

Lecture to the SEP 2025 Summer School

Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy and the call for a political revolution in the Soviet Union

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This is the second part of the lecture “The Revolution Betrayed” delivered by Johannes Stern and Jordan Shilton to the 2025 Summer School of the Socialist Equality Party (US) on the history of the Security and the Fourth International investigation. To supplement the reading of this part of the lecture, readers are encouraged to study Chapters 3 and 9 of Leon Trotsky’s “The Revolution Betrayed,” posted today on the WSWS and also available for purchase from Mehring Books.

I. Introduction

Leon Trotsky published *The Revolution Betrayed* in late 1936, shortly after the first Moscow Trial. David North has referred to this work, alongside Lenin’s *Imperialism*, as the greatest achievement of dialectical materialist analysis, i.e., Marxism, in the 20th century.

Trotsky’s work certainly justifies this praise. *The Revolution Betrayed* was decisive for an understanding of the character and degeneration of the Soviet state, and what the Stalinist bureaucracy represented. It demonstrated the historic necessity of a political revolution led by the working class to reestablish Soviet democracy by overthrowing the bureaucracy, which had usurped political power from the working class and developed a parasitic relationship to the workers’ state established by the 1917 October Revolution. Otherwise, Trotsky warned, the bureaucratic caste would endeavour to consolidate its privileges by restoring capitalism and laying the basis for the emergence of a new bourgeois class.

These questions of programme and perspective set our movement apart from all varieties of revisionism, including state capitalism and Shachtmanism, and Pabloism, not to mention Stalinism. All of the revisionists, in one way or another, ascribed to the Stalinist bureaucracy a historic role it did not possess: the state capitalists, by declaring it a new social class; the Pabloites, by claiming it could play a revolutionary role in the transition to socialism through a process of self-reform. In this context, it is easier to understand why these forces responded with such violent hostility to our exposure of the crimes of Stalinism in *Security and the Fourth International* that we are examining at this school: because it cut across their own political operations and programmes, and their common material interests with the bureaucracy.

Tuesday will mark 89 years since Trotsky finished *Betrayed* during his stay in Norway. His notes on his time there, which included a four-month-long, illegal detention imposed by the Labour Party government in Oslo at the behest of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, give a flavour of the incredibly difficult conditions under which he wrote this book. Trotsky writes,

My wife and I lived in extreme isolation, without thinking of feeling sorry for ourselves. A very friendly relationship was established with the Knudsens, politics being, by tacit consent, excluded from our conversations. During the moments of respite my illness afforded, I worked on *The Revolution Betrayed*, trying to bring out clearly the causes of the victory of the Soviet bureaucracy over the party, the soviets, and the people, and to sketch perspectives for the subsequent development of the USSR.

On August 5 [1936] I sent the first copies of the finished manuscript to the American and French translators. The very same day, with Konrad Knudsen and his wife, we left for the south of Norway, where we were to spend two weeks at the seashore. But the following morning, while still en route, we learned that a group of fascists had forced their way into the house to steal my archives. [Leon Trotsky, “In ‘Socialist’ Norway”]

Over the course of 11 chapters, Trotsky provides an analysis of the Soviet Union’s economic, social, political and cultural development since the October Revolution. He then clearly outlines the two possible variants of its future development: capitalist restoration by the bureaucracy or a political revolution led by the working class to reestablish Soviet democracy.

I will not within the framework of this lecture be able to review each chapter in detail. To appreciate the full scope and depth of Trotsky’s analysis and political perspective, it is necessary for all comrades to study this work. To assist them in their study, my lecture will provide an overview of the most critical aspects of Trotsky’s work. I will begin with a consideration of the Marxist method that guides *The Revolution Betrayed*. This will be followed by an examination of Trotsky’s conception of the Soviet state as having a “dual character” and his description of the bureaucracy as the “gendarme of inequality.” I will

conclude by exploring what Trotsky wrote regarding the prospects for political revolution or capitalist restoration, before briefly pointing to *The Revolution Betrayed*'s subsequent significance for the Fourth International.

II. *The Revolution Betrayed* and the Marxist method

The source of the scientific analysis and perspective developed by Trotsky is the Marxist method, i.e., dialectical materialism. David North wrote in "Marxism, history and the science of perspective"—a lecture given at the 2005 SEP summer school subsequently published as a chapter ("The Science of Political Perspective") in *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*—that the question of whether the Marxist method of analysis could be considered a science

depends, to a great extent, upon 1) whether the laws which it claims to have discovered reveal the real objective mechanisms of socio-economic development; 2) whether the discovery of those laws can adequately explain the preceding historical evolution of mankind; and 3) whether the understanding of these laws makes possible significant predictions about the future development of human society. [David North, "*Marxism, history and the science of perspective*"]

On the basis of a reading of *The Revolution Betrayed*, one can answer in the affirmative on all three points with regard to the development of the Soviet Union.

Trotsky sets out to uncover the objective laws of social development in the USSR and, on that basis, to provide a scientific account of what the Stalinist bureaucracy is and what the consequences of its policies will be. Trotsky was working in the tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin. As North wrote in 1982,

It is of decisive importance to understand that Trotsky did not conclude his theoretical work on Stalinism once he had established, on the basis of the German events, its counterrevolutionary role. Nor did he rest content with pointing to the further development of Stalinist treachery after 1933—the Popular Front betrayals in France and Spain, the Moscow Trials, the Stalin-Hitler Pact—to substantiate his indictment of its counterrevolutionary role.

Trotsky set out to discover the objective social laws, from the standpoint of historical materialism, of the degeneration of the first workers' state and of the transformation of the Stalinist bureaucracy into the principal agency of imperialism within the international workers' movement. Herein lay the great continuity of Trotsky's work with that of Marx, Engels and Lenin. [David North, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, p. 28]

As a dialectical materialist, Trotsky analyses the Soviet Union not as a finished and fixed phenomenon, but as a society in transition. He begins with a historical review of the economic and social history of the Soviet Union since the 1917 October Revolution, in order on this basis to make an assessment of the economic achievements and shortcomings. The rise

of the bureaucracy is explained within this context, due to the extended isolation of the Soviet Union owing to the delay of the revolution in the West and Russia's historical and economic backwardness. From there, Trotsky proceeds to expound the two divergent possible courses of development within the Soviet Union, to which I have already referred.

In his introduction, Trotsky draws a sharp distinction between his method of analysing the Soviet Union and that of various schools of bourgeois commentary.

"Questions end for them where they really only begin," he writes. "The purpose of the present investigation is to estimate correctly what is, in order the better to understand what is coming to be. We shall dwell upon the past only so far as that helps us to see the future. Our book will be critical. Whoever worships the accomplished fact is incapable of preparing the future." (*The Revolution Betrayed*, Introduction, pp. 2-3).

One of the most important historical laws elaborated by Trotsky is the superiority of socialised production and a planned economy, notwithstanding its increasingly bureaucratic character, over capitalist private property. After citing statistics showing the rapid industrialisation experienced by the Soviet Union since 1917, promising developments in agriculture, the building of new cities and cultural progress, he insists,

With the bourgeois economists we have no longer anything to quarrel over. Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of *Das Kapital*, but in an industrial arena comprising a sixth part of the earth's surface—not in the language of dialectics, but in the language of steel, cement and electricity.

Even if the Soviet Union, as a result of internal difficulties, external blows and the mistakes of leadership, were to collapse—which we firmly hope will not happen—there would remain an earnest of the future this indestructible fact, that thanks solely to a proletarian revolution a backward country has achieved in less than 10 years successes unexampled in history. [*The Revolution Betrayed*, Chapter 1: What Has Been Achieved? pp. 7-8]

The undeniable achievements made possible by the revolution were constrained by Russia's historic backwardness and, to use Trotsky's expression, the "extreme tardiness" of the revolution in the West. The Soviet economy remained far behind the most advanced capitalist economies in terms of production per capita and the quality of its products. Trotsky observes at the end of Chapter 1,

The Soviet regime is passing through a preparatory stage, importing, borrowing and appropriating the technical and cultural conquests of the West. The comparative coefficients of production and consumption testify that this preparatory stage is far from finished. Even under the improbable condition of a continuing complete capitalist standstill, it must still occupy a whole historic period. That is a first extremely important conclusion which we shall have need of in our further investigation. [*Ibid.* p. 17]

Moreover, the impressive achievements made possible by socialised production were hampered and even endangered by the bureaucracy's policy of "socialism in one country," which was an explicit repudiation of the socialist and internationalist programme fought for by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

In light of these contradictory economic conditions, Trotsky ridiculed the claims of the Stalinist bureaucracy that "socialism" had been achieved

in the Soviet Union. In so doing, he defended Marxism against the ahistorical metaphysics employed by the ruling bureaucracy to legitimise its material privileges. Trotsky drew attention in Chapter 3 to the absurdity of the Stalinists' attempts to describe what existed in the Soviet Union as "socialism," i.e., the lowest stage of communism, on the basis of the dominance of the state trusts in industry and the near complete collectivisation of agriculture. Trotsky writes,

At first glance this gives a complete correspondence with the a priori—and therefore hypothetical—scheme of Marx. But it is exactly for the Marxist that this question is not exhausted by a consideration of forms of property regardless of the achieved productivity of labor. By the lowest stage of communism Marx meant, at any rate, a society which from the very beginning stands higher in its economic development than the most advanced capitalism. Theoretically such a conception is flawless, for taken on a world scale communism, even in its first incipient stage, means a higher level of development than that of bourgeois society.

Moreover, Marx expected that the Frenchman would begin the social revolution, the German continue it, the Englishman finish it; and as to the Russian, Marx left him far in the rear. But this conceptual order was upset by the facts. Whoever tries now mechanically to apply the universal historic conception of Marx to the particular case of the Soviet Union at the given stage of its development, will be entangled at once in hopeless contradictions. [*The Revolution Betrayed*, Chapter 3: Socialism and the State, pp. 40-41]

It is following this passage that Trotsky formulates for the first time a preliminary definition of the Soviet regime, which he says, "in all its contradictoriness," is "not a socialist regime, but a preparatory regime transitional from capitalism to socialism."

III. The dual character of the Soviet state

Trotsky defines the Soviet state as having a dual character. That is to say, property had been socialised by the October Revolution, but the methods of distribution remained bourgeois.

It is important to stress here that the Soviet state did not have a "dual character" primarily due to policies pursued by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Rather, it was the inevitable product of Russia's historic backwardness and the fact that the October Revolution remained isolated for a longer period than the Bolsheviks had anticipated. To be sure, the reactionary nationalist policies of the bureaucracy sharpened the "dual character" of the state. But even under the best of political conditions, this state of affairs would have persisted for a more or less extended period of time.

Trotsky cites Engels from the latter's *Anti-Dühring* on this point:

When, together with class domination and the struggle for individual existence created by the present anarchy in production, those conflicts and excesses which result from this struggle disappear, from that time on there will be nothing to suppress, and there will be no need for a special instrument of suppression, the state.

Trotsky continues:

The philistine considers the gendarme an eternal institution. In reality, the gendarme will bridle mankind only until man shall thoroughly bridle nature. In order that the state shall disappear, "class domination and the struggle for individual existence" must disappear.

Engels joins these two conditions together, for in the perspective of changing social regimes a few decades amount to nothing. But the thing looks different to those generations who bear the weight of a revolution. It is true that capitalist anarchy creates the struggle of each against all, but the trouble is that a socialisation of the means of production does not yet automatically remove the "struggle for individual existence." That is the nub of the question!

A socialist state even in America, on the basis of the most advanced capitalism, could not immediately provide everyone with as much as he needs, and would therefore be compelled to spur everyone to produce as much as possible. The duty of the stimulator in these circumstances naturally falls to the state, which in its turn cannot but resort, with various changes and mitigations, to the method of labor payment worked out by capitalism. It was in this sense that Marx wrote in 1875:

"Bourgeois law ... is inevitable in the first phase of the communist society, in that form in which it issues after long labor pains from capitalist society. Law can never be higher than the economic structure and the cultural development of society conditioned by that structure."

In explaining these remarkable lines, Lenin adds:

"Bourgeois law in relation to the distribution of the objects of consumption assumes, of course, inevitably a bourgeois state, for law is nothing without an apparatus capable of compelling observance of its norms. It follows (we are still quoting Lenin) that under Communism not only will bourgeois law survive for a certain time, but also even a bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie!" [*Ibid.* pp. 45-46]

Trotsky explains in the spirit of Marx's *Capital* why it is that the state in the period immediately after a victorious socialist revolution cannot but resort for a time to the "method of labour payment worked out by capitalism." At the beginning of chapter 4, he identifies "the problem of problems" as being "the productivity of labour." He writes,

State compulsion like money compulsion is an inheritance from the class society, which is incapable of defining the relations of man by man except in the form of fetishes, churchly or secular, after appointing to defend them the most alarming of all fetishes, the state, with a great knife between its teeth. [Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, chapter 4: The Struggle for Productivity of Labour, p. 57]

In the opening chapters of *Capital*, Marx provides a materialist analysis of the emergence of commodity production and exchange, and how money serves an objectively necessary function under capitalism. As he writes in chapter three, entitled "Money, or the Circulation of Commodities,"

It is not money that renders commodities commensurable. Just

the contrary. It is because all commodities, as values, are realised human labour, and therefore commensurable, that their values can be measured by one and the same special commodity, and the latter be converted into the common measure of their values, i.e., into money. Money as a measure of value, is the phenomenal form that must of necessity be assumed by that measure of value which is immanent in commodities, labour-time. [Karl Marx, *Capital*, chapter 3: Money, or the Circulation of Commodities]

Following this logic, Trotsky provides a concise explanation of the historical role of money, underscoring its necessity under conditions in which Soviet society does not yet produce the adequate abundance of products to distribute them according to everyone's needs.

Such characteristically anarchist demands as the "abolition" of money, "abolition" of wages, or "liquidation" of the state and family, possess interest merely as models of mechanical thinking. Money cannot be arbitrarily "abolished," nor the state and the old family "liquidated." They have to exhaust their historic mission, evaporate, and fall away. The deathblow to money fetishism will be struck only upon that stage when the steady growth of social wealth has made us bipeds forget our miserly attitude toward every excess minute of labor, and our humiliating fear about the size of our ration. Having lost its ability to bring happiness or trample men in the dust, money will turn into mere bookkeeping receipts for the convenience of statisticians and for planning purposes. [Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, chapter 4: The Struggle for Productivity of Labour, pp. 57-58]

In 1921, as the Bolsheviks secured victory in the Civil War, the decision was taken to adopt the New Economic Policy (NEP) in recognition of the necessity of allowing capitalist relations within a limited sphere to revive production. I cannot go into this question in the necessary detail, but the need for this measure, always viewed by Lenin and Trotsky as a temporary retreat, arose from the defeats of the working class in the West, compelling the USSR to hold out alone without help from more advanced economies, and the sharp economic crisis within Russia and the continued existence of even pre-capitalist social relations in the countryside.

The consequence of the NEP was the strengthening of more privileged layers, both in the countryside and towns, from which the emerging bureaucracy drew increasing support. During the early years of the Left Opposition's struggle against the bureaucracy, Trotsky and his followers advocated a more rapid tempo of industrialisation to overcome the "scissors crisis" referred to by Joseph Kishore yesterday and raise the overall productivity of labour. The Stalinists vehemently opposed this course for several years.

By the late 1920s, under the influence of "socialism in one country," as the Stalinist bureaucracy swung sharply towards complete collectivisation in agriculture, Stalin issued the bombastic pledge to "send the NEP to the devil," i.e., eliminate market relations, while striving to build socialism within the Soviet Union alone. A few years later, the bureaucracy was boasting that "socialism" had been achieved after the first five-year plan was achieved in four years and three months.

Yet through the very development of Soviet industry and agriculture, made possible by the tremendous superiority of socialised production and a planned economy, notwithstanding its bureaucratic defects, the ruling caste was compelled to reinstitute cash payments to the peasantry and abolish food cards in the course of 1935 and 1936, resurrecting money payment for workers' basic necessities. Trotsky notes that the

bureaucracy thereby acknowledged in practice, in opposition to all of its rhetorical declamations, that the Soviet Union continued to have a dual character due to its reliance on bourgeois forms of distribution.

IV. The gendarme of inequality

Marx wrote in 1845,

A development of the productive forces is the absolutely necessary practical premise [of Communism], because without it want is generalised, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means that all the old crap must revive. [*The German Ideology*, p. 54]

Trotsky employs this brief theoretical insight of Marx to concretely demonstrate how the "struggle for necessities" continued in the Soviet Union due to its economic backwardness in comparison with capitalist methods of production. Since the economic basis proved inadequate to supply the population with the necessities of life, the emergence of a bureaucracy as the gendarme or enforcer of inequality was made possible.

As Trotsky writes in chapter 5:

The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. [*Ibid*, chapter 5: The Soviet Thermidor, p. 96]

None of this should be understood as a justification of or an apology for the Stalinist bureaucracy. Our movement has always tenaciously fought those tendencies among historians and political organisations that presented the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet state as the inevitable result of October 1917. All that Trotsky is saying here, and all that we want to say, is that the immense power Stalin was able to concentrate in his hands arose from the fact that the bureaucracy had substantial social roots and material interests strengthened by the series of defeats suffered by the working class in the years following 1917 and by Russia's historic backwardness.

The bureaucracy used this power to wrench control of the state from the workers and develop as a parasitic caste its own interests. By the time Trotsky wrote *The Revolution Betrayed*, these interests included systematically suppressing the working class and leading it to catastrophic defeats, above all in Germany. As a later lecture will show, the bureaucracy was also at this time focused on physically exterminating the old Bolsheviks and oppositional forces within the USSR.

There are two quotes from Trotsky that provide an excellent elucidation of the relationship between the bureaucracy's economic power and its political role. At the beginning of chapter 5, Trotsky takes note of the superiority of the Left Opposition's political analysis and prognoses concerning developments in the Soviet Union compared to those of the bureaucracy. He writes that historians will be compelled to conclude that the Left Opposition "offered an immeasurably more correct analysis of the processes taking place in the country" than the bureaucracy. He then

continues,

This assertion is contradicted at first glance by the simple fact that the faction which could not see ahead was steadily victorious, while the more penetrating group suffered defeat after defeat. That kind of objection, which comes automatically to mind, is convincing, however, only for those who think rationalistically, and see in politics a logical argument or a chess match. A political struggle is in its essence a struggle of interests and forces, not of arguments. The quality of the leadership is, of course, far from a matter of indifference for the outcome of the conflict, but it is not the only factor, and in the last analysis is not decisive. Each of the struggling camps moreover demands leaders in its own image. [*Ibid.* pp. 75-76]

And then there is the following explanation from the end of chapter 5:

Alongside the economic factor dictating capitalist methods of payment at the present stage, there operates a parallel political factor in the person of the bureaucracy itself. In its very essence it is the planter and protector of inequality. It arose in the beginning as the bourgeois organ of a workers' state. In establishing and defending the advantages of a minority, it of course draws off the cream for its own use. Nobody who has wealth to distribute ever omits himself. Thus out of a social necessity there has developed an organ which has far outgrown its socially necessary function, and become an independent factor and therewith the source of great danger for the whole social organism. [*Ibid.* p. 97]

The growth in inequality within the Soviet Union can be traced through the different stages of economic policy following the October Revolution, which Trotsky examines in *The Revolution Betrayed*. Describing the "economic zigzags" of the bureaucratic leadership, he documents how sharp shifts in economic policy, often directly contradicting and violating principles previously claimed to be foundational, were accompanied by a consistent promotion of better-off sections of society at the expense of the great mass of the working population, i.e., urban workers and the agricultural labourers.

I cannot go into detail about the economic history of the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1936, but here are some key dates to help comrades have an overview. Those who wish to engage more thoroughly with this issue will find no better starting point than Trotsky's analysis in *The Revolution Betrayed*.

- Until 1921: The period of military communism. Trotsky refers to this period as having featured an "equality of poverty" due to the lack of resources, making it impossible to consolidate a bureaucracy with privileges apart from the rest of the population.

- 1921: The start of the NEP. Leads to the emergence of the NEP-men, petty-bourgeois traders who profit from the revival of market relations between the cities and country.

- 1923-28: As the bureaucracy consolidates power, it actively promotes the kulaks (more prosperous peasants) in the villages. Summed up in the infamous Stalinist call to the peasantry, "Get rich!" The bureaucracy also resists calls from the Left Opposition to encourage a speedier tempo of industrialisation.

- 1929: Sharp swing towards rapid industrialisation and complete collectivisation of agriculture in connection with the first five-year plan, which was unveiled in October 1928.

- 1932: The announcement that the first five-year plan was completed in four years and three months. While great advances were made on the basis of socialised property, the bureaucracy devalued the currency, used statistical manipulations to conceal serious problems in industrial production and oversaw a disastrous crisis in agriculture that led to famine with hundreds of thousands of deaths.

To define with even more precision what the bureaucracy had become in the course of this period, Trotsky draws an historical analogy with the French Revolution of the late 18th century. He refers to the Stalinist bureaucracy as having carried through the "Soviet Thermidor." This is a reference to the events of the month of Thermidor [July] 1794, when Robespierre and the Jacobins were deposed by more moderate elements who represented the interests of the big bourgeoisie in the so-called "Directorate" government. But while representing a reaction against the most revolutionary and daring elements who had pioneered the struggle against feudalism and secured the progressive achievements of the French Revolution between 1789 and 1793, the Thermidorian regime did not overturn the gains of the revolution by taking the beginnings of French capitalism back to feudalism.

Trotsky was pointing with his invocation of the "Soviet Thermidor" to a similar process, albeit one with very different social roots. The bureaucracy had broken decisively with the socialist and internationalist programme that secured victory for the Bolsheviks in 1917, and begun a campaign of ruthless suppression against the Left Opposition and other opponents. It had pursued increasingly reckless and disastrous economic policies on the basis of the reactionary programme of "socialism in one country," as we have seen. Furthermore, it had opened top positions in the state to former Mensheviks and even bourgeois reactionaries who, at the time of the October Revolution and Civil War, opposed the Soviet power. But it still depended upon the forms of socialised property and the workers' state established by the October Revolution for its privileges.

Trotsky did not believe this would continue to be the case indefinitely. On the contrary, passages from *The Revolution Betrayed* already make clear that by 1936, he no longer saw any guarantee that the bureaucracy would continue to defend socialised property in its policies, which were increasingly calling the very existence of the Soviet Union into question.

He writes in chapter 9,

During the last fifteen years, the government has changed its social composition even more deeply than its ideas. Since of all the strata of Soviet society the bureaucracy has best solved its own social problem, and is fully content with the existing situation, it has ceased to offer any subjective guarantee whatever of the socialist direction of its policy. It continues to preserve state property only to the extent that it fears the proletariat. This saving fear is nourished and supported by the illegal party of Bolshevik-Leninists, which is the most conscious expression of the socialist tendencies opposing that bourgeois reaction with which the Thermidorian bureaucracy is completely saturated. [*Ibid.*, chapter 9: Social Relations in the Social Union, p. 213]

Trotsky then drew out how these sharp social tensions within the Soviet Union would inevitably produce major political struggles, on whose outcome would depend the fate of the first workers' state. He wrote,

As a conscious political force the bureaucracy has betrayed the revolution. But a victorious revolution is fortunately not only a program and a banner, not only political institutions, but also a system of social relations. To betray it is not enough. You have to

overthrow it. The October revolution has been betrayed by the ruling stratum, but not yet overthrown. It has a great power of resistance, coinciding with the established property relations, with the living force of the proletariat, the consciousness of its best elements, the impasse of world capitalism, and the inevitability of world revolution. [*Ibid.*, pp 213-214]

V. Political revolution vs. capitalist restoration

Summing up his analysis, Trotsky outlines two possible variants of development for the Soviet Union. They can be summarised as (1) a political revolution led by the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy and reestablish Soviet democracy, or (2) the restoration of capitalism by the bureaucracy.

Trotsky poses these two alternatives as part of a comprehensive definition of the Soviet Union in 1936 that remains a remarkable example of dialectical materialist analysis. He writes in chapter 9,

The Soviet Union is a contradictory society halfway between capitalism and socialism, in which: (a) the productive forces are still far from adequate to give the state property a socialist character; (b) the tendency toward primitive accumulation created by want breaks out through innumerable pores of the planned economy; (c) norms of distribution preserving a bourgeois character lie at the basis of a new differentiation of society; (d) the economic growth, while slowly bettering the situation of the toilers, promotes a swift formation of privileged strata; (e) exploiting the social antagonisms, a bureaucracy has converted itself into an uncontrolled caste alien to socialism; (f) the social revolution, betrayed by the ruling party, still exists in property relations and in the consciousness of the toiling masses; (g) a further development of the accumulating contradictions can as well lead to socialism as back to capitalism; (h) on the road to capitalism the counterrevolution would have to break the resistance of the workers; (i) on the road to socialism the workers would have to overthrow the bureaucracy.

In the last analysis, the question will be decided by a struggle of living social forces, both on the national and the world arena. [*Ibid.*, p. 216]

In words that can serve as a guide for every comrade when he or she seeks to apply the Marxist method of analysis to any of the complex political questions we confront today in our own work, Trotsky continues,

Doctrinaires will doubtless not be satisfied with this hypothetical definition. They would like categorical formulae: yes—yes, and no—no. Sociological problems would certainly be simpler, if social phenomena had always a finished character. There is nothing more dangerous, however, than to throw out of reality, for the sake of logical completeness, elements which today violate your scheme and tomorrow may wholly overturn it.

In our analysis, we have above all avoided doing violence to dynamic social formations which have had no precedent and have no analogies. The scientific task, as well as the political, is not to give a finished definition to an unfinished process, but to follow all its stages, separate its progressive from its reactionary tendencies,

expose their mutual relations, foresee possible variants of development, and find in this foresight a basis for action. [*Ibid.*, pp. 216-217]

Let me briefly explain in more detail what Trotsky meant by the call for a “political revolution” in the Soviet Union. This remained a programmatic demand of the Trotskyist movement over the course of subsequent decades, right up until the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev, as Trotsky had predicted, moved decisively to restore capitalism in the USSR.

The 1917 October Revolution was a social revolution because it brought about a transformation in social relations. The working class, led by the party of Lenin and Trotsky, captured state power and set about resolving the outstanding bourgeois-democratic tasks by implementing socialist policies. The system of world imperialism broke at its weakest link and one-sixth of the globe’s territory was removed from the direct domination of capitalist private profit.

By contrast, the revolution called for by the Trotskyist movement in the Soviet Union was not social, but political. It would not have to fundamentally change property relations, since socialised property continued to exist in spite of the Stalinist degeneration of the state. Moreover, the Trotskyist movement always connected the fight for the political revolution in the USSR with its programme of socialist revolution around the globe, the only progressive way to open up the Soviet economy to the productive technique achieved by the most advanced capitalist countries. As Trotsky explained in the final chapter of *The Revolution Betrayed*:

History has known elsewhere not only social revolutions which substituted the bourgeois for the feudal regime, but also political revolutions which, without destroying the economic foundations of society, swept out an old ruling upper crust (1830 and 1848 in France, February 1917 in Russia, etc.). The overthrow of the Bonapartist caste will, of course, have deep social consequences, but in itself it will be confined within the limits of political revolution. [*The Revolution Betrayed*, Chapter 11: Whither the Soviet Union?, pp. 245-246]

Trotsky did not present the political revolution as an inevitability. On the contrary, he stressed in several places in *The Revolution Betrayed*, including in the comprehensive definition from which I cited, that a slide back to capitalism at the instigation of the bureaucracy was a no less likely possible outcome. Bearing in mind the trajectory of the Soviet Union over subsequent decades and what we have witnessed in the more than three decades since the Stalinist liquidation of the USSR, his explanation of the devastating economic, social and cultural impact of capitalist restoration was extraordinarily prescient. If comrades want to know how it was that only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) consistently opposed the Stalinist bureaucracy as the gravedigger of the revolution and was the only political tendency in the 1980s to recognise that Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost* represented an open turn to capitalist restoration, they must read *The Revolution Betrayed*.

VI. The historic significance of *The Revolution Betrayed* for the Fourth International

I began this lecture by noting our movement's placing of *The Revolution Betrayed* alongside Lenin's *Imperialism* as the two most outstanding works of Marxism in the 20th century. *The Revolution Betrayed* established objectively the necessity for founding the Fourth International, the call for which had first been raised by Trotsky in 1933 following the German catastrophe, reviewed in the lecture by Johannes Stern. Almost exactly two years after *The Revolution Betrayed* was published, the Fourth International held its founding congress in Paris and set itself the goal of resolving the crisis of the revolutionary leadership of the proletariat. Trotsky's analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet state and the Stalinist bureaucracy, and the perspective of political revolution found clear expression in the Fourth International's founding program.

After concisely reviewing the achievements of the October Revolution and the subsequent bureaucratic degeneration of the state, the founding programme declared that the Soviet Union

embodies terrific contradictions. But it still remains a degenerated workers' state. Such is the social diagnosis. The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism. [Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, The USSR and Problems of the Transitional Epoch]

The Revolution Betrayed continued, like Lenin's *Imperialism*, to serve as a guide for the programme and perspective of the Trotskyist movement decades after its publication. To cite just one example of the centrality of *The Revolution Betrayed* in the political programme and perspectives of the ICFI for the Soviet working class more than a half century after its publication, I wish to refer to the March 1987 ICFI statement *What is happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the crisis of Stalinism*, which was one of the first assessments of the implications of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The statement noted in section 12,

In opposition to all the Stalinists, middle class radicals, pacifists, reformists and revisionists of all stripes who today hail the "democratic" Gorbachev—just as their predecessors sang the praises of Stalin—the International Committee of the Fourth International remains the implacable enemy of the bureaucracy.

We call on the Soviet and international working class—while using all the opportunities created by the crisis in the bureaucracy, including any concessions it is forced to make to the working class—to conduct an uncompromising struggle for the political revolution: for the overthrow of the bureaucratic regime and the reestablishment of the political power of the working class based on Soviet democracy. [International Committee of the Fourth International, *What is happening in the USSR? Gorbachev and the crisis of Stalinism*]

After reviewing the decisive character of the productivity of labour for the guaranteeing of socialism, stressing that improving the productivity of labour in the USSR could be accomplished only on the basis of a global division of labour, and warning of the efforts of the bureaucracy to deepen collaboration with imperialism, the statement continued in section 16,

These developments and the ~~danger~~ *danger* they pose can only be understood from the standpoint of the fundamental contradictions of the Soviet economy. Chief among these is the conflict between the nationalized property relations and bourgeois forms of distribution based on wage labor—the form of distribution developed under the capitalist mode of production.

Fifty years ago, in *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky drew out the strategic implications of this contradiction:

"Two opposite tendencies are growing up out of the depth of the Soviet regime. To the extent that, in contrast to a decaying capitalism, it develops the productive forces, it is preparing the economic basis of socialism. To the extent that, for the benefit of an upper stratum, it carries to more and more extreme expression bourgeois norms of distribution, it is preparing a capitalist restoration. This contrast between forms of property and norms of distribution cannot grow indefinitely. Either the bourgeois norm must in one form or another spread to the means of production, or the norms of distribution must be brought into correspondence with the socialist property system." [*Ibid.*]

As we now know, the Stalinist bureaucracy succeeded in reimposing bourgeois forms of property on the Soviet workers through its liquidation of the Soviet Union. In our movement's first assessment of the consequences of the Stalinist bureaucracy's liquidation of the Soviet Union, given at a Midwest aggregate of the Workers League in January 1992, David North's remarks on the implications for our political perspective took Trotsky's prognosis in *The Revolution Betrayed* as the essential starting point. He explained, referring to our programmatic call for a political revolution in the Soviet Union to reestablish Soviet democracy as part of the programme of world socialist revolution,

For more than 55 years this analysis of the Soviet state has defined our orientation. We have defended it against countless attempts to revise the Marxist conception of the Soviet state and the Stalinist bureaucracy. There were those in the 1930s who claimed that the bureaucracy was a new class. Then, in the late '40s and early '50s, this revisionist conception was turned inside out by the Pabloites—beginning with Deutscher, who attributed to the bureaucracy a progressive role. Deutscher argued that Trotsky had exaggerated the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism, that Stalinism was engaged in a process of political reform, and that Stalin was a sort of proletarian Cromwell who was carrying through the interests of the revolution, albeit in an unfortunately bloody fashion. He said that Trotsky's idea that Stalinism would lead to the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union was an unwarranted and even grotesque exaggeration, however understandable it was, given the tragic situation in which Trotsky found himself in the 1930s. All of these revisionist distortions of Marxism have been exposed. The correctness of Trotsky's evaluation of Stalinism as the gravedigger of the Russian Revolution has been totally vindicated. [David North, "*The End of the USSR*"]

In conclusion, it is worth dwelling briefly on the implications of Trotsky's analysis in *The Revolution Betrayed* for our approach to the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, their exposure through Security and the Fourth International and the vicious response to the investigation of these crimes by all the revisionist groups. I hope this lecture has made it clear to all comrades that what was at stake in the struggle between

Stalinism and the Trotskyist movement was a bitter conflict between irreconcilable social forces with antagonistic material interests. The Stalinist bureaucracy represented a privileged social caste in the Soviet Union, which wanted to defend its position at all costs against the threat of a revolutionary upsurge from below by the Soviet masses. The Trotskyists, as the vanguard of the working class, fought precisely to politically arm the workers with a revolutionary programme to overthrow the bureaucracy.

On a world scale, the Stalinists sought “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism and attracted those petty-bourgeois social forces who wished to block the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class for socialism. All of the revisionist groups, whether Pabloite, state capitalist, Shachtmanite or some other hue, oriented politically to alliances with the Stalinists because they saw in the bureaucracy common social interests. This explains their violent hostility to the exposure of Stalinist crimes, including the assassination of Trotsky and other leading members of the Fourth International. They did not want such inconvenient facts to cut across their political alliances with Stalinism, which in the final analysis were aimed at continuing to politically paralyse the working class on a world scale.

Only in this context can the immense political significance of Security and the Fourth International be fully appreciated. It was not only a matter of exposing the crimes of individual agents in the Fourth International and their political accomplices, as justified and necessary as that was. Security and the Fourth International was above all a tremendous political victory for the fight for historical truth and therefore the raising of working class consciousness in what North described—in his unpublished manuscript summarising the Alan Gelfand case that was circulated to comrades prior to this school—as “the life and death struggles of the Trotskyist movement against the combined counter-revolutionary agencies of imperialism.”



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