

Internationalist Socialism vs. Nationalist Reformism, Part 4

The Stalinist bureaucracy launches a war on the Trotskyist movement

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The following lecture was delivered by Clara Weiss at the SEP (US) International Summer School, held August 2-9, 2025. It is the fourth and concluding part of the lecture “Internationalist Socialism vs. Nationalist Reformism” delivered by Clara Weiss, Chris Marsden and Peter Symonds to the 2025 Summer School of the Socialist Equality Party (US) on the history of the Security and the Fourth International investigation. Part 1 was published here; part 2 here; and part 3 here.

To accompany this lecture, the WSWS is posting a revised translation of an article by Christian Rakovsky in response to capitulators, and a new translation of a document by the Soviet Trotskyist movement from 1932. The latter document will be published in the coming days.

The attacks on the Opposition in 1927

In June 1927, shortly after the crushing of the Chinese Revolution by Chiang Kai-Shek, Trotsky and other leaders of the Opposition were summoned before the Central Control Commission. The Soviet Control Commission tried to indict Trotsky for speeches he had given at the Executive Committee of the Communist International, the highest body of the Comintern. Trotsky angrily rejected the attempt of the Central Control Commission—which had been handpicked by Stalin—to elevate itself over the leading bodies of the International. He forcefully asserted reminded them,

If you are familiar with the Comintern’s charter, then you should know that I was not delegated there by our party, but was elected by the Congress, and the charter specifically states that the Comintern is not a collection of individual parties, but an international centralized party that elects its Central Committee at the Congress, and not through delegations from individual parties. Therefore, the members of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, in their activities as members of the ECCI, are not accountable to the sections, i.e., to the organs of individual parties. Such is the statute of the Comintern. I would not recommend violating it.^[1]

In the extraordinary session, Trotsky turned what the Stalinist faction had designed as a concerted attack on the Opposition into a counter-assault against the bureaucracy. He bluntly told his accusers that they were sitting there as representatives of that bureaucracy. He also

explained, more to the stenographer than to his three Stalinist accusers, the international and class process that had put him in the chair of the accused, and them into the chairs of the accusers. The world revolution had been delayed, and “this,” he said, “is why we have become the opposition.” He continued:

In 1923 we told it [the Soviet proletariat] that the German proletariat would win soon. Then we talked to it about the impending victory of the general strike in England. None of this materialized. *And then came the counter-revolutionary coup in China.* All of this has left an imprint on our proletariat. After this, an ebb [of the revolutionary tide] is inevitable, *even if it is temporary...*^[2]

Trotsky’s conduct and statements at this meeting underscore the extraordinary level of far-sightedness and political consciousness and also the determination with which he engaged in the struggle.

As expected, following this session, he was removed from the Central Committee. In the lead-up to the 15th Party Congress in December, all efforts by the Opposition to discuss their views in party cell meetings—the right of every party member—were undercut. The 1927 Platform of the Opposition was banned from circulation and discussion, even though it had been signed by 3,688 party members, many of them longstanding party leaders. Oppositionists were banned from speaking with rank-and-file workers at factories, even when they were invited. Already, hundreds of supporters of the Opposition had been arrested. It was clear, certainly to Trotsky, that the Congress would result in the expulsion of the Opposition from the Party. But this did not mean that the Opposition lessened the struggle. On the contrary. At an important meeting on November 5, Trotsky declared,

Our line is correct, ideologically we are invincible, you will not crush us... We represent a growing international factor in the workers’ movement ... We accuse the CCC [Central Control Commission] of three basic, interrelated sins: first, capitulation before the world bourgeoisie, secondly, fraternization with the mouthpieces of the world bourgeoisie, thirdly, the desire to destroy the left revolutionary wing [of the party].^[3]

He defiantly stated, “Your attempts to intimidate us, to push us from the ranks of the workers’ movement will fail. You can only remove us from

the ranks of the workers' movement with our flesh and blood."^[4] This last sentence was underlined in red, most likely by Stalin.

Following this speech, a supporter of the Stalin faction denounced Trotsky as "scum" [shtana]. Trotsky, Smilga and Kamenev walked out of the meeting in protest.

Two days later, on November 7, the Opposition organized demonstrations to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the October Revolution. The GPU responded with arrests. The apartment of Ivar Smilga, who had been summoned by Lenin almost exactly 10 years earlier to aid the revolutionary uprising in Petersburg and was one of the best-known leaders of the Soviet government, was demolished. Then, at the 15th Party Congress in December 1927, the Opposition was expelled from the party.

The OGPU operation to "liquidate" the Soviet Trotskyist movement in 1928-1930

In January 1928, Trotsky was deported to Alma-Ata in what is now Kazakhstan. Thousands were arrested across the USSR. This map shows the colonies of Oppositionists in the USSR.

A large portion of them were located in Siberia and Central Asia, where exiled Oppositionists contracted malaria and other diseases and were cut off from regular communications with the outside world. While executions were not yet on the order of the day, many Oppositionists died from what today would be called a policy of malign neglect. Thus, one of Trotsky's closest collaborators and secretaries, Georgy Butov, died of the effects of a hunger strike in prison in September 1928. He was the second of Trotsky's secretary to be driven to death. His other three secretaries would all be executed in 1937-1938 after leading major hunger strikes of the Trotskyists in the Gulags.

Many oppositionists died of tuberculosis. Although the disease was widely spread at the time, under the Soviet government it had become treatable and survivable. Yet the Stalin faction refused treatment for Oppositionists as a matter of course. Among the most famous victims of this policy were Trotsky's youngest daughter, Nina, who played an important role in the Opposition in Soviet Ukraine and on Crimea. She died in June 1928. As Trotsky bitterly noted in a letter shortly before her death, "Apparently, these gentlemen ... have begun to go after my family after they destroyed my secretariat."^[5]

Kote Tsintsadze, a Georgian Old Bolshevik and close friend of Trotsky, died in 1930; Saul Krasnyi, a brilliant young Oppositionist, died from tuberculosis at the age of 29, also in 1930. Iosif Eltsin, another young Oppositionist, was arrested already terminally ill with tuberculosis. His father, Boris Eltsin, repeatedly pleaded with the OGPU that someone who was "so gravely ill must be immediately released."^[6] A physician and revolutionary since 1897, Boris Eltsin was the head of the All-Union Soviet Trotskyist Center. He too had been arrested and was placed under conditions that threatened his already poor health. His requests to receive medical treatment and be allowed to join and care for his dying son were denied.

To give you a sense of the ferocity of the persecution but also the ongoing struggle of the Opposition, it is worth quoting from the kind of document that now landed on Stalin's desk on a regular basis. In internal reports about the crackdown on the Opposition, the Soviet secret police, the OGPU, openly spoke of operations to "liquidate" the Trotskyist movement. On October 30, 1928—that is, almost one year after the expulsion of the Opposition from the party—Genrikh Yagoda, the head of the OGPU, reported to Stalin

In view of the serious increase in the activity of the underground Trotskyist organization—[involving the] mass distribution of leaflets, attempts to widely involve non-party workers in the opposition movement, preparation of speeches for the 11th anniversary of the October Revolution—the organization of strikes at enterprises, special columns of demonstrators, etc. preparation of campaigns for the renegotiation of collective agreements, re-election of cell bureaus, factory committees, and councils; a series of speeches at workers' meetings, etc.—on October 20, we liquidated part of the underground Leningrad activist group. Thirty-nine people were arrested, 15 were temporarily detained, of whom five have already been released as they broke with the opposition as a result of the investigation. The Leningrad factional center, part of the Komsomol center, and a number of active workers were liquidated.^[7]

Reports such as this from 1928-1930 about the "liquidation" or "partial liquidation" of the Opposition in Moscow, Kharkov, and many other cities, fill several archival files. The crackdown was facilitated by the far-reaching penetration of the Opposition by the OGPU. In particular, the OGPU exploited a political crisis in the Opposition in 1928-1929 to force individuals who were in the process of capitulating to work for the OGPU inside the ranks of the Opposition. Upon capitulation, former Oppositionists routinely provided extensive testimony to restore themselves in the good graces of the bureaucracy—usually a futile endeavor. The result was the type of "liquidation" operations described by Yagoda above.

The first open murder of a Trotskyist occurred in December 1929: Yakov Bliumkin, a supporter of Trotsky in the GPU, was sentenced to death and executed after visiting Trotsky in Prinkipo, where the leader of the revolution had now been exiled. By January 1930, Lev Sedov warned publicly that the Stalinist bureaucracy sought the "extermination" of the Opposition.^[8]

What did the Opposition represent?

Despite its infiltration of the Opposition and the ever more violent crackdown, the OGPU had a very hard time to "deal with" Trotskyism. There are two major reasons for this. First, its political line, especially its criticism of the autarkic conceptions that underlay the First Five-Year Plan and the policy of rapid industrialization and collectivization, were confirmed in the everyday experiences of workers. In Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Kiev, and other major cities, the Opposition was able to grow even after its expulsion from the party, especially among a layer of young workers.

Secondly, the Opposition had already become a powerful factor in the international and Soviet working-class movement before the most violent repression started. This fact is essential for an understanding not only of the persecution of the Trotskyist movement but, indeed, for the history of the entire 20th century. The traditional narrative of Soviet historians downplays the role of the Opposition in Soviet life and reduces the inner-party struggle to a contest between personalities. However, a serious examination of the historical record shows that the Opposition was deeply entrenched in Soviet and the international political and intellectual life. Its reach extended far beyond the pure number of cadre it had, substantial though it was.

As mentioned before, up until 1927, leaders of the Opposition occupied critical positions within the Soviet party and economic apparatus. But

perhaps the most important and complex measure of the Opposition's influence is its intellectual reach. Even as articles by Trotsky and other leaders of the Opposition were censored in *Pravda*, Oppositionists were on the editorial boards of some of the most important theoretical, literary and economic journals of that time. To name but three examples:

Vagarshak Ter-Vaganian was the editor-in-chief of *Pod znamenem marksizma* (Under the Banner of Marxism). Issues of that journal regularly circulated in copies of between 4,000 and 6,000.

Alexander Voronsky was the editor-in-chief of the journal *Krasnaia nov'* (Red Virgin Soil), which published articles on literature, culture, philosophy and economics. It was one of the most widely read journals, with issues circulating in 7,000 to 14,000 copies.

Evgeny Preobrazhensky was part of many editorial boards, including that of the *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi akademii*, one of the most important journals for theoretical debates and articles on virtually every subject at the time. The average circulation of its issues was 5,000-6,000.

These three were all Old Bolsheviks who had signed the Declaration of the 46. Theoreticians of the Opposition, including many younger members whose names are all but unknown today, authored hundreds of pamphlets and monographs on a wide variety of subjects that circulated in hundreds of thousands of copies. This graph gives an overview of the scale of the literary production of the Opposition. I deliberately excluded the published works of Trotsky and those of figures like Evgeny Preobrazhensky, whose writings have been largely translated. I will note, however, that the 19 volumes of Trotsky's *Collected Works*, though never finished and increasingly suppressed, were printed in 325,000 copies. I also did not count articles that appeared in *Pravda*, which circulated in half a million copies per issue. For many titles, I was unable to establish the exact number of issues in which they were printed.

Even so, we are talking about a minimum of 26,147 printed pages, and well over 1.8 million copies of writings by just 51 Oppositionists in circulation. The range of topics covered is also significant: The Oppositionists were preoccupied not simply with "Soviet" matters but with fundamental questions of international strategy, history and Marxist theory. The Chinese and German revolutions as well as Marxist philosophy and economics, along with literature, were perhaps the central topics they focused on. In both composition and outlook, the Opposition was thus, as Trotsky correctly stated, an *international* tendency.

To give just a few examples:

This was a popular political dictionary, compiled by Boris El'tsin, whom I mentioned before. It explained Marxist terminology to the everyday worker and was printed in at least four editions. We know that the 1924 edition encompassed 150,000 copies and the 1927 edition 90,000.

This is an outstanding pamphlet on Rosa Luxemburg by Isaak Al'ter, a native of Poland and leader of the Opposition in Leningrad, from the fall of 1927. It was published in 8,000 copies.

Grigory Yakovín, one of the principal theoretical leaders of the Opposition and, in the words of Trotsky, a "brilliant Marxist scholar", authored an extremely important, 300-page history of the German Revolution and workers' movement. It was published in 1927 in 4,000 copies.

This is a study of the *Agrarian Question in India* by Fedor Dingelshedt. Trotsky made use of it in his later letters and notes on India. Interestingly, it was published as late as 1928, when the author was already imprisoned. It was printed in 3,000 copies.

Beginning in the late 1920s, these books were systematically pulped and destroyed. Many of them, including Yakovín's study of the German revolution, were listed as books to be "removed from libraries" by the Soviet secret service well into the 1970s. With a handful of exceptions, the authors were murdered. Many of them, including Yakovín and Dingelshedt played an important role in the leadership of the Opposition

throughout the 1930s. By 1931, they were among the 200 Oppositionists imprisoned in the Verkhne-Uralsk political isolator. They co-authored documents of immense historic significance that were only discovered seven years ago, in 2018, and published in full in Russian in 2022.

In their most important document, from 1932, "The Crisis of the Revolution and the Tasks of the Working Class," they consistently defended the conception of permanent revolution against the autarkic conception of "socialism in one country" and analyzed the betrayal of the world revolution by the Stalinized Communist International. Despite working under immensely difficult conditions, they had a clear understanding of the place of the Trotskyist movement in the development of the world socialist revolution. They wrote,

The Leninist opposition is above all an international tendency. Its emergence and development are rooted in the profound changes in the whole international situation in the wake of the defeat of the first wave of the European revolution in [19]21-23.^[9]

In early 1933, Dingelshedt signed one of the most extraordinary documents of the Soviet Trotskyist movement of that period which powerfully confirmed that the imprisoned Soviet Trotskyists shared and helped develop Trotsky's analysis of the rise of Nazism in Germany which will be discussed at greater length in the next lecture. After analyzing the role played by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the rise of Nazism, they concluded

The world revolution is entering one of its most dramatic phases. To explain this to the workers of the entire world, to mobilize the workers, to make sure that the working class understands the causes that have led to this stage, that it understands that the victory of the proletariat is impossible under the Stalinist regime ... that international Stalinism is one of the decisive barriers that the working class needs to crush in order to overcome the giant wave of world reaction—this is our primary task. And we are obliged to fulfill it with all the possibilities and in all forms that we have at hand.^[10]

Conclusion

By the early 1930s, the Stalinist leadership had turned the USSR into the center of political anti-Marxism and counter-revolutionary violence. More so than ever before, the fight for the continuity of the Marxist movement had to be waged primarily on an international level and in a direct struggle to destroy the movement physically.

When Stalin deported Trotsky to Prinkipo, an island in Turkey, in early 1929, he mistakenly thought that by physically removing Trotsky from the "levers of power," he could do away with Trotskyism. But he miscalculated. The Trotskyists never relinquished the fight, not within and not outside the borders in the USSR. The political struggle for the continuity of Marxism by Trotsky in the 1920s laid the basis for the emergence of the Trotskyist movement as a powerful force in Soviet and international politics. It provided the theoretical and political basis upon which the Soviet Trotskyists could continue the fight.

It was only through the most barbaric counter-revolutionary violence that the Stalinist bureaucracy was able to silence a large portion of the international Trotskyist movement. All active Soviet Trotskyists were

annihilated in the Great Terror, and, in August 1940, Leon Trotsky was assassinated. These developments will be the subjects of the subsequent lectures.

Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 171, d. 87, l. 83.

Ibid., l. 144.

Ibid., ll. 116-117. Emphasis in the original.

RGASPI, f. 17, op. 171, d. 109, ll. 41-44.

Ibid., l. 45.

Letter by Trotsky to leading Trotskyists, June 2, 1928. Harvard University, Houghton Library, Leon Trotsky Soviet Papers, T-1613. URL: https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/387681

RGASPI, f. 17, op. 171, d. 153, l. 236.

N. Markin, “Medlennaia rasprava nad Kh. G. Rakovskim”, *Biulleten’ oppositsii*, No. 9, January 1930. URL: <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-09.shtml>

Tetradī verkhne-ural’skogo politicheskogo izoliatora 1932-1933, ed. by Alexei Gusev, A. Reznik, A. Fokin, V. Shabalin, Moscow: Trovant 2022, p. 120.

Ibid., pp. 299-300.

[1] Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 171, d. 87, l. 83.

[2] Ibid., l. 144.

[3] Ibid., ll. 116-117. Emphasis in the original.

[4] RGASPI, f. 17, op. 171, d. 109, ll. 41-44.

[5] Ibid., l. 45.

[6] Letter by Trotsky to leading Trotskyists, June 2, 1928. Harvard University, Houghton Library, Leon Trotsky Soviet Papers, T-1613. URL: https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/387681

[7] RGASPI, f. 17, op. 171, d. 153, l. 236.

[8] N. Markin, “Medlennaia rasprava nad Kh. G. Rakovskim”, *Biulleten’ oppositsii*, No. 9, January 1930. URL: <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-09.shtml>

[9] *Tetradī verkhne-ural’skogo politicheskogo izoliatora 1932-1933*, ed. by Alexei Gusev, A. Reznik, A. Fokin, V. Shabalin, Moscow: Trovant 2022, p. 120.

[10] Ibid., pp. 299-300.



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