Lecture to the SEP 2025 Summer School

Origins of the Left Opposition: From Lenin's Last Struggle to the fight against "Socialism in One Country"

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The following lecture was delivered by Joseph Kishore, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), at the SEP (US) International Summer School, held August 2-9, 2025. It is the second part of a two-part lecture on the Origins of Trotskyism.

The WSWS is also publishing a primary source document written by Leon Trotsky to accompany this lecture, "The New Course," written between December 1923 and January 1924, which is a foundational document of the Left Opposition. We encourage our readers to study these texts alongside this lecture.

The WSWS will be publishing all the lectures at the school in the coming weeks. The introduction to the school by SEP National Chairman David North, "The place of Security and the Fourth International in the history of the Trotskyist movement" was published on August 13. The first part of the lecture on the origins of Trotskyism, by Christoph Vandreier, national secretary of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Germany), was published on August 20.

The first half of this lecture reviewed the theoretical and political struggles that culminated in the Bolsheviks' conquest of power in October 1917. The revolution was not simply a national event, but the first realization of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution—a strategy rooted in the perspective of world revolution, which found organizational and political expression in the founding of the Communist International in 1919.

The years following the initial revolutionary wave, particularly between 1921 and 1924, marked a decisive turning point. After seven years of war and civil war, Russia was economically devastated and socially exhausted. The failure of the working class to seize power in Europe left the Soviet Union isolated. In response to the dire economic conditions, the Soviet government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921—a temporary and necessary retreat that reintroduced certain market mechanisms.

However, the NEP also had social and political consequences. Combined with the temporary stabilization of capitalism in Western Europe, it contributed to a growing conservative mood within the Communist Party and the state apparatus, along with the resurgence of national chauvinist tendencies. The next stage would be defined by an intransigent political struggle against these tendencies—beginning with Lenin's last struggle and culminating in the formation of the Left Opposition and the fight against the anti-Marxist theory of "socialism in one country." It was in this period that the alliance between Lenin and Trotsky emerged in opposition to the rising bureaucracy.

Lenin's last struggle against nationalism and bureaucracy

This conflict would center on a number of issues, which, while they were inter-related in both content and time, I will review in their separate components.

Monopoly on foreign trade

First, there was the conflict over the monopoly on foreign trade, which involved the relationship between the Soviet Union and world capitalism, and with it, the fundamental premises of the October Revolution. As Lenin reaffirmed in late February 1922, the perspective guiding the revolution was that of world socialist revolution:

> We have not finished building even the foundations of socialist economy and the hostile powers of moribund capitalism can still deprive us of that. We must clearly appreciate this and frankly admit it; for there is nothing more dangerous than illusions... We have always urged and reiterated *the elementary truth of Marxism*—that *the joint efforts of the workers of several advanced countries are needed for the victory of socialism*." [Lenin, "Notes of a publicist," Collected Works, Progress Publishers, Vol. 33, pp. 204-211, emphasis added]

The NEP, which had been introduced one year earlier, was understood by the Soviet government to be a temporary retreat necessitated by Russia's economic devastation and the failure of the immediate postwar revolutionary wave in Europe. "If the European proletariat had conquered power in 1919, it could have taken our backward country in tow," Trotsky remarked later, allowing for a direct transition from "War Communism" toward a genuine socialist economy. The NEP could only be sustained without undermining the foundations of the workers' state if strict controls, particularly on foreign trade, were placed on the ability of imperialism to "buy up" the Soviet economy.

The NEP, however, also created a social basis within Soviet Russia for greater liberalization, which found reflection within the party. By early 1922, pressures were mounting to loosen the monopoly on foreign trade in order to encourage foreign investment and appease sections of the petty bourgeoisie and peasantry. Lenin reacted forcefully. In a March 3 letter to Lev Kamenev, he insisted that a breach in the monopoly would allow foreign capital, "already buying up our officials with bribes," to "[cart] out what there is left of Russia." [Lenin, CW, Progress Publishers, Vol 45]

By May 1922, Lenin submitted a motion to the Politburo to reaffirm the monopoly on foreign trade and received reluctant assent from Stalin, who wrote that while he backed the proposal, "such a weakening [of the monopoly] is becoming inevitable." Trotsky supported Lenin's position, and on May 22, the Central Committee accepted Lenin's demands.

Lenin suffered his first stroke on May 26, 1922. The declining health of the principal leader of the Bolshevik Party coincided with moves to isolate Trotsky. In July 1922, rumors circulated of a proposal to remove Trotsky from the Central Committee, prompting a furious note from Lenin to Kamenev, calling such an act "the height of absurdity." Then on October 6, in Lenin's absence due to ill health, the Central Committee adopted another resolution that weakened the monopoly on foreign trade, reversing the decision made just five months earlier.

Seeing this as both a personal blow and a symptom of political degeneration, Lenin went on the offensive, forming an alliance with Trotsky on this question. Lenin's last public appearance took place at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in November–December 1922. At that Congress, Trotsky delivered a comprehensive report on the situation confronting the Soviet government, which stressed the global context of the revolution and developed themes that Lenin had written about at the beginning of the year:

> We are still living in a capitalist encirclement… The monopoly of foreign trade is of principled importance to us. It is one of our safeguards against capitalism which… would not at all be averse under certain conditions to buy up our incipient socialism, after failing to snuff it out by military measures. ["The New Economic Policy of Soviet Russia and the Perspectives of the World Revolution," November 14, 1922, in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Monad Press, pg. 242]

In a series of letters written in mid-December 1922, Lenin pressed forward on the foreign trade issue and sought to formalize an alliance with Trotsky to reverse the decision in October. In a letter to Stalin, he denounced Nikolai Bukharin's moves against this monopoly:

> In practice, Bukharin is acting as an advocate of the profiteer, of the petty bourgeois and of the upper stratum of the peasantry in opposition to the industrial proletariat, which will be totally unable to build up its own industry and make Russia an industrial country unless it has the protection, not of tariffs, but of the monopoly of foreign trade… from the viewpoint of the proletariat and of its industry, the present fight rages around fundamental principles. ["Re The Monopoly Of Foreign Trade," Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33]

That same day, Lenin wrote to Trotsky, asking him to publicly defend "our common standpoint" and to represent their position at the upcoming plenum. In a follow-up letter to Trotsky on December 15, he affirmed: "I consider that we have quite reached agreement. I ask you to declare our solidarity at the plenum." The motion carried, but almost immediately, following a second stroke, the Central Committee acted to prevent further communication with Lenin on political questions, citing concerns for his health. Stalin was placed in charge of enforcing this order.

On December 21, Lenin wrote to Trotsky: "It looks as though it has been possible to take the position without a single shot, by a simple maneuver… I suggest that we should not stop and should continue the offensive…" The following day, Stalin lashed out at Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, for allowing Lenin to dictate the letter to Trotsky. Lenin would not learn of this incident until March 1923, when it would contribute to Lenin's call for Stalin to be removed as general secretary, to which we will return.

The fight against Great Russian chauvinism

An even more fundamental issue emerged in parallel during the second half of 1922: The fight against the reemergence of Russian nationalism within the leadership of the Bolshevik Party.

The Bolshevik Revolution was based on internationalism, not only in its orientation toward world revolution, but in its internal policies toward the oppressed nationalities of the former tsarist empire. The October Revolution had pledged self-determination and equality to the oppressed peoples who had long suffered under tsarist and Great Russian domination. But with the partial stabilization of the Soviet state under the NEP, powerful nationalist pressures began to reassert themselves.

The central issue was Stalin's proposal to incorporate the non-Russian republics—Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and others—into the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) under the rubric of "autonomization," which effectively reestablished Russian dominance. On September 26, 1922, Lenin proposed instead the formation of a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which would be a federation of equal republics with the formal right of secession.

Under Lenin's plan, the RSFSR would be subordinated to the new federal executive bodies, placing all the republics on an equal footing. We have written of the significance of this position more recently, in relation to Putin's attack on Lenin precisely on this issue.

At a meeting on October 6, 1922, the Central Committee adopted a resolution based on Lenin's proposal, the same meeting that had passed the proposal weakening the foreign trade monopoly. In a letter to Kamenev dated October 7, Lenin declared:

> I declare war to the death on dominant-national chauvinism. I shall eat it with all my healthy teeth as soon as I get rid of my accursed bad tooth. It must be absolutely insisted that the Union Central Executive Committee should be presided over in turn by a Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, etc. Absolutely!" ["Memo Combatting Dominant Nation Chauvinism," Lenin Collected Works, Vol. 33]

Conflicts between the Russian Communist Party and the leadership of the Georgian Communist Party were central to the dispute over the national question. In late November, it came to light that Sergo Ordzhonikidze, acting as Stalin's envoy in Georgia, had physically assaulted a member of the Georgian Central Committee during a dispute, which Lenin denounced in the strongest terms.

On December 30–31, Lenin summed up the issues in dictated notes "On the Question of Nationalities and 'Autonomization.'" In this document, Lenin delivered a searing critique of what he referred to as the entire "truly Russian" bureaucratic tendency growing within the state apparatus, due to the fact that the Soviet government existed for "five years without the help of other countries and because we have been 'busy' most of the time with military engagements." He warned:

> It is quite natural that in such circumstances the "freedom to secede from the union"… will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is. There is no doubt that the infinitesimal percentage of Soviet and sovietised workers

will drown in that tide of chauvinistic Great-Russian riffraff like a fly in milk. [“On the Question of Nationalities and ‘Autonomization,’” December 30-31, 1922]

Lenin explicitly identified Stalin’s “infatuation with pure administration” and his “spite” as the driving force behind the centralization efforts. The imposition of Russian dominance under the cover of Soviet unity would be a betrayal of the proletarian internationalism upon which the October Revolution had been founded. Lenin wrote:

> [T]he fundamental interest of proletarian class struggle requires that we never adopt a formal attitude to the national question, but always take into account the specific attitude of the proletarian of the oppressed (or small) nation towards the oppressor (or great) nation.

And in the most direct political accusation, Lenin declared:

> The political responsibility for all this truly Great-Russian nationalist campaign must, of course, be laid on Stalin and [Felix] Dzerzhinsky. [Ibid.]

The growth of bureaucratism and the final bloc between Lenin and Trotsky

The social processes driving these disputes lay in the growth of the Soviet bureaucracy. The economic concessions made to the peasantry and petty-bourgeois layers under the NEP created a fertile ground for the revival of bourgeois and nationalist sentiments. As Comrade North explained:

> The revival of nationalist sentiments expressed not only the outlook of the peasantry but also the sentiments of the personnel of the growing bureaucracy, which came more and more to see the revolution from the standpoint of the privileges which this revolution had created for those who occupied privileged positions in the new national Soviet state. [“Lenin, Trotsky and the Origins of the Left Opposition,” David North, November 1993]

As Trotsky later remarked, the outlook of the bureaucrat was “Not everything for the world revolution, something for me too.” Lenin himself recognized these dangers with increasing clarity throughout the period we have been reviewing. In his political report to the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922, he described the central contradiction facing the Soviet state:

> If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take the huge bureaucratic machine, the gigantic heap, we must ask: ‘Who is directing whom?’ I doubt very much whether it can be truthfully said that the Communists are directing the heap. To tell the truth, they are not directing, they are being directed… Have the 4,700 Communists… come under the influence of an alien culture? True, there may be the impression that the vanquished have a high level of culture. But that is not the case at all. Their culture is miserable, insignificant, but it still is at a higher level than ours… [quoted in Ibid.]

This warning reflected Lenin’s growing awareness that the revolution’s cultural and political conquests were being undermined by the very backwardness the Soviet state had sought to overcome.

At the Eleventh Party Congress (March–April 1922), a seemingly secondary decision was made that would have fateful consequences: the nomination of Stalin to the newly created post of general secretary. The move was backed by Zinoviev and Kamenev as a counterweight to Trotsky. Lenin, who participated in the Congress only sporadically, voiced his concerns about Stalin’s political character, making his famous remark, “This chef will prepare only spicy dishes.” However, believing the post to be of minor significance at the time, he did not block the appointment.

A significant episode in the development of this emerging bureaucratic layer came in August 1922 at the Twelfth Party Conference, which for the first time legalized material privileges for leading party officials. In his analysis of the growth of bureaucratization, Vadim Rogovin places central emphasis on this change:

> The conference resolution, “On the Material Status of Active Party Workers,” designated clearly the number of “active Party workers” (15,325 persons) and introduced a strict hierarchy of their placement into six ranks. Due to receive payment according to the highest rank were members of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission, heads of Central Committee departments, the members of the regional bureaus of the Central Committee, and the secretaries of the regional and provincial committees. [*Was There an Alternative? 1923-1927; Trotskyism: A Look Back Through the Years*, Mehring Books, p. 62]

Lenin’s concerns deepened upon his return to active political life in the autumn of 1922, following his first stroke. He now confronted a party and state apparatus increasingly shaped by the influence of Stalin.

In early December 1922, as the conflict over the monopoly on foreign trade and the fight against national-chauvinism was reaching an apogee, Lenin held what would be his final political discussion with Trotsky. The topic was the fight against the growing bureaucratism in the Soviet apparatus. Trotsky later recounted the conversation in *The Stalin School of Falsification*:

> Lenin summoned me to his room in the Kremlin, spoke of the terrible growth of bureaucratism… He proposed to create a special commission of the Central Committee and asked me to take active part in the work. I answered… “In the present struggle with bureaucratism… we must not forget that there is taking place… a special selection of functionaries… around certain ruling party personalities and groups… that is, the Central Committee.”
>
> Lenin reflected, and then said: “That is, I propose a struggle with Soviet bureaucratism and you are proposing to include the bureaucratism of the Organization Bureau of the Party.”
>
> “I suppose that’s it,” Trotsky replied.
>
> Then Vladimir Ilyich said: “Very well, then, I propose a bloc.”
>
> I said: “It is a pleasure to form a bloc with a good man.” [Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification*, 1937]

Lenin's "Testament" and the unfinished struggle against Stalin

The final months of Lenin's active political life—between December 1922 and March 1923—were marked by a profound and intensifying awareness of the crisis gripping the Communist Party and Soviet state. Though increasingly debilitated by illness, including a second stroke on December 15, Lenin continued to dictate letters and political notes, a series of documents collectively known as his Testament. These writings represent Lenin's clearest warnings about the dangers posed by the bureaucratic degeneration of the party.

On December 23–25, 1922, Lenin dictated a letter addressed to the upcoming Twelfth Party Congress. Reflecting on the class contradictions within Soviet society, Lenin warned of the underlying instability of the revolution and the danger of a split in the Communist Party:

> Our Party relies on two classes and therefore its instability would be possible and its downfall inevitable if there were no agreement between those two classes… No measure of any kind could prevent a split in such a case. [Lenin, *Letter to the Congress*]

Turning to an evaluation of the leadership of the Communist Party, he wrote:

> Comrade Stalin, having become secretary-general, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands, and I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution.
>
> Comrade Trotsky, on the other hand… is distinguished not only by outstanding ability—he is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present C.C.—but he has displayed excessive self-assurance and shown excessive preoccupation with the purely administrative side of the work. [Ibid.]

Involved in Lenin's discussion of individual personalities within the leadership of the Bolshevik Party was an understanding of the social forces and pressures which, Lenin wrote, "can inadvertently lead to a split." As Comrade North explained:

> Why, one might ask, did Lenin attribute such vast political significance to the relations between these two men? Lenin repeatedly inveighed against the vulgar tendency to reduce complex political problems to the level of individuals and their subjective intentions. He was certainly not changing his approach to political problems. Rather, it must be the case that Lenin recognized in the chronic tension between Trotsky and Stalin the expression of real social conflicts within the Bolshevik Party that were themselves the reflection of the social contradictions that threatened the Russian Revolution. ["Lenin, Trotsky and the Origins of the Left Opposition"]

On January 4, 1923, Lenin intervened more directly against Stalin, calling explicitly for his removal from the position of general secretary:

> Stalin is too rude and this defect… becomes intolerable in a secretary-general. That is why I suggest that the comrades think about a way of removing Stalin from that post and appointing another man in his stead… This circumstance may appear to be a negligible detail. But… it is a detail which can assume decisive importance. [Lenin, Addition to the Letter]

On March 5, 1923, Lenin wrote again to Trotsky urging him to take up their joint position on the national question. That same day, Lenin sent a letter to Stalin, threatening to break off personal relations. Referring to the earlier call during which Stalin had denounced Krupskaya for allowing Lenin to dictate a letter to Trotsky, Lenin wrote:

> You have been so rude as to summon my wife to the telephone and use bad language… I ask you, therefore, to think it over whether you are prepared to withdraw what you have said and to make your apologies, or whether you prefer that relations between us should be broken off. [Lenin, To Comrade Stalin]

Lenin's intention was to bring all of these issues before the Twelfth Party Congress and launch an open struggle, in alliance with Trotsky, against the bureaucratic degeneration of the party leadership.

But this was not to be. Five days later, on March 10, 1923, Lenin suffered his third stroke, which rendered him permanently incapacitated. He died ten months later, on January 21, 1924. Lenin's Testament was suppressed by the Stalinist faction, but the issues that had begun to emerge in his final year would be continued and developed by the Left Opposition.

The founding of the Left Opposition: From the defeat of the German Revolution to the "New Course"

The emergence of the Left Opposition in 1923 was the conscious political response to the growing bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union. As we have stressed, this degeneration was rooted in the objective conditions confronted by the Soviet state in the aftermath of the October Revolution and the devastating Civil War. However, as Comrade North emphasized in responding to the fatalistic apologetics of Stalinist historian Eric Hobsbawm, objective conditions find expression in political struggle:

> The divisions which opened up in the Russian Communist Party after 1921 testify to the fact that the objective conditions generated a wide range of responses. How leaders of the party responded to the problems, and the tendencies that developed around these responses, reflected not only their different evaluations of the objective conditions, but also their relation to different and even mutually hostile social forces. ["Leon Trotsky and the Fate of Socialism in the Twentieth Century: A Reply to Professor Eric Hobsbawm," in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished 20th Century*]

One pole of this developing conflict was represented by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, which articulated the interests of the industrial proletariat and the program of world socialist revolution. The other was the clique around Stalin, which increasingly expressed the outlook and material interests of the growing bureaucratic caste.

Trotsky's letter of October 8 and the Declaration of the 46

Between Lenin's third stroke on March 10, 1923 and the autumn of that year, a critical political interregnum unfolded. Trotsky refrained for several months from launching an open political offensive, hoping that Lenin's health might improve and that their anticipated bloc could be revived.

Throughout the summer of 1923, Stalin, operating increasingly as the dominant figure within the ruling "troika" alongside Zinoviev and Kamenev, made calculated moves to consolidate control over the party apparatus, including by sidelining Trotsky's allies, such as Rakovsky and Preobrazhensky. Meanwhile, the economic situation in the Soviet Union was deteriorating rapidly. The so-called "scissors crisis"—the growing disparity between industrial prices and agricultural prices—reached a critical point by the fall. Factory managers were unable to meet payrolls, while the peasantry was being squeezed by unfavorable exchange terms. A wave of strikes broke out in major industrial centers.

The Politburo, dominated by the troika, refused to even entertain a discussion on Trotsky's proposals for addressing the emergency, which were centered on the need for greater economic planning and the development of state industry. This, combined with the developments in Germany, where the situation was ripe for revolution, which could sharply shift the international situation, compelled Trotsky to conclude that an open struggle was necessary.

On October 8, 1923, Trotsky submitted a letter to the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the RCP—a document of "epochal significance," as Comrade North has called it, in an editorial published in the *International Workers Bulletin* in October 1993, when the document was translated into English for the first time. With this letter, the political foundations of the Left Opposition were laid. [See, "On the Founding of the Left Opposition"]

The letter was a declaration of war against the bureaucratic degeneration of the party. It began by identifying "two reasons for the marked deterioration of the situation inside the party":

> (a) the fundamentally improper and unhealthy regime within the party; and (b) the dissatisfaction of the workers and peasants with the grave economic situation that has come about not only as a result of objective difficulties but also because of obvious radical mistakes in economic policy. [Trotsky, October 8, 1923 Letter to the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the Russian Communist Party]

Trotsky exposed how the regime of secretarial selection, dominated by Stalin, had created a self-perpetuating hierarchy of appointed officials. These secretaries, unaccountable to the membership, were chosen not for their political clarity or revolutionary experience, but for their subordination to the ruling clique. Trotsky warned that "internal abscesses" were forming throughout the party, and that the repression of discussion would only drive opposition underground, risking the emergence of illegal groupings.

He then turned to the economic situation. The NEP, as a temporary retreat, required careful and conscious economic planning to avoid strengthening capitalist elements. Instead, Trotsky pointed to the incoherence of economic policy. He warned that important decisions were being made "hastily in the Politburo" without reference to the plan or scientific forecasting. The resulting "scissors crisis" was undermining the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry.

All of this, Trotsky concluded, pointed to an existential threat to the revolution. The party, he wrote, was entering "what may be the most crucial epoch in its history, carrying the heavy burden of the mistakes made by our leading bodies."

For many of the party's most experienced Marxist leaders, the letter provided a rallying point. On October 15, just one week later, forty-six prominent Old Bolsheviks submitted a Declaration to the Politburo, endorsing Trotsky's analysis and initiating the Left Opposition. The declaration warned that the economic crisis was enormously exacerbated by the internal party regime:

> We observe an ever progressing, barely disguised division of the party into a secretarial hierarchy and into "laymen"… Instead of that living, independent collective which is sensitive to the changes in living reality… we have a one-sided direction of activity… If the situation which has developed is not radically changed in the very near future, the economic crisis in Soviet Russia and the crisis of the fractional dictatorship within the party will strike heavy blows to the workers' dictatorship in Russia. ["Declaration of the 46"]

"The New Course" and the battle for the party

At this point, the developing bureaucratic apparatus did not yet feel strong enough to simply suppress the devastating critique raised by Trotsky and the leading Bolsheviks who signed the Declaration of the 46. Trotsky commanded immense respect within the working class and the party membership. The leadership was compelled to make certain tactical concessions.

On December 5, 1923, the Central Committee passed a resolution "On Party Building," which, at least on paper, endorsed several of Trotsky's central criticisms, including on the bureaucratization of the internal party regime.

Trotsky followed up the resolution with "The New Course (A Letter to Party Meetings)," which was published in Pravda on December 8, urging that the resolution's provisions be implemented in full. "The center of gravity, which was mistakenly placed in the apparatus by the 'old course,' has now been transferred by the 'new course,' proclaimed in the resolution of the Central Committee, to the activity, initiative, and critical spirit of all the party members, as the organized vanguard of the proletariat." (in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)*, Pathfinder Press, 2002, pg. 137)

Stalin and the developing bureaucratic layer he represented responded by launching an attack on Trotsky, seeking to undermine the resolution that had been adopted. On December 15, Stalin published an article in *Pravda* dredging up old disputes from before the October Revolution to portray Trotsky as a longstanding opponent of Leninism. The campaign of historical falsification had begun.

Trotsky responded with a series of articles directed to the membership of the party and published between December and January 1924. In these articles, collected in the pamphlet *The New Course*, Trotsky articulated the political foundations of the Left Opposition and developed the arguments from the letter of October 8. The titles reflect the basic issues Trotsky was addressing: The Question of Party Generations; The Social Composition of the Party; Groups and Factional Formation; Bureaucratism and the Revolution; Tradition and Revolutionary Policy; The "Underestimation" of the Peasantry; and Planned Economy.

Trotsky stressed that the problems confronting the party in an increasingly complex social and economic situation, exacerbated by the isolation of the revolution, could only be resolved through the active involvement of the membership and the elevation of its political level:

> All the previous work of purging the party, the raising of its political education and its theoretical level, and finally the setting

> up of qualifications for party functionaries, can be crowned only by widening and intensifying the independent activity of the entire party collectively. Such activity is the only serious guarantee against all the dangers connected with the New Economic Policy and *the retarded development of the European revolution*. [Preface to The New Course, January 1924, in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition*, pp. 70-71, emphasis added]

Trotsky stressed the relationship between the failure of the German revolution, which we will address shortly, and the imperative for a shift in the character of the party within the Soviet Union. "The approach of the events in Germany set the party aquiver," he wrote. "Precisely at this moment it appeared with particular sharpness that the party was living, as it were, on two stories: The upper story, where things are decided, and the lower story, where all you do is learn of the decisions." ["The Question of Party Generations," December 23, 1923, *Ibid*. pp. 75-76]

The shift in the internal regime was "postponed" as the events in Germany unfolded. "When it turned out that this showdown was delayed by the force of things, the party put the question of the 'new course' on the order of the day." [*Ibid*., 76]

While stressing the objective and international factors underlying the perils confronting the Soviet state, Trotsky at the same time emphasized the role of the subjective factor, the response of the party. "History is made by people but people do not always make history consciously; not even their own," he wrote.

> In the last analysis, the question will be resolved by two great factors of international importance: the course of the revolution in Europe and the rapidity of our economic development. But to reject fatalistically all responsibility for these objective factors would be a mistake of the same stripe as to seek guarantees solely in a subjective radicalism inherited from the past. In the same revolutionary situation, and in the same international conditions, the party will resist the tendencies of disorganization more or resist them less, to the extent that it is more or less conscious of the danger and that it combats these dangers with more or less vigor. ["The Social Composition of the Party," December 1923, *Ibid*. p. 83]

One month later, on January 21, 1924, Lenin died. At the same time, Stalin and his allies convened the Thirteenth Party Conference and opened a campaign of denunciation against Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

The "Lessons of October," the "Literary Debates" of 1924, and the adoption of "Socialism in One Country"

Simultaneous with these internal conflicts, developments outside the boundaries of the Soviet Union would have immense significance for the future course of political developments—above all the failure of the 1923 German Revolution.

The bureaucratization of the Soviet state was both a cause and a consequence of the continued isolation of the world revolution throughout the mid- to late-1920s. As the bureaucracy grew in strength, it undermined the Comintern's capacity to carry out a revolutionary policy, which strengthened the nationalist pressures within the Soviet Union. The failure of the German Revolution was a critical turning point.

The German Revolution of 1923: A missed opportunity and its consequences

I cannot in the course of this lecture give a detailed review of the events of 1923, which are provided in Comrade Peter Schwarz' excellent essay, "The German October: The Missed Revolution of 1923." But it is necessary to give a basic outline to understand the developments that followed.

In the summer and fall of 1923, conditions in Germany had reached a boiling point. Hyperinflation rendered the currency worthless, exacerbated by the French occupation of the Ruhr industrial region. Millions were plunged into poverty. A strike wave swept across Germany, culminating in the August 10 general strike that brought down the government of Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno. Meanwhile, reactionary forces were plotting coups and uprisings.

It was in this context that the Russian Communist Party's Political Bureau, under Trotsky's urging, adopted a resolution on August 21 instructing the Comintern to prepare for an insurrection in Germany. Arms shipments were readied, Soviet advisers traveled to Germany, and the German Communist Party (KPD) began forming workers' militias. The KPD's influence was growing rapidly in the working class, while the Social Democrats were increasingly despised. It was an extremely favorable revolutionary situation.

Stalin, expressing the conservative instincts of the Soviet bureaucracy, sought to pull back. In a letter to Zinoviev dated August 7, 1923, he warned: "In my opinion, the Germans must be restrained and not encouraged." Trotsky, by contrast, insisted that the revolution had to be prepared for decisively and urgently. He encouraged the setting of a definitive date and warned that the opportunity would not last forever.

By late September, Germany was in a state of emergency. On October 1 a failed putsch by right-wing military forces underscored the instability of the Weimar regime. And yet, on October 21, just as the KPD was preparing to lead the uprising, it suddenly canceled the insurrection—just two weeks after Trotsky's letter of October 8. The decision, driven by hesitation among the German and Russian leaderships, resulted in a political fiasco. The decision did not reach Hamburg, where there was an abortive and isolated uprising that was defeated in three days.

The failure in Germany maintained the isolation of the Soviet Union and dealt a demoralizing blow to the international working class. Its consequences would reverberate throughout the 20th century, as it strengthened the forces of reaction that led, a decade later—and with the assistance of the criminal policy of the Comintern and Social Democracy—to the coming to power of Hitler in 1933.

Lessons of October

In the fall of 1924, Trotsky wrote a preface to the third volume of his collected speeches and articles from 1917. Published under the title *The Lessons of October*, this work became a foundational document of the Left Opposition.

Certain fundamental conceptions animated this document. First, Trotsky understood that in the developing conflict within the party, the education of the working class in the historical experiences of the revolution was imperative. Trotsky also understood that the conflict with the emerging bureaucracy would be fought not only over program and policy, but over the interpretation of history itself.

"It is indispensable for the entire party, and especially its younger generations," he wrote, "to study and assimilate step by step the experience of October, which provided the supreme, incontestable, and irrevocable test of the past and opened wide the gates to the future." He began the essay by referring to the party's neglect of its own revolutionary experience. "Having achieved the revolution," he observed, "we seem to have concluded that we should never have to repeat it… as if we thought that no immediate and direct benefit… could be derived from the study of October." [*Lessons of October*]

Second, Trotsky approached the historical clarification of October not only from the standpoint of internal considerations, but as a pressing question for the international proletariat. He rejected the conception that the October Revolution was a self-contained national event, insisting instead that it was a world-historic experience. “We are a part of the International,” he wrote, “and the workers in all other countries are still faced with the solution of the problem of their own ‘October.’”

In addition to the experience in Germany, the Bulgarian Communist Party, Trotsky noted, had let slip a “favorable moment for revolutionary action” in June 1923, and then launched an unprepared and adventurist insurrection in September.

In Germany, where the objective conditions were more favorable than in Russia in 1917, the lack of a far-sighted and resolute leadership led to a missed revolutionary opportunity of world-historic significance. Trotsky insisted: “To be sure, mere study of the October Revolution is not sufficient… but circumstances may arise where all the prerequisites for revolution exist, with the exception of a farseeing and resolute party leadership grounded in the understanding of the laws and methods of the revolution. This was exactly the situation last year in Germany.”

Third, the core conclusion Trotsky drew from the experience of October was the decisive role of the revolutionary party. “The fundamental instrument of proletarian revolution is the party,” he wrote. “On the basis of our experience… we can posit as almost an unalterable law that a party crisis is inevitable in the transition from preparatory revolutionary activity to the immediate struggle for power.”

Every serious tactical turn, Trotsky argued, produces friction and crisis. “If the turn is too abrupt or too sudden,” he warned, “and if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia and conservatism have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party will prove itself unable to fulfill its leadership… The party is ravaged by a crisis, and the movement passes the party by—and heads toward defeat.”

A revolutionary party, he wrote, is always “subjected to the pressure of other political forces.” During a crisis or sharp turn, the ability of the party to resist these pressures is weakened. “From this the possibility always arises,” he warned, “that the internal groupings in the party… may develop far beyond the original controversial points of departure and serve as a support for various class tendencies… The party that does not keep step with the historical tasks of its own class becomes, or runs the risk of becoming, the indirect tool of other classes.”

This insight provided not only a diagnosis of the party’s crisis in 1917, but a warning about the crisis it faced in 1924. Trotsky made clear that at the moment of insurrection, what had been latent confusion rose to the surface:

> Whatever remains in the party that is irresolute, skeptical, conciliationist, capitulatory—in short, Menshevik—all this rises to the surface in opposition to the insurrection, seeks theoretical formulas to justify its opposition, and finds them ready-made in the arsenal of the opportunist opponents of yesterday. We shall have occasion to observe this phenomenon more than once in the future.

Fourth, Trotsky’s essay was not written in the spirit of factional intrigue. He explicitly rejected the use of the conflicts of 1917 for petty recriminations. “Nothing could be more paltry,” he wrote, “than an attempt to turn them now, after a lapse of several years, into weapons of attack against those who were at that time mistaken.” But, he continued, “it would be… inadmissible to remain silent… on account of trifling personal considerations.”

Trotsky’s aim was to raise the political level of the entire party, and especially of its younger layers. It was only on the basis of clarity—above all, historical clarity—that the party could overcome the mounting internal dangers and fulfill its role in leading the international revolution.

The main portion of the document was a review of the internal conflicts of the Bolshevik Party in 1917—conflicts that had been largely unknown by the broader party membership and were examined in Christoph’s lecture. He detailed the initial reversion of Stalin and Kamenev to a defensist and conciliationist position after the February Revolution; the sharp resistance by many leading Bolsheviks to Lenin’s April Theses; and the opposition of Zinoviev and Kamenev to the very insurrection that brought the working class to power.

It was precisely this that made *Lessons of October* so threatening to the Stalinist apparatus. It reacted with a sustained campaign to isolate and discredit Trotsky. Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin initiated the “literary discussion,” a thoroughly orchestrated, ideological campaign of slander and falsification.

From this campaign emerged the official mythology of “Trotskyism” as a distinct and hostile current. This was, as Trotsky himself observed ironically, the “theory of original sin”: That Trotsky had never truly been a Bolshevik, that he “underestimated the peasantry,” that his political role had been a deviation all along. Stalin also began to falsify the history of October, minimizing Trotsky’s central role in the insurrection and inventing the legend of a “practical center” supposedly led by himself.

Trotsky’s intention was to educate a new generation of revolutionary Marxists, inside Russia and internationally, on the historical basis of the October Revolution—and to draw the strategic conclusions necessary to preserve and extend that victory. His central thesis—that the fate of the working class depended upon the question of leadership—remains one of the most critical lessons of the twentieth century.

“Socialism in One Country”: The theoretical banner of bureaucratic reaction

The political and ideological campaign against Trotsky culminated in a fundamental revision of Marxism and a decisive break with the internationalist foundations of Bolshevism: The theory of “socialism in one country.”

Before the end of 1924, no leading Bolshevik questioned the principle that socialism could not be achieved in isolation. In early 1924, Stalin himself had acknowledged that “the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient” for the final victory of socialism. Lenin had repeatedly insisted that the survival of the Soviet Republic depended upon the extension of the revolution to the advanced capitalist countries, particularly to Europe.

But in December 1924, Stalin reversed course. Along with Bukharin, he now insisted that the proletariat “can and must” build socialism in one country. Trotsky’s “theory of permanent revolution,” Stalin argued, expressed a “lack of faith in the strength and capacities of our revolution, lack of faith in the strength and capacity of the Russian proletariat—this is what lies at the root of the theory of ‘permanent revolution.’” Stalin, “The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists,” December 1924]

Stalin proclaimed that the theory of permanent revolution was a “variety of Menshevism,” since the Mensheviks argued against the seizure of power by the working class in Russia on the grounds that it was economically backward. This was the height of sophistry. As Christoph reviewed in the first lecture, Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution argued, against the Menshevik conception, that the working class in Russia had to take power, leading the peasant masses, and establish a workers’ state. This was both possible and necessary precisely because of the global character of the revolution, of which the Russian Revolution was a component part.

Stalin turned this into a “lack of faith” in the “Russian proletariat.” What he really meant was that Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution

was based on an international perspective, on an understanding of the Russian Revolution as part of a world revolution. This was the essence of the conflict between Trotskyism and Stalinism—the "theory of permanent revolution" vs. "socialism in one country."

Comrade North, in reply to the historian Thomas Twiss, emphasizes this point. While Twiss (and also, one might add, the state capitalists) argued that the essence of Trotsky's critique of Stalinism lay in the opposition to bureaucratism. This was wrong. "The problem of the Soviet bureaucracy was, for Trotsky, entirely secondary to the question of revolutionary internationalism," Comrade North explains.

He continues:

> In fact, the actual nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy could only be understood within the context of the relationship of the Soviet Union to the international class struggle and the fate of world socialism. As a tendency that emerged within the Bolshevik Party—under conditions of the defeats suffered by the working class in Central and Western Europe in the aftermath of the October Revolution—Stalinism represented a nationalist reaction against Marxian internationalism. As Trotsky wrote just one year before his assassination, "It may be said that the whole of Stalinism, taken on the theoretical plane, grew out of the criticism of the theory of permanent revolution as it was formulated in 1905." [David North, preface to *Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century*]

The theory of socialism in one country was formally adopted at the 14th Party Congress in 1925 and became the ideological banner of the rising nationalist bureaucracy. The consequences were catastrophic, as subsequent lectures will demonstrate.

Security and the Fourth International, in initiating the investigation into Trotsky's assassination, necessarily reexamined and advanced the entire history of the Trotskyist movement. The ferocious opposition to this investigation—particularly by the Pabloites—was rooted in their own political adaptation to Stalinism. That political trajectory culminated in the agent-infested Socialist Workers Party, under Jack Barnes, openly repudiating Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in 1982.

If one conclusion emerges from a review of the origins of the Left Opposition, it is the unbroken continuity between the perspective that animated the Russian Revolution and the emergence of the struggle, led by Trotsky, against the rising Stalinist bureaucracy. This historical continuity refutes the anti-communist slander that Stalinism was the inevitable outcome of the October Revolution. On the contrary, what Stalinism set out to suppress—through expulsions, slander, falsification, and ultimately political genocide—was the perspective of world socialist revolution, the program of Marxism itself.

It was this campaign of murder and assassination that Security and the Fourth International was launched to expose—a campaign through which the lines of historical continuity were preserved and Stalinism and its agents were dealt an extraordinary blow. Moreover, the theory of permanent revolution, which lay at the heart of this entire struggle, has been vindicated by the tragedies and betrayals of the twentieth century. It remains the essential theoretical foundation for the political orientation of the working class and the youth in the convulsive and revolutionary period now unfolding.

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