

On the 85th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky

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The World Socialist Web Site and Mehring Yay'nc'lk (Books), in collaboration with the Adalar (Princes' Islands) Municipality, held a commemoration event titled "The 85th Anniversary of the Assassination of Leon Trotsky: Historical Significance and Enduring Consequences" on the island of Büyükdada (Prinkipo), Turkey, on Saturday, August 16. The event featured an online interview with David North, the chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The interviewer was Ula? Ate?çi, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in Turkey, which works in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability.

Ula? Ate?çi (UA): Leon Trotsky was assassinated 85 years ago, on August 20, 1940. In your writings you have referred to the assassination as the most politically consequential in the 20th century. What do you mean by this?

David North (DN): To understand the significance of Trotsky's assassination, one must understand his place in world history, what he represented and the social struggles with which he was identified. Leon Trotsky was the personification of the revolutionary movement of the working class for socialism. His assassination was the culmination of a criminal onslaught against the working class on a world scale; Nazism and Stalinism were different forms in which the reaction against the October Revolution expressed itself. Trotsky personified that great revolution, which was the culmination of an immense social, political and intellectual development of humanity that can be traced back to the Enlightenment and even to the Renaissance. Trotsky's assassination in 1940 was the climax of a political process of genocide that exterminated the flower of socialist culture. His murder removed from the scene an individual who was politically and intellectually irreplaceable.

If I could use an analogy: Imagine music, if Mozart, Bach, Beethoven had been removed violently at the height of their creativity; or science, without Newton and Einstein. In the sphere of politics, Trotsky, occupied a position of that magnitude. His death deprived the working class of a strategist of incomparable genius. It is not an exaggeration to say that 85 years after his death, we are still dealing with the consequences of his death, and with the consequences of the extermination of the generation of revolutionists in Russia in Europe in the course of the 1930s and 1940s.

Trotsky said that the crisis of mankind is the crisis of leadership. That crisis was a product of the destruction of the Bolshevik Revolution and of the great Russian and European socialist culture that had its origins in the work of Marx and Engels. And so when we say that his murder was the most consequential political assassination of the past century, I mean it in this sense: The political reverberations of that assassination are with us to this day, and in commemorating this assassination, we are recommitting ourselves to the building of the leadership that Trotsky and Lenin had fought to build, and which proved itself in 1917 capable of rising to the demands of the crisis of capitalism. So that is perhaps the best way I can explain what I meant when I wrote that Trotsky's assassination was the

most consequential.

UA: Why was it necessary for Stalin to kill Trotsky? Was this simply an act of political vengeance against an old political opponent, or did Stalin really have reason to fear Trotsky?

DN: It was certainly an act of political vengeance. Stalin was a political criminal. He murdered not only his political opponents. He exterminated their families, their friends, their associates. But in a political sense, the decision to assassinate Trotsky was dictated by the immense fear that Stalin had of the political influence exerted by Trotsky on a world scale and within the Soviet Union itself.

Stalin, of course, had participated in the October Revolution. He had experienced the impact of a crisis on the consciousness of the masses. And he understood very well, from the experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution, which arose in the midst of World War I, that a crisis of similar dimensions could produce a huge radicalization within the working class, in which the position of Trotsky would be profoundly transformed. He never believed that Trotsky was nothing more than an isolated and helpless exile. There are many petty-bourgeois academics today who may write that, but that's not the political reality.

Trotsky was killed in 1940. World War II had already begun, the catastrophe was unfolding. It was only a matter of time before the catastrophic consequences of Stalin's policies, his betrayals across Europe, in Germany, in France, in Spain, would make clear that he had opened the door to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Stalin had gone through the experience of the October Revolution, and he understood that with the approach of war, the crisis that it would generate within the Soviet Union itself, particularly under conditions of looming disaster, that all the repressed support for Trotsky could very suddenly emerge.

After all, Trotsky still lived in the consciousness of the working class as the founder and leader of the Red Army, the brilliant strategist that had defeated the imperialist armies in the Civil War between 1918 and 1921. The famous socialist writer Victor Serge, in his book *Russia Twenty Years After*, said that the first shocks of a war will lead millions in the Soviet Union to think immediately of the "organizer of victory," Leon Trotsky. That is why Stalin saw the assassination of Trotsky as a political necessity for the reactionary bureaucratic regime that he headed.

But Stalin was not the only reactionary leader who feared Trotsky. A very well-known discussion took place in 1940 between Hitler and the French ambassador, Coulondre. Paraphrasing Coulondre, he said to Hitler, "Notwithstanding your military victories in France, has it not occurred to you that with the development of war, the real victor could prove to be Trotsky?" Hitler reacted in shock, responding, "I know, but why did you push me toward war? Why didn't you make compromises?" Trotsky, reading of this discussion as it was reported in a French newspaper, said, "What these gentlemen fear, as reactionary representatives of barbarism, is the approach of revolution, and they give that revolution my name." The killing of Trotsky was a preventive response of the Stalinist

regime and of world reaction to the specter of socialist revolution. That's the real reason for Trotsky's assassination.

UA: Trotsky's assassination was the culmination of a political genocide in the USSR, justified by lies that Trotsky and his supporters were agents of Hitler. Today, Stalinist and pseudo-left organizations repeat these lies. Can you comment on this?

DN: Well, those who repeat these lies simply expose themselves as liars. The crimes committed by Stalin have been so overwhelmingly documented, and the fraudulent character of the allegations that were thrown against Trotsky and virtually the entire leadership of the Bolshevik Party were so comprehensively exposed, that to repeat them today places those who utilize these lies in the same category as those who deny the Holocaust carried out by the Nazis.

Stalin accused virtually the entire surviving leadership of the Bolshevik Revolution of being agents of fascism, of being instruments of Hitler's regime. But in 1939, after he had carried out his Terror against the socialist working class and intelligentsia of the Soviet Union, it was Stalin who signed a pact with Hitler. In fact, for the next two years until the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, it was not permitted for members of the Communist Parties who were active in Western Europe to speak ill of the Hitler regime.

It was Trotsky who warned that the outcome of Stalinism would be the destruction of the Soviet Union and that the bureaucracy would restore capitalism. That happened finally in 1991. So the repetition of Stalin's lies can only be done politically by those who support his reactionary program, who are reactionary petty-bourgeois nationalists, fundamentally hostile to the program of socialist internationalism for which Trotsky fought.

One can have, of course, a legitimate discussion with principled intellectuals and a broad discussion within the working class about the history of the Russian Revolution, the complexities of its history. But all such discussions must be based on truth, on facts. There is no place in that discussion for those who perpetuate miserable lies, who justify mass murder and who can transform Stalin into a political hero. In fact, such people find themselves not in the camp of socialism but in the camp of reactionary nationalism, and as a matter of fact, in the camp of Putin and the Russian nationalists who base themselves not on the October Revolution but on the reactionary traditions of Tsarism, which was overthrown by the Russian working class in 1917.

UA: There was a previous attempt on Trotsky's life on May 24, 1940. Could you speak about that attack and Trotsky's response?

DN: On the evening of May 24, 1940, a Stalinist gang of assassins led by the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros was allowed to enter Trotsky's villa in Coyoacan in the early morning hours by the guard who was on duty, an American by the name of Robert Sheldon Harte. It would later be established that Harte was actually a Stalinist agent. He opened the door to the villa, and this gang entered the compound armed with machine guns, incendiary devices and actually entered into Trotsky's bedroom and began firing machine guns. Extraordinarily, Trotsky and his wife, as they awoke, managed to roll off the bed. The machine guns were pointed somewhat upward, and they fired into the bed and into the wall. It was dark, and they somehow did not succeed, miraculously, in killing Trotsky. In the course of this attack, Trotsky's grandson Seva Volkov, who was only 14 years old, was wounded in the toe, but that was not as a serious injury. The assassins then withdrew.

Trotsky immediately left his room. This was not the first time in Trotsky's life that he had come under fire. He had experience with this, and he began to look for his guard. Unfortunately, his guard consisted entirely of amateurs. They were not prepared for an attack of this character. I was later told by a survivor of that attack, the captain of Trotsky's guard Harold Robins, that when Trotsky found the guards he was obviously disappointed with their failure to respond or take

any action in any event.

They soon realized that Harte had disappeared. It was not clear whether he had been kidnapped or gone voluntarily, i.e., whether he was a participant in the conspiracy or merely a victim of it. Not long after, his body was found, and notwithstanding doubts about his role, the initial conclusion was that he was kidnapped and murdered. However, Trotsky did say that the possibility that he was an agent was not excluded. Subsequent information, particularly documents uncovered after the Soviet Union was dissolved, has conclusively established that Harte was a GPU agent, who participated in the assassination conspiracy.

Again, it's important to take note of the timing. The attack in May 1940 took place against the background of the Nazi invasion of France, and it was Stalin's hope that public opinion would be concentrated on the escalation of the war, that the assassination of Trotsky would not dominate international headlines. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, Trotsky first of all devoted an enormous amount of his time to exposing the conspiracy. He wrote a very powerful essay, titled, "Stalin Seeks My Death," in which he said, "I live on this earth not in accordance with the rule but as an exception to the rule."

The Stalinists and their supporters among petty-bourgeois intellectuals and unprincipled elements actually tried to advance the claim that Trotsky had organized the assault himself, that it was not a real assassination attempt. Trotsky comprehensively exposed this lie, and of course, what occurred on August 20 was to demonstrate the scale of that lie. He also wrote another article, "The GPU and the Comintern," exposing the extent to which the different Communist Parties all over the world, the Stalinist parties, were actually under the control of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Trotsky knew that there would be another attempt on his life. In 1976, when I was in Mexico gathering information on the assassination of Trotsky, a journalist who knew Trotsky recalled a conversation that he had with Trotsky just a few days before his assassination, in which Trotsky said, "There will be another attempt on my life. It will be carried out either by someone I know or someone who has access to the villa." The journalist told me that he was very fond of Trotsky, he respected him immensely, and was very depressed when Trotsky said this to him, but that Trotsky smiled and said, "Well, you know, whatever happens, I still will win. And you know why?" The journalist asked why, and Trotsky came up close to him and whispered in his ear, "Because I'm much smarter than Stalin."

Of course, what Trotsky was really saying was that he had confidence in the political perspective for which he fought, and that Stalin, whatever temporary successes he had, was without perspective. To use a metaphor which Trotsky had earlier applied to the opponents of the revolution, he would wind up in the waste basket of history.

UA: It has been claimed that Trotsky's assassination was inevitable? Do you agree with this assessment, or could it have been prevented?

DN: That is a complicated question, and it depends on what you mean by inevitable. If one is speaking of a historical process, there are, of course, inevitabilities. The class struggle in capitalist society is inevitable. Revolution and counterrevolution arise inevitably out of the contradictions of that system. War and the struggle against war arise inevitably out of the geopolitics of world capitalism. But if you're speaking of a specific event, then, of course, one has to use the term "inevitability" much more carefully. It was inevitable, as Trotsky had foreseen, that there would be an attempt on his life. It was inevitable that the Soviet bureaucracy would attempt to murder Trotsky. Was it inevitable that the attempt would succeed? No, it was not. It did not succeed on May 24, 1940, and it was not inevitable that the attempt would succeed on August 20, 1940. It succeeded because of a failure of even the most basic security.

The assassin Ramon Mercader had been infiltrated into Trotsky's household by an agent. He arrived at the villa in Coyoacan on August 20, in the late afternoon. It was a sunny day, and he was carrying a raincoat.

Trotsky had met with Mercader only three days earlier and had expressed suspicion about this individual, and he had even stated that he never wanted to see him again, but his guards did not respond to this. In particular, as we were later to discover, his principal secretary in Coyoacan, Joseph Hansen, was himself a Stalinist agent. When Mercader arrived with a raincoat, he was not searched. In his raincoat, he was carrying an automatic gun, an alpenstock and a knife. Had that raincoat been taken from him, the assassination would not have taken place. It was not, and he was allowed to enter Trotsky's study alone with Trotsky where the attack took place.

So the assassination on that date was not inevitable. It could have been prevented. There are lessons which have to be drawn from that experience, and we have sought to draw them. Political security is a very critical issue, and no political party that takes the question of the struggle against imperialist reaction seriously can ignore it. So it's important to understand that while the attempts on Trotsky's life were inevitable, their success was not inevitable.

We are Marxists, not fatalists. There are historical laws, but those historical laws do not lead to a predetermined conclusion, and that's important for understanding the political situation today. In one sense, the development of capitalism, the development of imperialism, leads to genocide, fascism and nuclear war. But it also leads to socialist revolution. And so the question really is, which of those tendencies will come to predominate, the tendencies toward destruction or the tendencies toward revolution? That's the decisive question.

Here we come to the critical issue of political leadership. As Marxists, we believe that the same tendencies which threaten mankind with destruction also contain within them the possibility for socialist revolution. In that sense, we are historical optimists. Revolution is possible. Its victory is possible. But we are not complacent. And we understand that unless we fight and unless we take the actions which are necessary, unless we have a correct political program, and we are able to impart that program to the working class, the danger of a catastrophe is very great. That's why we fight to build revolutionary leadership.

UA: You have now been active in the struggle for socialist revolution for 55 years. How have you maintained your optimism and determination in the face of so many decades of political reaction?

DN: The great advantage of Marxism is that it approaches and analyzes objective reality scientifically and not impressionistically. It understands that the forms of appearance are contradictory, and what appears to be the dominance of reaction also contains within it the possibility of revolution. When I joined the Trotskyist movement in 1971, it was a time when the Soviet Union was seen by many to be all-powerful. The Communist Parties numbered in the millions, and yet their influence was based on false policies that proved to be unviable. All that has happened, whether it is the collapse of the Soviet Union or the restoration of capitalism in China, has confirmed the Trotskyist perspective. Our perspective has been a correct one; it has correctly analyzed the objective situation.

While the initial beneficiaries of developments have been the forces of political reaction, other processes are underway. Revolutions don't occur because everything is going splendidly, and people decide they just would like to change things, to have things a bit better than they are. Revolutions don't announce themselves like birthday parties, where everybody receives an invitation and are asked to come to a celebration of a birthday. Revolutions are always unexpected. They always appear to be impossible, because they generally arrive at the point in which reaction, in a certain sense, has reached its most extreme stage of development. That was true in the France of 1789, and it certainly was true in the Russia of 1917.

The world situation which we presently live in is again demonstrating the complete incapacity of capitalism to deal with the immense social, economic, ecological problems of our age. It is a system which, in every

sense of the word, is bankrupt. No one can believe that nuclear war is a viable alternative to the problems of mankind, or that the use of genocide is going to be acceptable to the vast portions of humanity. Resistance is growing everywhere, but it's necessary for that resistance to interact with the correct political perspective. We are on the eve of the greatest revolutionary explosions in history, and I think the basis of optimism is to recognize the power of these objective tendencies.

As I said before, history does not give us revolution wrapped up as a birthday present. We have to extract from the objective situation its revolutionary potential and act upon it. That's the decisive question. I believe that the experiences through which masses of people have passed—they've witnessed the bankruptcy of social democracy, of Stalinism, of bourgeois nationalism—now perhaps they'll recognize the need to return to the authentic theory and practice of social revolution.

They will once again draw their lessons from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and from its contemporary manifestation, the Marxism of the 21st century, Trotskyism and the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International. I believe in that perspective, and that's why my comrades and I are immensely optimistic that the next period of development will see a huge shift by the working class towards social revolution. And I think perhaps not that distant, not so far in the future, we will hold another celebration on Büyükada, and it will be under conditions in which that perspective will be at a far more advanced stage of realization.



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