

David North answers questions at the international Trotsky commemoration in Prinkipo

David North
20 August 2026

The fourth annual International Commemoration of Leon Trotsky was held on August 16, 2026, at the Ta? Mektep venue on Büyükada (Prinkipo), Turkey, hosted by the Adalar (Princes' Islands) Municipality with the support of Mehring Yay?nc?l?k (Books) and the World Socialist Web Site. Before an audience of more than 100, WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North delivered the featured speech, "Trotsky's My Life: An imperishable contribution to Marxism and world literature," recorded in advance and screened for those present.

Below we publish the transcript of the question-and-answer session that followed, in which North replied to questions on the fate of Ernst Thälmann, the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising, the tasks confronting revolutionaries in the Middle East and the influence of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union. The event was opened by Adalar Acting Mayor Medine Pamuk, speaking in place of Mayor Ali Ercan Akpolat, imprisoned since June in the Erdoğan government's campaign against opposition-run municipalities, and by Ula? Sevinç, chairman of the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi-Dördüncü Enternasyonal, whose remarks are published here.

Question 1: The German Communist Party leader Ernst Thälmann was killed by the Nazis in a concentration camp. Can you comment on the fate of Thälmann?

Well, Thälmann was seized by the Nazis shortly after they came to power, as were many other social democratic leaders. Thälmann, of course, as the leader of the German Communist Party, bore an enormous responsibility for the defeat of the German working class. The Communist Party itself was completely incapable by 1933 of organizing any resistance. Of course, in his biography, Thälmann had been a very militant worker, but he was by no means a competent political leader. He was an instrument of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

But I want to say something about his ultimate fate. As you point out, he was murdered by the Nazis either in 1944 or 1945. They held him for many years. But it is not widely known or discussed that when Stalin signed the pact with Hitler, he deliberately did not request the release of Thälmann from a concentration camp. The Nazis had assumed that would be one of the conditions for the signing of the treaty. But Stalin did not seek Thälmann's release. And of course, in that sense, Stalin himself bore direct responsibility for the tragic fate of Thälmann.

I hope that answers your question.

Question 2: Trotsky defended the Soviet state by suppressing the Kronstadt uprising. How do you view this event today?

Yes, Trotsky accepted responsibility for the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising. And I think one has to understand the circumstances under which that occurred. Clearly it had certain tragic elements to it. But the uprising in Kronstadt posed a direct and quite immediate threat to the survival of the Soviet state.

I don't know whether the person who asked the question is familiar with the geography of Leningrad. Kronstadt occupied an absolutely critical strategic position off the shore of Petersburg, Leningrad. And had the uprising against the Bolshevik regime been successful, the British navy would have occupied Kronstadt. And that would have been a devastating blow to the Soviet republic. This is a well-known historical fact.

So Trotsky accepted responsibility for what occurred. It was a political and military necessity. The uprising occurred in the midst of a civil war. The regime was fighting to defend itself against counterrevolution.

Question 3: Under conditions of the Gaza genocide, Hamas' defeat, Syria's fall, and the dissolution of the region's largest guerrilla organization by the Kurdish PKK, we do not see the working class making its own intervention. What do you suggest that revolutionaries and communists do in this situation?

Well, it's a very important question. Let me first state again, as I did in my remarks, the solidarity of the International Committee with Büyükada Mayor Ali Ercan Akpolat. We will continue to campaign for his release from prison. This is a campaign that we are conducting internationally. And so I hope that in the future, when the museum opens, and I'm sure that will one day take place, we will be able to celebrate the opening of the museum together with Mayor Ercan. And if you have an opportunity to see Ercan, please convey to him my personal greetings and strong support for his liberation from his unjust imprisonment.

In response to your question: I think, if you examine the international situation and the development of the class struggle, you will see that there is, in fact, a growing radicalization of the working class. In the last two years, there has been a substantial increase in strike activity and mass demonstrations. And here in the United States, it is increasingly evident that the working class is being radicalized by the deterioration in the conditions of life, inflation and the assault on living standards. And I must add, there is a very deep and growing opposition to the war in Iran. This is

not a war which has the support of the broad mass of the working class—quite the opposite.

Objective conditions are radicalizing the working class all over the world. And you must understand that the working class is a global force, vastly more powerful than it was even 30 or 40 years ago. Clearly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist regime, as well as the reintroduction of capitalism into China, created a tremendous amount of confusion and disorientation. But after 35 years, that disorientation is giving way to growing anger and militancy.

And so the major question today is not whether or not the working class will fight. The working class is going to fight. It's going to fight all over the world: in the United States, throughout Europe, in Asia, and in Turkey. But the working class needs political leadership. And the great challenge of our epoch is the rebuilding of a genuine revolutionary Marxist movement. And that is what the International Committee of the Fourth International has set as its fundamental task.

All the political events of the past century, and of course the most recent period, have vindicated the analysis of the Trotskyist movement. The great problems of our age will not be solved by bourgeois national movements. They're not going to be solved by guerrilla organizations. They will only be solved by the working class, unified on an international scale, on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program. And at the heart of that program is internationalism. It is the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, and it is the liquidation of the entire national state system. That is the only viable solution.

And if you think that is very difficult to accomplish—of course it is. But revolutions are not easy to accomplish. Revolutions occur, and they occur because there are big, difficult historical problems to be solved. These are not easy problems. These are huge problems. And that's why revolutions take place. And the coming revolution will be a working class revolution. And it will be a revolution which unites the working class, as Trotsky had foreseen, all over the world.

And that's our strategy. We don't have simply a national strategy. We have a global strategy. And we fight within each country—whether it's in the United States or in Germany or in Turkey—we fight for the implementation of that international strategy. And we are convinced that that will prove to be successful. But you have to fight for it. I can explain our policy, but of course the success of that policy depends upon its acceptance by the working class. And we have to work for that. We have to convince workers, and that means your direct involvement in the political struggle.

If I could speak frankly: it's easy to complain about how difficult things are. But the world has never been changed by simply complaining. It's changed by people intervening in the historical process and taking up the fight. That's what we have to do.

One last point, as I said in my remarks: in January 1917, Trotsky was in New York. Lenin was in Switzerland. The revolution exploded. They were successful because they had prepared theoretically and politically. So I think we have to learn from that historical experience.

Question 4: What was the extent of the influence held by the Left Opposition and Trotsky within the Red Army and the workers' and soldiers' soviets?

Well, as a matter of fact, there has been an enormous amount of new information and material on this very issue, based on archives which were previously not available. In fact, the Left Opposition was a very powerful force within the Soviet Union. It had enormous support among broad sections of workers, among student youth, and within significant layers of

the intelligentsia. And the Soviet bureaucracy, led by Stalin, was terrified of the Left Opposition. That is why they had to rely increasingly on repression, on expulsions, on physical violence.

The Left Opposition was not a marginal force. And indeed Trotsky himself, despite all the persecution and all the lies, still retained immense political authority among the advanced workers within the Soviet Union. He had led the Red Army. He was seen as, next to Lenin, the principal leader of the October Revolution. And no person had played so decisive a role in the defeat of the counterrevolution as Trotsky. And so he retained enormous support. That's why the bureaucracy exiled him first to Alma Ata and then sent him out of the Soviet Union. They were seeking to break the very powerful connection that Trotsky retained with the working class, with the best sections of the intelligentsia, and certainly among the youth.

I just want to conclude on this point. Three days from today, August 19 will mark the 90th anniversary of the beginning of the first Moscow Trial. Stalin had been unable to suppress the still considerable influence of Trotsky and his supporters within the Soviet Union. And that's why in 1936 he concluded that the only alternative left to him was wholesale mass murder, which is what began in 1936. Between 1936 and 1939, under Stalin's leadership, hundreds of thousands of dedicated Marxist revolutionaries, communists, were murdered systematically in the USSR.

The lies upon which the Moscow Trials were based were comprehensively exposed by Trotsky. The first trial included many of the most significant leaders of the October Revolution, such as Zinoviev, Kamenev, Smirnov, Mrachkovsky and others. And it is nothing less than criminal that even to this day, leaders of the existing communist parties, Maoist groups, and other radical tendencies still support and propagate the lies upon which the mass murder of large sections of the Soviet Marxist working class and intelligentsia was based.

Many of the historical problems we face, many of the contemporary political problems we face, are a consequence of those crimes. Crimes of that magnitude have long-lasting impact. And so the restoration of historical truth and the exposure of the lies of the Moscow Trials and of the falsification of history, which did such damage to the political consciousness of the working class, remain of immense importance even to this day.

But to sum up: yes, the Stalinist regime was terrified of Trotskyism. And that is why it employed such violent methods to destroy it. But here we are, 90 years later, and the historical stature of Trotsky remains a powerful factor in political history, in the present situation. And I'm convinced that when we say that Trotskyism is the Marxism of the 21st century, that means that Trotskyism, which contains within it all the political lessons of a century of struggle, will form the foundations for the renewed political education of the working class and the coming social revolution.

So finally, comrades, I want to thank the Socialist Equality Party in Turkey, and also the Adalar community, for making this meeting possible. As I said in my remarks, your annual commemoration of Trotsky's presence in Prinkipo, Büyükada, is acquiring ever greater international recognition. And I look forward to the day in which the Trotsky villa will be rebuilt and will become a general center of political, cultural and historical enlightenment.

So thank you very much for inviting me. And please accept my revolutionary greetings, and let us commit ourselves to the fight for socialism. Thank you very much, comrades.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact