—leaving the Healy leadership with no choice but to expel them. His followers formed the Socialist Review Group.

The essential significance of Cliff's break from the Fourth International was explained in the *Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)* as follows: "Cliff was to argue that the Stalinist dictatorship was only the most finished expression of a new stage in the evolution of world capitalism, which was partially expressed by Labour's post-war nationalisations and those conducted by the newly independent colonial regimes. He placed the intelligentsia alongside the Stalinist bureaucracy as the midwife of yet another variety of state capitalism. The industrial working class had "played no role whatsoever" in the Chinese revolution, while in Cuba, "middle-class intellectuals filled the whole arena of struggle".

Cliff's theory was grounded in the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class. He asserted that Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution had been disproven in the aftermath of WWII: "While the conservative, cowardly nature of a late-developing bourgeoisie (Trotsky's first point) is an *absolute law*, the revolutionary character of the young working class (point 2) is neither absolute nor inevitable... Once the constantly revolutionary nature of the working class, the central pillar of Trotsky's theory, becomes suspect, the whole structure falls to pieces."

For Cliff, the Labour Party bureaucracy articulated the social interests of the entire working class. He wrote, "To a large extent, what makes the Labour Party tick is what makes the British people tick". Consequently, "Marxists should not set themselves up as a party or embryo of a party of their own. They should remember that the working class looks to the Labour Party as the political organisation of the class (and no doubt when a new wave of political activity spreads among the working class millions of new voters will flock to its banner and hundreds of thousands will join it actively)." ["Tony Cliff and the origins of the International Socialists", *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)*]

This reformist theory has been used ever since by the SWP to justify its subordination of the working class to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Its various front groups—the Anti-Nazi League in the 1970s and Stand Up To Racism today—are aimed at corralling militant youth back under the control of the existing leaderships. This was on full display

at Marxism 2025 in the hero's welcome given by the SWP to former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The historical verdict on Cliff's foundational "theory" of the Soviet Union as state capitalist was delivered in 1991, when the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev restored capitalism, dissolved the USSR and established state rule by a bourgeois oligarchy. This was realised via an unprecedented "shock therapy" programme of mass privatisations and liquidation of state assets. As Trotsky had predicted, facing the collapse of their national-autarkic program of "socialism in a single country", the bureaucracy sought to convert their tenuous caste rule into definite forms of ownership. Cliff later described this social counter-revolution as neither a step forwards nor backwards, but "simply a step - sideways".

### **A party dedicated to opposing Trotsky and the Fourth International**

For decades, side by side their hypocritical invocations to Trotsky's "greatness", the SWP has cultivated hostility and disdain toward the programme and party for which Trotsky fought.

Cliff's book *Trotskyism After Trotsky* (1999) ridiculed the Fourth International after World War II for refusing "to face the reality that Trotsky's prognoses regarding the future of the Stalinist regime and the economic, social and political situation in the capitalist West as well as in the backward and developing East did not come true."

Like Ted Grant, Cliff responded to the beginning of the post-war capitalist boom by decrying the failure of Trotskyism. Trotsky "predicted" a revolution, but it never came. Therefore, the Fourth International's perspective was false.

But as Trotsky emphasised, a perspective was not a promissory note that could be "cashed in" on the due date. Rather, it defined a political orientation for an entire epoch. In one of his last major statements, Trotsky wrote:

The capitalist world has no way out, unless a prolonged death agony is so considered. It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars, and new uprisings. A young revolutionary party must base itself on this perspective. History will provide it with enough opportunities and possibilities to test itself, to accumulate experience, and to mature. The swifter the ranks of the vanguard are fused the more the epoch of bloody convulsions will be shortened, the less the destruction will our planet suffer. But the great historical problem will not be solved in any case until a revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat. The question of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: it is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organising the proletarian vanguard with ten-fold energy. Precisely in this lies the task of the Fourth International. [Leon Trotsky, "Manifesto of the Fourth International on the Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution" (May, 1940)]

Deriding those who "clung" to Trotsky's designation of the imperialist epoch as the "death agony of capitalism", Cliff also rejected Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism. Responding to Trotsky's 1939 article "The USSR in War", Cliff took issue with Trotsky's description of Stalinism as "a

regime of acute crisis". Trotsky was wrong, Cliff insisted. Stalinism was not "a temporary transitional regime". After WWII it went "from strength to strength" and had become "a stable class system".

But Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism was soon confirmed. Stalin's death in March 1953 ushered in a major crisis of Stalinist bureaucratic rule, including the East German workers' uprising in June of that year, Khrushchev's Secret Speech in February 1956 exposing Stalin's monstrous crimes against party democracy, followed by the Hungarian Revolution in October-November 1956.

### **Pro-Stalinist overtures**

Cliff's belief in the longevity of capitalism and his petty-bourgeois orientation to the existing leaderships was buttressed by new forces who entered the International Socialists in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the student protest movement. SWP academic John Molyneux joined the International Socialists in 1968. A lecturer at Portsmouth University's School of Art and Design, he authored numerous attacks on Trotskyism, including *Leon Trotsky's Theory of Revolution* (1981) which developed on his earlier writings on "Trotsky's Dual Legacy" in *Marxism and the Party* (1978).

At the SWP's Marxism Festival in 1985, Molyneux shared a platform with notorious Stalinist hack Monty Johnstone. Molyneux declared: "Trotsky, in the 40 years of his life as a revolutionary, made many mistakes. We, in the SWP, have not been reluctant to point out, to disclose and expose those mistakes."

In reply, Johnstone lavished praise on the SWP, joking: "It should be said that the SWP did take the first steps of getting away from uncritical Trotsky cultism when they disputed Trotsky's characterisation of the Soviet Union. It is only unfortunate that they were wrong on that point!"

The SWP's overtures to Johnstone were no accident. The SWP were embittered opponents of Security and the Fourth International, the investigation launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1975, into the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Leon Trotsky by Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader in August 1940.

While the ICFI published overwhelming evidence exposing the deadly work of GPU agents inside the Trotskyist movement, the IS denounced the investigation as a "A Shameless Frame-Up". Michael Kidron (on behalf of the International Socialists) signed a vitriolic denunciation of Security and the Fourth International issued in 1976 by Pabloite and state capitalist organisations worldwide.

Duncan Hallas, a long-time theoretical leader of the IS/SWP, later attacked "the grotesque Security and the Fourth International campaign—aimed at the now deceased Joseph Hansen and the SWP US". This was the same Joseph Hansen unmasked as a GPU spy, who helped organise the assassination of Trotsky—the political crime of the century. Hansen later defected to the FBI, facilitating the entry of state agents into the leadership of the US Socialist Workers Party. Hallas's siding with the GPU complemented his intellectual hackwork. He authored numerous essays attacking Trotsky's legacy, including "Fourth International in Decline" (1973), "Trotskyism Reassessed" (1977), and "Building the Leadership" (1969), a venomous attack on Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League.

Alex Callinicos, the present-day theoretical leader of the SWP, honed the SWP's attack on the Fourth International. His 1990 book *Trotskyism* disparaged Trotsky's "rather catastrophic assessment of the prospects for world capitalism" and rejected his insistence in the founding programme of the Fourth International that "The historical crisis of mankind is

reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership". Callinicos accused Trotsky of "historical fatalism", citing Trotsky's insistence that: "The orientation of the masses is determined first by the objective conditions of decaying capitalism, and second, by the treacherous politics of the old workers' organisations. Of these factors, the first, of course, is the decisive one: the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus."

Callinicos replied, "in the atmosphere of isolation, persecution and defeat to which Trotsky and his followers were condemned in the late 1930s, he gave way, at times at least, to the belief that 'the laws of history' would allow the FI to gain a mass following."

What else must a Marxist party base itself upon, if not the laws of history? Far from Trotsky exhibiting "fatalism", he oversaw the founding of the Fourth International! Its founding was a monumental political victory against the counter-revolutionary efforts of Stalinism and imperialism to destroy the Trotskyist movement. But for Callinicos, "Orthodox Trotskyism was... disabled by the idea of the Fourth International itself".

The FI could not claim to be a new International, replacing the Third, Callinicos argued, because it did not lead millions like its predecessor. But Lenin issued the call for the Third International in the opening months of World War I, when he stood in a minority against the betrayal of the Second International whose parties had joined the patriotic stampede in support of "their own" bourgeoisie. The Bolshevik Party came to the leadership of the working masses between April and October 1917 on the foundation of Lenin's fight for a new International and not the other way around.

Trotsky answered those who claimed it was "premature" to found the Fourth International. He wrote: "Sceptics ask: But has the moment for the creation of the Fourth International yet arrived? It is impossible, they say, to create an International 'artificially'; it can arise only out of great events, etc., etc..."

He continued, "The Fourth International has already arisen out of great events: the greatest defeats of the proletariat in history. The cause for these defeats is to be found in the degeneration and perfidy of the old leadership. The class struggle does not tolerate an interruption. The Third International, following the Second, is dead for purposes of revolution. Long live the Fourth International!"

While the cadres of the FI were not numerous, Trotsky insisted: "Outside these cadres there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name. If our international be still weak in numbers, it is strong in doctrine, program, tradition, in the incomparable tempering of its cadres. Who does not perceive this today, let him in the meantime stand aside. Tomorrow it will become more evident."

Trotsky's call for a new International, *To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew*, issued in July 1933 following the victory of fascism in Germany, preserved the continuity of Bolshevism. Hitler came to power without a single shot being fired thanks to the treacherous policies pursued by the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Stalinist Comintern. Between 1933 and 1938, Trotsky opposed all those centrist tendencies (including the Independent Labour Party in Britain and the POUM in Spain), which "supported" his struggle against Stalinism but opposed the Fourth International. Such groups refused to accept Trotsky's characterisation of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its affiliated parties as counter-revolutionary, fearing it would disrupt their opportunist relations within the labour movement of their respective countries, by bringing them into open conflict with the Stalinists.

## The SWP and John Kelly

The SWP is today courting an updated version of the Stalinist school of falsification, this time in relation to the history of British Trotskyism.

In 2018, Joseph Choonara, editor of the SWP's theoretical journal *International Socialism*, hosted a session at the SWP's Marxism Festival called, "Debating Trotskyism in Britain" with Stalinist historian John E. Kelly.

Kelly's book, *Contemporary Trotskyism: Parties, Sects and Social Movements in Britain*, was published a short time earlier (reviewed favourably by Choonara). Kelly followed with a second volume, *The Twilight of World Trotskyism*, published in 2022. His books argue that Trotskyism "amounts to a tragic and wasteful misdirection of political energy and resources away from serious radical politics".

As the SEP explained in its Congress resolution last year, Kelly "claims that the 'weakness and failings of world Trotskyism' come back to its programmatic insistence that 'Reforms are no longer possible: the choice is socialism or barbarism,' which he calls 'simplistic and groundless' and 'conceptually naïve and empirically flawed.' This is said under conditions of economic breakdown, soaring inequality, escalating war, the threat of planetary destruction, the victory of Trump and the global rise of the far-right."

Choonara told his audience at Marxism 2018, "I think people were surprised I had not written a hatchet job or an icepick job [he laughed] whatever you want to call it, about the book." Trotsky was killed with an icepick blow to the head by Stalinist assassin Mercader.

He continued, "It's absolutely true as John [Kelly] mentioned, that early in our history we engaged in quite a radical revision of some of the central ideas of Trotskyism," adding that the SWP had been "historically quite critical" of decisions made by Trotsky. Namely, "We think the decision to launch the Fourth International" in 1938 "was a mistake. We've said that many, many times in the past."

For the SWP and Stalinists like Kelly, the FI was a "tragic mistake". But the "failure" of the FI to build mass parties was a direct product of the crimes of Stalinism and its bloody suppression of the world revolution. Rather than dwell on such unpleasant facts, Kelly pontificates about Trotskyism's major flaw: its programmatic focus "on those abstract actors, the working class", at the expense of "Other forms of oppression, based on gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity..." The SWP, which has spearheaded the promotion of anti-Marxist racial and gender politics, is in complete agreement with Kelly.

Under conditions of global capitalist breakdown and a mass radicalisation of the working class and youth, the SWP's central function, in alliance with the labour and trade union bureaucracy, is to wall off the working class from Trotskyism and the Fourth International. This was on full display at Marxism 2025. Their rewriting of history to deny Trotsky's leadership of the fight against Stalinism, and their refusal to challenge such outrageous Stalinist slanders during their "Russia Course", is to condition their organisation to police left-wing and socialist sentiment in the new left party announced by Jeremy Corbyn.

## FURTHER READING:

Vadim Z. Rogovin's multi-volume history, "Was There an Alternative to Stalinism?" is available here from Mehring Books.



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