

Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century

David North
4 April 2023

This is the preface for the upcoming book by David North, Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century. North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and the National Chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

The print and epub version can be purchased at Mehring Books.

The material compiled in this volume was written over a period of forty years. The first essay, *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, was initially published in the late autumn of 1982. The last item, a letter to a youth organization founded by Trotskyists in Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the former USSR, was written in February 2023.

Despite the many years that separate the first and last document, they are connected by a central argument: that Leon Trotsky was the most significant figure in the history of socialism during the first four decades of the twentieth century, and that his legacy remains the critical and indispensable theoretical and political foundation of the ongoing contemporary struggle for the victory of world socialism. The events of the last forty years have powerfully substantiated this appraisal of Trotsky's place in history and his enduring political significance.

Let us begin with the fact that Trotsky's condemnation of Stalinism as a counterrevolutionary force has been vindicated by history. But when the first essay was written, the Soviet Union and the associated Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe still existed. Stalinist political parties affiliated with the Kremlin bureaucracy boasted of millions of members. Trotsky's prediction that the Stalinist bureaucracy would restore capitalism, and that the rotten structure of the regime would collapse beneath the weight of national economic autarky, incompetence, and lies was dismissed as "Trotskyite sectarianism" and even "anti-Soviet propaganda" by the many political apologists for "real existing socialism."

Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism was written precisely during the months when the long-time and increasingly senile Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev passed from his sickbed to the Kremlin Wall necropolis in Red Square. The Stalinist bureaucracy transferred its allegiance first to Yuri Andropov and then to Konstantin Chernenko—who, within little more than two years, joined their predecessor alongside the Kremlin Wall—and, finally, in March 1985, to Mikhail Gorbachev.

For all the latter's promises of a new "openness" [*glasnost*] in the study of Soviet history, the Kremlin continued to denounce the struggle waged by Trotsky against the Stalinist regime and its betrayal of the October Revolution.

As late as November 1987, as the Stalinist regime was careening toward collapse, Gorbachev included in his address on the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution a defense of Stalin and a venomous denunciation of Trotsky. But as Trotsky had once noted, the laws of history proved to be more powerful than even the most powerful general secretary.

The only political tendency that foresaw and warned that Gorbachev's policies were directed toward the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the

restoration of capitalism was the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). As early as March 1987, amidst the global adulation, known as "Gorbymania," of the new Soviet leader, the International Committee warned:

For both the working class in the Soviet Union and the workers and oppressed masses internationally, the so-called reform policy of Gorbachev represents a sinister threat. It jeopardizes the historic conquests of the October Revolution and is bound up with a deepening of the bureaucracy's counterrevolutionary collaboration with imperialism on a world scale.^[1]

Two years later, in 1989, in an analysis of Gorbachev's policies titled *Perestroika Versus Socialism*, I wrote:

During the past three years, decisive steps have been taken by Gorbachev to promote private ownership of the productive forces. The bureaucracy is ever more openly identifying its interests with the development of Soviet cooperatives organized along entirely capitalist lines. Thus, to the extent that the bureaucracy's own privileges are no longer bound up with, but hostile to, the forms of state property, its relations with world imperialism must undergo a corresponding and significant change. The principal goal of Soviet foreign policy becomes less and less the defense of the USSR against imperialist attack, but rather the mobilization of imperialist support—political and economic—for the realization of the domestic goals of *perestroika*, that is, the development of capitalist property relations within the Soviet Union. Thus, the counterrevolutionary logic of the Stalinist theory of socialism in one country finds its ultimate expression in the development of a foreign policy aimed at undermining Soviet state property and reintroducing capitalism within the USSR itself.^[2]

I cannot claim exceptional credit for this appraisal of Gorbachev's policies, which was verified by subsequent developments. The perspective of the International Committee was based on the analysis of the contradictions of Soviet society and the counterrevolutionary trajectory of the Stalinist regime made by Trotsky a half century earlier in his *Revolution Betrayed*. Moreover, the ICFI's understanding of the post-Soviet process of capitalist restoration was facilitated by the fact that it proceeded along the lines anticipated by Trotsky.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not result, as Francis Fukuyama had predicted, in the "End of History," which the Rand Corporation analyst defined as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and

the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."^[3] It is quite clear that Fukuyama did not foresee the accession of Donald Trump to the American presidency.

In fact, neither in post-Soviet Russia nor in the advanced capitalist countries did developments conform to the schema of the sage from the Rand think tank. Within Russia, all the sunny predictions with which the restoration of capitalism had been justified were refuted by events. Rather than prosperity, the fire sale of state assets to former Soviet bureaucrats and other criminal elements produced mass poverty and staggering levels of social inequality. Rather than nourishing the blossoming of democracy, the new Russian state rapidly assumed the form of an oligarchic regime. And the claim that Russia, once it had irrevocably repudiated its historical association with the October Revolution, would be welcomed by its new "Western partners" with tender embraces and integrated peacefully into the brotherhood of capitalist nations, proved to be the most far-fetched and unrealistic of all the predictions.

Within the major imperialist countries, the events that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union—the succession of economic, geopolitical and social crises that have characterized the last three decades—have substantiated the Marxist analysis of the contradictions that drive capitalism, as a world system, to destruction. The founding document of the Fourth International, written by Trotsky in 1938, defined the historical epoch as that of capitalism's "death agony" and described the contemporary situation on the eve of World War II:

Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. ...

Under the increasing tension of capitalist disintegration, imperialist antagonisms reach an impasse at the height of which separate clashes and bloody local disturbances ... must inevitably coalesce into a conflagration of world dimensions. The bourgeoisie, of course, is aware of the mortal danger to its domination represented by a new war. But that class is now immeasurably less capable of averting war than on the eve of 1914.^[4]

The present world situation bears more than just a disturbing resemblance to that described so acutely by Trotsky eighty-five years ago. His understanding of the world situation was derived from his analysis of the source of the crisis of capitalism: 1) the conflict between social production and private ownership of the means of production; and 2) the incompatibility of the capitalist nation-state system with the objective development of the world economy. Within the framework of capitalism, the crisis arising from these contradictions leads to the twin catastrophes of fascist barbarism and world war.

In his analysis of the fatal dynamic of global capitalism, Trotsky had placed central emphasis on the role of American imperialism. In 1928, writing from distant Alma Ata in Central Asia (to which he had been exiled by the Stalinist regime), he wrote:

In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the

expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war.^[5]

In 1934, Trotsky described the trajectory of American imperialism in even sharper terms:

U.S. capitalism is up against the same problems that pushed Germany in 1914 on the path of war. The world is divided? It must be redivided. For Germany it was a question of "organizing Europe." The United States must "organize" the world. History is bringing humanity face to face with the volcanic eruption of American imperialism.^[6]

Trotsky mocked the penchant of the United States to sanctify its predatory policies with humanitarian phrases. He memorably described President Woodrow Wilson, in the aftermath of World War I, as "a philistine and hypocrite," an "oily Tartuffe" who "crisscrosses blood-drenched Europe as the supreme representative of morality, as the Messiah of the American Dollar; punishing, pardoning, and arranging the fate of the peoples."^[7] Now that Wilson's vicious racism has become well-known, Trotsky's description of the once venerated American president, long praised as the icon of democratic liberalism, has become the consensus of the academic community.

But however apt his exposure of its hypocrisy, Trotsky did not explain the policies of American imperialism, or, for that matter, that of its German rival under Hitler, as merely criminal disruptions of an otherwise peaceful world. His indictment of the policies of these countries, and that of the other imperialist powers, was of a historical, rather than philistine moralistic character. The policy of invasion, annexations, and conquests was, and still is, rooted not in the madness of individual leaders, even in the case of a psychopath like Hitler, but in the desperate necessity to overcome the limits imposed by state borders on access to global resources and the world market. The relentless growth of imperialist militarism, leading inevitably toward world war, signified the historical bankruptcy of the nation-state system. As Trotsky foresaw in 1934, in an article originally published in the American journal *Foreign Affairs*:

The struggle for foreign markets will become unprecedentedly sharp. Pious notions about the advantages of autarchy will at once be cast aside, and sage plans for national harmony will be thrown in the wastebasket. This applies not only to German capitalism, with its explosive dynamics, or to the belated and greedy capitalism of Japan, but also to the capitalism of America, which still is powerful despite its new contradictions.^[8]

The contradictions discerned by Trotsky in the late 1920s and 1930s are now at a far more advanced, even terminal, stage of development. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the drive to "organize the world" in the interests of the global hegemony of the United States has assumed the form of a global rampage. The "volcanic eruption" of American imperialism, predicted by Trotsky almost ninety years ago, is well underway.

But the American volcano is not the only site of militaristic eruptions. A massive rise in military spending on an international scale is underway. The gods of war are again athirst. The two main defeated powers of World War II are dropping their hypocritical pacifistic pretenses. Exploiting the

opportunity provided by the Ukraine war, the German Bundestag has approved the tripling of the country's military budget. Japan, already the second largest military power in Asia, has announced a 26.3 percent increase in "defense" spending. They are determined not to be left out of the distribution of the spoils that will follow, in the aftermath of World War III, from a new redivision of the world, provided there is a world left to divide.

That the world is approaching the abyss of a global military cataclysm is now widely acknowledged in the capitalist media. After a year of propaganda relentlessly portraying the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an "unprovoked war," bourgeois commentators are now placing the war in a more realistic international context. The *Financial Times'* foreign policy specialist Gideon Rachman recently noted the "historical parallel" between the present situation and "the rise in international tensions in the 1930s and 1940s."

The fact that the president of China and the prime minister of Japan paid simultaneous and competing visits to the capitals of Russia and Ukraine underlines the global significance of the Ukraine war. Japan and China are fierce rivals in east Asia. Both countries understand that their struggle will be profoundly affected by the outcome of the conflict in Europe.

This shadow boxing between China and Japan over Ukraine is part of a broader trend. Strategic rivalries in Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are increasingly overlapping with each other. What is emerging is something that looks more and more like a single geopolitical struggle.^[9]

Every historical personage is, of course, a product of his or her time. But Trotsky is a historical figure whose *active* influence upon contemporary events has extended far beyond his lifetime. His writings are studied not only for the insight they provide into the events of the first four decades of the last century, but also as analyses essential for understanding and intervening in present-day events.

In a massive 1,124-page study of *International Trotskyism* published in 1991 on the very eve of the dissolution of the USSR, the late Robert J. Alexander, an anti-Marxist academic and long-time member of the Council on Foreign Relations, expressed concern that the dissolution of the USSR might lead to the resurgence of Trotskyism as a mass movement. He wrote:

As of the end of the 1980s the Trotskyists have never come to power in any country. Although international Trotskyism does not enjoy the support of a well established regime, as did the heirs of Stalinism, the persistence of the movement in a wide variety of countries together with the instability of the political life of most of the world's nations means that the possibility that a Trotskyist party might come to power in the foreseeable future cannot be totally ruled out.^[10]

The ruling elites took Professor Alexander's warning seriously. They responded to the political danger on the left posed by the collapse of the Stalinist regimes by commissioning a series of slanderous pseudo-biographies of Trotsky. But the works of Professors Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service, despite initial rapturous reviews in the capitalist press, failed miserably. Their lies were comprehensively exposed by the International Committee. The biography written by the celebrated Professor Robert Service of Oxford University became a source

of embarrassment for its publisher, Harvard University Press, after *The American Historical Review* acknowledged that my criticism of Service's biography as a "piece of hack-work" was "Strong words but justified."^[11]

There is an historical materialist explanation for the persistence and growth of the international Trotskyist movement in the face of relentless persecution, spanning decades, by innumerable enemies. The basic objective economic and social forces that determined the general course of political events in Trotsky's lifetime, centered on the global class struggle of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, have not been superseded by history. Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution remains the essential historic-strategic foundation of the struggle against capitalism by the international working class. He wrote in 1930:

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follows on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.^[12]

Far from being overtaken by events, the immense globally integrated development of the productive forces and the vast growth of the working class have further substantiated Trotsky's conception of socialist revolution as an interdependent process of international class struggle. The movement of history is now decisively intersecting with the strategic vision of the great Marxist theorist and revolutionary.

The present world situation is one that Trotsky would have no problem recognizing and analyzing. We are living in the final stage of the same historical epoch of imperialist war and socialist revolution. The historical problems with which Trotsky dealt—especially in the sixteen years between Lenin's incapacitating stroke and removal from political activity in 1923 and his own assassination in 1940—remain the unresolved existential political issues that confront the working class: imperialist war, the breakdown of democracy and resurgence of fascism, spiraling inflation, mass unemployment, poverty, the treachery of the existing mass labor organizations and their integration into the structures of the capitalist state.

This year marks the centenary of the founding of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union. Trotsky's initial public critique, in the autumn of 1923, of the growth of bureaucratism in both the Soviet state and the Communist Party marked the beginning of the most politically consequential struggle of the twentieth century. The usurpation of political power by the Soviet bureaucracy, led by Stalin, was to have catastrophic consequences for the fate of the international working class and the struggle for socialism. The political justification for this usurpation—which entailed the subordination of the working class to the bureaucracy, the destruction of all forms of workers' democracy, and, ultimately, the physical liquidation of Marxists within the USSR—was provided by the Stalinist dogma of "socialism in one country." This pseudo-theory, directed first and foremost against Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, sanctioned the repudiation of the perspective of international socialism upon which the October Revolution had been based.

A recently published volume devoted to a study of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism begins with the following assertion: "For most of the last two decades of his life, the political and theoretical issue that

concerned Leon Trotsky more than any other was the problem of Soviet bureaucracy.”^[13]

This statement is fundamentally incorrect. The problem of the Soviet bureaucracy was, for Trotsky, entirely secondary to the question of revolutionary internationalism. In fact, the actual nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy could only be understood within the context of the relationship of the Soviet Union to the international class struggle and the fate of world socialism. As a tendency that emerged within the Bolshevik Party—under conditions of the defeats suffered by the working class in Central and Western Europe in the aftermath of the October Revolution—Stalinism represented a nationalist reaction against Marxian internationalism. As Trotsky wrote just one year before his assassination, “It may be said that the whole of Stalinism, taken on the theoretical plane, grew out of the criticism of the theory of permanent revolution as it was formulated in 1905.”^[14]

The fight against the bureaucratic dictatorship was inextricably linked to the program of socialist internationalism. The same strategic principle applies to all political tasks in the present world situation. There are no national solutions to the great problems of the contemporary epoch.

Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution provided the analysis of the objective dynamic of the international class struggle upon which the strategy of world socialist revolution had to be based. But Trotsky also explained that the victory of socialism would not be realized through the automatic working out of capitalist contradictions. These contradictions created only the objective conditions and potential for the conquest of power by the working class. But the transformation of potential into reality depended upon the conscious decisions and actions of the revolutionary party.

Trotsky’s declaration in the 1938 founding document of the Fourth International that “The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership” was a summing up of the central lessons of the previous fifteen years of defeats suffered by the working class as a consequence of the opportunism and treachery of the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties and trade unions.

Events such as the defeat of the general strike in Britain in 1926, the crushing of the Shanghai working class by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927, the victory of the Nazis in Germany in 1933, the demoralization of the French working class in the aftermath of the mass strikes of 1936 by the politics of the Popular Front, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution in 1939, and, finally, Stalin’s pact with Hitler and the outbreak of World War II provoked pessimism and disillusionment with the prospects for socialism among broad sections of the left-wing intelligentsia. Did these defeats not prove, they asked, that the working class is incapable of conquering and holding power?

Trotsky emphatically rejected the demoralization that motivated the question. The obstacle to the realization of socialism was not the “non-revolutionary” character of the working class, but, rather, the rottenness of the existing mass parties. But this raised a further question: Was it possible to build a party whose leaders would prove equal to the demands of the revolution? Those who denied this possibility were driven to the most pessimistic political conclusions, i.e., that the program of socialist revolution advanced an unrealizable utopia and that the position of humanity was, in essence, hopeless. “Not all our opponents express this thought clearly,” Trotsky wrote in the autumn of 1939, “but all of them—ultra-lefts, centrists, anarchists, not to mention Stalinists and social democrats—shift the responsibility for the defeats from themselves to the shoulders of the proletariat. None of them indicate under precisely what conditions the proletariat will be capable of accomplishing the socialist overturn.”^[15]

Trotsky had identified the source of the political demoralization of left intellectuals. The rejection of the revolutionary potential of the working class was the essential premise of the anti-Marxism of petty-bourgeois left

academics in the aftermath of World War II. Directing their arguments against the historical perspective of Trotsky (even if they did not openly acknowledge this), the Frankfurt School sought to disconnect Marxism from the working class. The postmodernists declared the end of “grand narratives” that explained history as an objective law-governed process and identified the working class as the central revolutionary force in society. The inevitable outcome of the regression in social thought was the total repudiation of Marxism and social revolution based on the working class. As two leading representatives of this regression, Ernesto Laclau and Chantelle Mouffe, bluntly declared in 1985:

At this point we should state plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain. It is no longer possible to maintain the conception of subjectivity and classes elaborated by Marxism, nor its vision of the historical course of capitalist development...^[16]

The anti-Marxist theoreticians have been refuted by events. Only the Trotskyist movement anticipated and has prepared for the global upsurge of class struggle that is now underway. Basing itself on the perspective of Permanent Revolution, the International Committee stated in 1988:

We anticipate that the next stage of proletarian struggles will develop inexorably, beneath the combined pressure of objective economic tendencies and the subjective influence of Marxists, along an international trajectory. The proletariat will tend more and more to define itself in practice as an international class; and the Marxian internationalists, whose policies are the expression of this organic tendency, will cultivate this process and give it conscious form.^[17]

The accelerating world capitalist crisis and global class struggle will provide the objective conditions for the socialist revolution and the overthrow of capitalism. “But,” as Trotsky warned, “the great historic problem will not be solved in any case until the revolutionary party stands at the head of the proletariat.”

The question of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: it is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organizing the proletarian vanguard with tenfold energy. Precisely in this lies the task of the Fourth International.^[18]

The historical experiences of the past century thoroughly tested all political movements, parties, and tendencies that claimed to be leading the struggle against capitalism. But the upheavals of the twentieth century have exposed the counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinists, Social Democrats, Maoists, bourgeois nationalists, anarchists, and Pabloites. Only the Fourth International, led by the International Committee, has met the test of history. The international revolutionary socialist movement of the working class on every continent will develop on the theoretical and political foundations of Trotskyism, the Marxism of the twenty-first century.

* * * *

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Wije Dias (August 27, 1941 – July 27, 2022), a leading member of the International Committee of the

Fourth International and general secretary of its Sri Lankan section for thirty-five years. Comrade Wije died in the midst of struggle, upholding in old age, and with undiminished passion, the ideals of his youth. His legacy—of courage, commitment to Trotskyist principles, and devotion to socialism—will provide an inspiring example to the working class in the great class battles that will decide the fate of mankind.

David North
Detroit
April 4, 2023

[1] International Committee of the Fourth International, *What Is Happening in the USSR: Gorbachev and the Crisis of Stalinism* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1987), p. 12.

[2] David North, *Perestroika Versus Socialism: Stalinism and the Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1989) p. 49.

[3] *The National Interest*, 19 (Summer 1989), p. 3.

[4] *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (The Transitional Program)*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm#op>

[5] *The Third International After Lenin* (Section 2: The United States and Europe),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti01.htm#p1-02>

[6] “War and the Fourth International,” June 10, 1934, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/06/warfi.htm>

[7] “Order Out of Chaos,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1919/xx/order.html>

[8] “Nationalism and Economic Life,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/xx/nationalism.htm>

[9] “China, Japan and the Ukraine war,” *Financial Times*, March 27, 2023.

[10] Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991) p. 32.

[11] Review by Bertrand M. Patenaude in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 3 (June 2011), p. 902; also cited in *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, by David North (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2013), pp. 243-48.

[12] Leon Trotsky, “What is the Permanent Revolution?,” *The Permanent Revolution*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr10.htm>

[13] Thomas M. Twiss, *Trotsky and the Problem of Soviet Bureaucracy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), p. 1.

[14] “Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution,” (1939), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/xx/3concepts.htm>

[15] “The USSR in War,” *In Defense of Marxism*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/09/ussr-war.htm>

[16] Ernesto Laclau and Chantelle Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso) p. 4.

[17] David North, Report to the 13th National Congress of the Workers League, *Fourth International*, July-December 1988, p. 39.

[18] *Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War* (1940), <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/emergconf/fi-emerg02.htm>



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact