

Socialism and historical truth

A lecture delivered at the Leipzig Book Fair

By David North
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This lecture by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board Chairman David North was delivered on March 13, 2015 at the Leipzig Book Fair before an audience of 450 people. The lecture introduced the publication of the German-language edition of The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century.

It is a great honor to have this opportunity to speak in Leipzig. The publication by Mehring Verlag of the German-language edition of *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, on the eve of the Leipzig Book Fair, is a tremendous achievement. I am very grateful to my comrades in the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, and, especially, Peter Schwarz and Andrea Reitmann, for their extraordinary work in the translation and editing of this volume. It is difficult to believe that a book of more than 450 pages was translated into German “aus dem Amerikanischen” in less than three months.

I am fortunate to have a translator who not only knows what I was trying to say, but manages to render it more precisely, and with a greater literary sensibility in German, than I was able to achieve in English. However, the content of my book may have been a factor that somewhat facilitated Andrea’s work. So much of it deals with events that occurred in this country that it could be said that Andrea has translated the American edition back into its original language.

I was last here during the Book Fair in March 2011, shortly after the publication of the first German edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*. That book, as some of you may know, consisted of a collection of essays and lectures that exposed the distortions, half-truths and outright lies directed against Leon Trotsky in three biographies written by Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service.

The publication of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* in early 2011 had preceded by several months the planned release, by Suhrkamp, of a German edition of the Service biography. However, Suhrkamp’s schedule was complicated by the release of an open letter, signed by fourteen respected historians, protesting the association of the prestigious publishing house with Service’s book. The impact of the historians’ protest was intensified by the publication, in the authoritative *American Historical Review*, of a review that unambiguously endorsed my critique of Service and condemned his biography of Trotsky as a piece of “hack work.”

This is not the sort of language that is normally used in an academic journal. A devastating and well deserved blow had been delivered to the professional reputation of Robert Service, at least in the eyes of principled scholars who still hold to the pre-postmodern view that historians are obligated, intellectually and morally, to observe long-established—but now increasingly violated—professional standards in the selection, presentation and interpretation of facts. After a delay of nearly a year, Suhrkamp finally released Service’s biography. But it arrived in the bookstores with the proverbial mark of Cain stamped upon its cover.

The essays and lectures that comprised the first edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* were written between 2009 and 2011. The second edition

included additional material that was written in response to the controversy generated by the first edition. It contained just part of the written record of the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International against the falsification of history. The publication of my new book reveals the extent to which the contemporary fight for socialism has been bound up with the fight for historical truth.

The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century consists of fifteen lectures and essays, which were written between 1995 and 2014. However, it is not just a matter of authorial pride that leads me to reject the definition of this book as an *anthology*. That word connotes a collection of works, which, aside from the fact that they were written by the same author, are only tangentially connected. I believe that *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* can be described, legitimately, as a single, internally unified work, whose fifteen chapters were written over a period of nearly twenty years in response to historical, theoretical and political issues that arose in the aftermath of the collapse, between 1989 and 1991, of the East European Stalinist regimes and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The sudden disappearance of these regimes raised fundamental questions about the entire course of the twentieth century. Virtually every major event of the century became a focus of intense controversy. Conflicts arose not only over the interpretation of events, but also over the presentation of facts. And of all the events of the twentieth century, the Russian Revolution of 1917 became the subject of the most furious conflict. This was because of the central place occupied by the revolution in the twentieth century. There is a saying in Germany with which you are all familiar: “Sag mir, wer deine Freunde sind, und Ich sage dir, wer du bist.” [“Tell me who your friends are, and I’ll tell you who you are.”] One can say, with equal certainty, to historians of the twentieth century: “Zeig mir, was sie über der Russischen Revolution schreiben, und Ich sage ihnen, ob sie überhaupt Historiker sind.” [“Show me what you write about the Russian Revolution, and I will tell you whether you can even be considered a historian.”]

Prior to 1989, all but the bitterest fascist and neo-fascist enemies of the Soviet Union acknowledged that the Bolshevik-led overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government in October 1917 represented a milestone in both twentieth century and world history. The title John Reed chose for his eyewitness report on the events in Petrograd in October 1917—*Ten Days that Shook the World*—reflected an appraisal of the historical significance of the revolution that was shared by both its partisans and opponents. The gigantic impact of the October Revolution—not only as manifested in the extraordinary economic transformation of the Soviet Union, but also in terms of the powerful impulse it gave to the development of revolutionary social and political consciousness among hundreds of millions of people throughout the world—constituted a central element of the social, political and economic environment of the twentieth century.

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 led rapidly to an extraordinary

change in the appraisal by the academic fraternity of the October Revolution and all of Soviet history. Prior to 1991, there was not to be found a single prominent historian who foresaw the end of the USSR. The warnings of the Trotskyist movement that the policies of the Stalinist regime would lead to the liquidation of the Soviet Union were dismissed as the ravings of “Trotskyite” sectarians, or simply ignored. Even after Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and initiated his program of perestroika, the fundamental stability of the Soviet Union was not questioned by capitalist governments or their intelligence agencies, let alone professional historians of the USSR, whether of the right or the left. The International Committee stood entirely alone in its prediction, made as early as 1986, that Gorbachev’s perestroika would lead, unless challenged by the Soviet working class, to the restoration of capitalism and the destruction of the USSR.

It is necessary to recall the pre-1991 myopia of Soviet historians in order to appreciate the extreme character of the shift that occurred in their appraisal of Soviet history in the aftermath of 1991. Almost overnight, their long-held faith in the permanence of the USSR was transformed into the conviction that its dissolution was nothing other than the *inevitable* fate of the state that had emerged out of the October Revolution. The Soviet revolution was, according to the new consensus, doomed from the start. The train of history, which brought Lenin to the Finland Station in Petrograd in April 1917, continued its fatal journey along a track line that terminated in a village near Minsk, where, in December 1991, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislaw Shushkevich signed the agreement dissolving the Soviet Union.

The reinterpretation of Soviet history—and, following from that, of the entire course of modern history—was heavily influenced by the post-1991 political environment dominated by the interaction of bourgeois triumphalism and petty-bourgeois pessimism, and outright demoralization. A substantial section of academics who, prior to 1991, had felt compelled to either moderate or keep to themselves their reactionary instincts, now let loose, in the manner of a primal scream, with anti-Marxist and anti-Communist tirades. Another, and probably larger, section of academics lamented their earlier leftist sympathies, which had suddenly gone out of fashion. It was within this intellectually cowardly ex-left and pseudo-left middle class milieu that the embittered and highly subjective irrationalism of post-modernist anti-Marxism found its most devoted audience.

The essays and lectures in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* represent the Marxist-Trotskyist response to the critical historical, political and philosophical-theoretical issues that arose in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR. The International Committee was well prepared for this task. It had the inestimable advantage over bourgeois academics of actually understanding the nature of the state that arose out of the October Revolution. For more than a half-century, the Trotskyist movement had been debating the “Russian Question.” Though published in 1936, Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* remains the definitive analysis of the Soviet Union. On the basis of Trotsky’s analysis of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state, the Fourth International had been able to comprehend the evolution of the USSR through the different stages of its historical development. It subjected to criticism theories of Soviet society that either identified the USSR as “state capitalist” or falsely claimed it had achieved—or was on the verge of achieving—socialism.

The Fourth International rejected the right-wing theories that defined the Stalinist bureaucracy as the historical protagonist of some new form of exploitative society (as in Bruno Rizzi’s *The Bureaucratization of the World* and James Burnham’s *Managerial Revolution*) or even as a new class (advanced, for example, by Milovan Djilas). The International Committee was formed in 1953 in the struggle against a tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, which—rejecting Trotsky’s analysis of

the Stalinist bureaucracy as a parasitic and counterrevolutionary force within Soviet society—sought to portray the Kremlin regime and its affiliated parties throughout the world as the central force for the achievement of socialism.

Central elements of the Trotskyist analysis of the Soviet Union were: 1) the elucidation of the socio-economic and political origins of the Stalinist degeneration; 2) the theoretical insight into the social function of the bureaucracy and the internal contradictions of the Soviet state; 3) the unviability of the program of national economic autarchy, which was unfurled in 1924 by Stalin under the banner of “socialism in one country;” and 4) the ineluctable dependence of the USSR on the world-wide overthrow of the capitalist system.

Flowing from the historically grounded and international analysis of the causes of the dissolution of the USSR, the International Committee understood the end of the Soviet Union as the most extreme expression of a historic crisis of the international workers’ movement—a crisis of political leadership *and* historical perspective. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was not an event that occurred in isolation from world events. The triumphalist claim that it demonstrated the bankruptcy of Marxism failed critical inspection on two fundamental grounds.

First, the adherents of the “failure of Marxism” theory utterly failed to demonstrate that the policies of the Soviet regime in the half-century that preceded the dissolution of the Soviet Union were, in any way, based on Marxist theory. Indeed, the “failure of Marxism” theorists simply ignored the vast body of Marxist literature, beginning with the works of Trotsky, that demonstrated that Stalinism was, in its theory and practice, the negation of Marxism.

Second, even if one were to set aside for a moment the question of the Marxist, non-Marxist or anti-Marxist character of the policies of the Soviet regime, the fact remained that the dissolution of the USSR took place amid a world-wide breakdown of all of the traditional working class organizations—both political parties and trade unions—which had, for many decades until the end of the 1980s, millions of members. If the failure of the Soviet Union was the consequence of its allegedly Marxist program, how was one to explain the virtually simultaneous collapse of virulently anti-Marxist and pro-capitalist social democratic parties and trade unions throughout the world.

The major trade union federation in the United States, the AFL-CIO, devoted immense resources throughout the Cold War, working in the closest collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency, to the struggle against the Soviet Union and all forms of left-wing influence in labor organizations around the world. But the collapse of the AFL-CIO in the course of the 1990s was, in the context of trade unionism, as dramatic as that of the Soviet Union. Since then, it has experienced an almost total loss of political power and influence. In the course of the past quarter-century since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it has lost a substantial portion of its membership. In one form or another, this has been the experience of the old workers’ and labor organizations all over the world.

Viewed within the context of the worldwide crisis confronting the working class, a review of the entire history of the Soviet Union and the causes of its dissolution was seen by the International Committee, in the aftermath of the events of 1991, as an essential and unavoidable political task. Given the monumental historical significance of the October Revolution, the final breakdown of the USSR could not but produce confusion and disorientation among broad sections of the working class. It was to be expected that the ruling class would mobilize all its resources, within the media and among the most intellectually corrupted academics, to exacerbate the confusion. It would deploy its weapons of mass falsification and misinformation to prevent the working class from understanding its own history.

The Trotskyist movement had already acquired substantial experience in

the struggle against historical falsification. It can be said that the exposure and refutation of lies was the principal form of the Trotskyist movement's decades-long battle against the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution. Lies about history played a crucial role in the Stalinist bureaucracy's usurpation of political power. Seeking to undermine Trotsky's immense prestige, within the Soviet Union and internationally, as the co-leader of the October Revolution and the founder and commander of the Red Army, Stalin and his henchmen launched a campaign of lies. They falsified the pre-1917 history of the Russian social democratic movement in order to present Trotsky as an irreconcilable factional opponent of Lenin. They misrepresented the policies advocated by Trotsky within the leadership of the Russian Communist Party in order to portray him as an enemy of the peasantry. By the 1930s, the lies had assumed monstrous dimensions. Trotsky and his supporters were portrayed as anti-Soviet saboteurs and terrorists, as agents of imperialism intent on restoring capitalism in the USSR. These lies formed the basis of the Moscow Trials and the Great Terror, launched by Stalin in 1936, which resulted in the physical extermination of hundreds of thousands of revolutionary socialists—the most politically conscious elements among the Soviet working class and Marxist intelligentsia—within the Soviet Union. The mass killings of 1936–39 were the end product of a process of historical falsification that had begun more than a decade earlier. “It remains an incontestable historical fact,” wrote Trotsky in 1937, “that the preparation of the bloody judicial frame-ups had its inception in the ‘minor’ historical distortions and ‘innocent’ falsification of citations.”

The response of the International Committee to the post-Soviet wave of politically motivated lying about history was informed by its knowledge of this tragic past. Many of the essays and lectures included in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* were written in response to essays or books by bourgeois academics that directly falsified or distorted significant aspects of Soviet and twentieth century history, or misrepresented critical elements of Marxist theory and practice. I believe that my book documents the terrible erosion of scholarly standards and intellectual integrity in broad sections of the bourgeois academy.

While the exposure of historical falsifications is an unavoidable political responsibility, I have also sought to impart to the refutation of lies a positive content: that is, to answer questions and clarify issues that are legitimately raised by the tragic experiences of the twentieth century. The fact that the answers given by bourgeois academics to these questions are misleading and often false does not mean that the questions themselves are illegitimate.

The first chapter confronts one of the key questions of twentieth century history. Was the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 a coup d'état, a putsch, carried out by a small group of conspirators who lacked any significant social base and political support? Or was it the outcome of a genuine, mass revolutionary movement of the working class, for which the Bolshevik Party provided a program and direction. Based on serious research carried out by conscientious scholars—and, thankfully, such people are to be found—I provide evidence that strongly supports the argument that the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government was the outcome of a mass revolutionary upsurge. The Bolshevik Party grew rapidly in 1917 because its analysis of the political situation was substantiated by events, and because its program articulated the needs and sentiments of broad sections of the working class.

Even if one accepts that the Soviet regime was the product of a genuine revolutionary movement, the question must still be asked: Was the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union inevitable? Was there an alternative to the bureaucratic dictatorship that led, ultimately, to the dissolution of the USSR? Or is it not the case that any attempt to realize socialism must end in failure, because it is impossible for an economically viable society to exist on anything other than a capitalist foundation? I attempt to answer these questions not by offering hopeful reassurances

that revolutions in the twenty-first century will turn out better than revolutions in the twentieth century. Rather, I cite documents that record the intense struggle that was waged within the Russian Communist Party in the 1920s over critical issues of domestic and international policy. The Left Opposition, founded in 1923 and led by Trotsky, fought for policies whose implementation would have made possible an entirely different evolution than that which occurred under Stalin's leadership.

If the resolution of controversies relating to the October Revolution and its aftermath required only the refutation of lies and the reconstruction of the historical reality based on the verified facts, the writings of Leon Trotsky would be required reading for every student of Soviet and twentieth century history. However, great political differences involve not only a struggle over facts, but also over material interests. There is a well-known saying: “If geometric axioms impinged on material interests, an attempt would be made to refute them.” The forces of political reaction, recognizing that truth impinges on their interests, do all in their power to discredit it. The lie, as Trotsky once wrote, is the ideological cement that forms the foundation of bourgeois society and fills the gaps between the publicly espoused ideals of freedom and equality and the social reality of repression and inequality. The sharper the contradictions, the greater the lies.

In this period of extreme social contradictions, the determination of historical truth has been vastly complicated by the emergence of retrograde and extremely dangerous tendencies in bourgeois intellectual life. Lying about history and politics did not begin in the twentieth century. But it is only in recent decades, with the emergence of post-modernism as the dominant tendency in the intellectual life of universities throughout the world, that there has been such a determined effort to justify intellectually, on the basis of philosophy, the obliteration of the distinction between truth and lies, and thereby legitimize the falsification of history. It is for this reason that *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* deals at considerable length with post-modernist theory, whose origins and evolution are *theoretically* based on subjective idealist irrationalism, *politically* motivated by hostility to socialism, and *socially* rooted in the material interests of the ruling class and affluent sections of the middle class.

The critique of post-modernism in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* calls attention to the writings of the French philosopher Francois Lyotard and the American philosopher Richard Rorty. As I am now speaking in Leipzig, I believe that I should make up for my neglect of German irrationalists by calling attention to the writings of Professor Jörg Baberowski, who is chairman of the Department of East European Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin. His work is significant only in that it exemplifies, in the most extreme form, the linkage between post-modernism, political reaction, and a cynical contempt for factual evidence and the most basic standards of scholarly integrity. In the preface to *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, I include a brief reference to Baberowski's work, citing his solipsistic assertion that “There is no reality without its representation.” I think it is only fair to review Baberowski's conception of history in somewhat greater detail.

In 2001, Baberowski contributed an essay to a book that bore the paradoxical title, *History is Always the Present*. If this were true, there would be no need to study history at all, since it could tell us nothing about the origins of the present. Indeed, Baberowski argues forcefully against the concept that there is anything to learn from the study of the past. “That one can learn from the past is an illusion of by-gone days, which has lost its prestige.” [p. 10]

The obliteration of the distinction between past and present must have the impact of extracting events from their broader context and removing the individuals who participated from the actual environment that shaped their personalities and, in the final analysis, determined the course of their

lives.

There is no question but that a serious historian—as he studies the past—conducts his work under the political, ideological, social and cultural influences of his time. All important historical work involves a dialogue between past and present. But the scholar would not be practicing history if he treated the subjects of his research as if they were his contemporaries. Julius Caesar, Jeanne d'Arc and Martin Luther lived in times that were, in many fundamental ways, different from our own. The great French historian of feudal society, Marc Bloch, wrote in his book, *The Historian's Craft*:

In a word, a historical phenomenon can never be understood apart from its moment in time. This is true of every evolutionary stage, our own, and all others. As the old Arab proverb has it: 'Men resemble their times more than they do their fathers.'

The recreation of the past requires not only empathy and imagination, but also intellectual rigor and patience. Professional historians must work in the archives of libraries with the same dedication and diligence as biologists and chemists working in laboratories. One of the finest American historians of the Russian Revolution, the late Leopold Haimson (1927–2010), wrote in the introduction to his last book *Russia's Revolutionary Experience, 1905–1917*:

... the original source of the significance of any truly original and important historical work is to be traced—first and foremost—to its author's original selection of primary sources on which he elects to focus attention in his research. To this I would add that its essential value will ultimately depend on the degree of precision and insight with which these sources are penetrated and analyzed.

But Baberowski is contemptuous of historians who seek, through the conscientious examination of primary sources and their careful interpretation, to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible. He writes:

The claim to show the past, as it really was, is revealed to be an illusion. What the historian comes across in the archives is not the past, but only that part of the past that has survived into the present. Documents and sources, the objects of historians, must be made to speak. They do not speak for themselves. The past is a construction. Its reality is determined by the interests and questions of the historian.

Of course, documents drawn from the archive must be studied and interpreted by living historians. But when a historian interprets a document, he cannot allow his imagination, let alone his personal likes and dislikes, to run wild. Incapable of such intellectual self-discipline, Baberowski rejects systematic research and subjectively constructs a narrative of the Russian Revolution that is nothing more than a projection of his personal anti-communist political positions.

And so, we find in the essay on the Russian Revolution in *History is Always the Present* the following statement:

Metamorphoses, from rebellion to strike, which led from the negation of order to the social-democratization of the mode of life,

were never in Russia anything more than incidental phenomena. The pogrom symbolized the essence of the Russian path to Revolution.

Only an individual who is entirely indifferent to the historical record could have written this sentence. There were massive strikes in 1905. There was an enormous growth in strike activity following the massacre of miners at the Lena gold mines in 1912. This persisted until the outbreak of the World War in 1914. Moreover, to depict the pogrom as the "essence" of the Russian Revolution is to stand reality on its head. There have been many detailed studies on the phenomenon of anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia. The most infamous of these occurred in 1881–84, 1903–06, and 1917–22. The connection between these horrifying episodes—in which thousands of Jews were slaughtered—and the efforts of the Tsarist regime to suppress popular opposition has been irrefutably established in numerous scholarly studies.

The pogrom in Odessa in October 1905 was carried out, with the support of government officials and police, just days after the regime had been compelled—beneath the pressure of revolutionary strikes and the emergence of the St. Petersburg Soviet—to make significant political concessions. Time does not permit me to quote from numerous scholarly papers that—citing Tsarist documents—establish clearly the connection between pogroms and the anti-socialist counterrevolution. It is impossible to believe that Baberowski is unfamiliar with these documents and with the research papers that have analyzed them. But he chooses to ignore them because they contradict his subjectively contrived narrative. In this case, the post-modernist rejection of the possibility of establishing objective truth serves as an ideological cover for deliberate historical falsification.

Baberowski's deconstruction of objective reality finds particularly striking expression in his denunciation of historians who have identified the Russian Revolution as an uprising of the working class. He writes:

"Down with the working class." This is what one would like to shout at those historians who, out of the growth of wage earners, construct a working class, while ignoring their experiences and identities. In the protests of the revolution it was not a working class that aroused itself. And there was also no fusing of the workers' movement and the left intelligentsia, as Bernd Bonwetsch, as late as 1991, tried to convince his clueless readers.

This outburst, in all its ignorance and absurdity, exposes the reactionary political agenda that underlies Baberowski's work. He is not, in any legitimate meaning of the word, a historian. Obliterating the distinction between history and propaganda, he ignores and falsifies the historical record in the interests of his right-wing political agenda. Baberowski's choice of words has a quite distinctive odor, which enables the reader to identify the political spirit that animates his work:

The Bolshevik Party had no mass following; it represented neither the interests of the workers or the peasants; nor did it have support in the periphery of the empire. It was a party of Russian and Jewish professional revolutionaries, who were not connected to the people that they wanted to free, and who were not rooted in the periphery of the empire.

I believe that it is not necessary, here in Germany, to explain the political content of this definition of Bolshevism. However, I will state

that it is a sign of a deep intellectual crisis that a man who wrote these words, and whose works display such contempt for historical truth, can occupy a leading academic post at the Humboldt University in Berlin.

It was during the twentieth century that the “Big Lie” emerged as a well-known instrument of mass politics, employed by the forces of political reaction to disorient the people, undermine their critical faculties and lower their powers of resistance. The struggle against the “Big Lie,” which today assumes the form of systematic falsification of the history of the twentieth century, is an essential element of the growing progressive struggle of mankind against a crisis-ridden capitalist system, which is as bankrupt intellectually as it is politically and economically. A system whose survival depends upon lies is doomed. This struggle for historical truth should draw inspiration from the words of Trotsky: “... the truth will triumph! We will blaze the trail for it. It will conquer!”

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