Chapter 6 - Trotsky and the world revolution

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Up until 1924, everybody in the Communist movement agreed that the victory of socialism in a single country was impossible - particularly in a country so isolated, underdeveloped and backward as Russia.

Germany was the most developed industrial country in Europe, with the largest, best-organised and most powerful working class movement in the world. It offered the hope of spreading the revolution's economic, political and moral strength immeasurably.

A Soviet Germany would forge an unbreakable alliance with Russia, massively reducing the military threat from French, British and US imperialism.

Its heavy industry and large working class would enable it to move much more quickly towards socialism than Russia could hope to do on her own. And revolution would spread from Germany across Western Europe like wild fire.

By October 1923 Germany was plummeting into a full scale revolutionary crisis. Hyper-inflation left the currency worthless and society in total chaos. The ruling class could not see a way forward out of the crisis. Only the Communist Party was growing.

Its influence in the factory committees increased as each day passed. The urgency of taking of power was clear, just as it had been in Russia in 1917.

To regain the initiative for the ruling class the army moved in to depose a coalition government between the Communists and Social-Democrats in the provinces of Saxony and Thuringia.

Yet the crucial moment passed and the Communist Party failed to launch an armed working class rising to counter this threat and seize power from the bosses. The masses were thrown on to the defensive and the Communist Party was thrown into confusion.

Stalin and Zinoviev scapegoated the leaders of the German Communist Party - Brandler and Thalheimer - for this debacle. But prior to October they had used all their influence to discourage them from preparing for an armed uprising.

Stalin had written to Zinoviev - the head of the Communist International - that in his view the Germans must be restrained, not spurred on. Trotsky's persistent warnings were roundly attacked, until it was too late.

Trotsky analysed the lessons of this wasted opportunity to spread the revolution in his pamphlet - Lessons of October. Without naming names, he showed how the hesitation and indecisiveness of Stalin and Zinoviev were part of a pattern.

The same irresolution had been seen in 1917, when Zinoviev had opposed the October insurrection, and when Stalin had originally wanted the Bolsheviks to support the Provisional Government.

Trotsky pointed to the fact that doubts and uncertainty would inevitably appear within a party leadership at the most dangerous time. But he pointed to the difference between Germany and Russia:

?With us, only a minority within the party was seized by such vacillations in 1917, which were, however, overcome, thanks to the sharp energy of Lenin. In Germany, on the contrary, the leadership as a whole vacillated and that was
These consequences of this debacle could only be minimised if the leadership of the Communist International was prepared to examine the lessons of Germany openly and draw the correct conclusions.

But they did not. Instead, they turned all their attention to a war against „Trotskyism“, a campaign that aimed to silence their critics for good. In the process of attacking Trotsky and his views, Stalin was forced to reject one of the most fundamental elements of Marxism.

Stalin and the world revolution

The „Theory of Socialism in One Country“ was Stalin‘s main contribution to the ideas and programme of the international Communist movement. It led to unmitigated disaster wherever it was put into practice.

We are still living with the wretched legacy of this theory today.

After the Stalin faction had finally recognised the October defeat in Germany, they fell into deep pessimism about the prospects for revolution in Europe. „Socialism in One Country“ was a product of this pessimism.

Up until 1924, nobody in the Communist Party had ever doubted the idea that, on its own, Russia would be unable to build socialism.

The Russian revolution was seen as the first break in the chain of capitalism, which would have to be followed by the overthrow of capitalism in the most advanced countries before a socialist society could be achieved.

The programme of the Young Communist League made this entirely clear. It stated that Russia „can arrive at Socialism only through the world proletarian revolution, which epoch of development we have now entered."

This was so well-established a view that nobody in the party had ever doubted it before. Even Stalin in a book that was later changed to remove this passage wrote:

„. . . can the final victory of socialism in one country be attained, without the joint efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible . . . for the final victory of socialism, for the organisation of socialist construction, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient. For this the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries are necessary."

Only after Lenin‘s death did Stalin have the courage to attack the internationalist foundation of the Bolshevik programme openly. The Theory of Socialism in One Country was the result.

In December 1924, in an article which attacked Trotsky and his theory of permanent revolution, Stalin wrote:

„The victory of socialism in one country, even if this country is less developed in the capitalist sense, while capitalism is preserved in other countries, even if these countries are more developed in the capitalist sense? is quite possible and probable."

Trotsky was accused of defeatism and Menshevism for denying that Russia could achieve socialism on its own. But Trotsky‘s opposition to Socialism in One Country had nothing in common with those Menshevik theorists who claimed that the Soviets should never have taken power in 1917.

All Trotsky‘s work in the Soviet government had been aimed at preserving and extending the gains that the workers‘ state had already made.

The point, Trotsky argued, was that Stalin was altering the very concept of socialism itself.

It should mean a society without classes, in which production would reach levels higher than those of the capitalist
states, enabling all working people to have equal rights to the products of a democratically planned economy, (something that could only be organised on a world scale).

Instead, it came to mean something different: the stability of the existing political system in the USSR.

This was far from being the only consequence of Stalin?s theory. If socialism could be achieved in Russia alone, the tasks of Communists in other countries would have to change.

Previously all parties of the Communist International had one overriding aim ? the overthrow of capitalism in their own countries as a step towards a federation of workers? states encompassing the globe.

Now their task was to prevent imperialism from launching further military campaigns against the USSR.

The interests of the world revolution now took second place to the defence of the USSR. Diplomacy and blocks with supposed ?Friends of the USSR? around the world became the main concern of Stalin and the Communist International.

The world party of revolution was being transformed into the defence organisation of the Stalin regime, a tool of that regime?s increasingly reactionary foreign policy.

Lenin?s warning that the imperialists would never accept the existence of the USSR and that ?the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with imperialist states for any length of time is inconceivable? was quietly put to one side. Now anyone who repeated this warning was a Menshevik, a pessimist, a . . . Trotskyist.

The theory of Socialism in One Country perfectly expressed the conservative outlook of a dominant centrist faction within the ruling bureaucracy.

The social base of this faction lay in the thousands drafted into the state apparatus after the Civil War.

Trotsky argued that by removing the pressure of the working class on the bureaucracy the Stalin faction was opening itself up to pressures from pro-capitalist forces in the countryside.

In foreign policy, Stalin?s bureaucratic centrist faction subjectively desired revolution but pursued policies designed to create stability in the international arena so that Russia could get on and ?build socialism? in peace.

Objectively, such policies thwarted the success of revolutionary and pre-revolutionary situations.

Britain 1926
The first fruits of Stalin?s theory could be seen in the British General Strike of 1926.

In 1924, two years before this historic struggle reached its peak, the Russian and British trade union leaders formed a pact ? the Anglo-Russian Committee.

This was a positive step. The bureaucratic leaders of the powerful British trade unions were by no means revolutionaries ? they had already shown that they were ready to sell out the interests of the British workers, and were most concerned to preserve their privileges, gained through years of negotiation and compromise with the capitalists and their governments.

Nevertheless, as Trotsky explained, the anger of the workers and their willingness to fight were on the rise. This put pressure on the union leaders, who ?took a step to the left in order to preserve their influence in the masses.? For this reason, ?to hold them there was entirely correct.?

It was necessary to force the British trade union leaders to commit themselves to concrete action to assist the USSR.

But Stalin went much further than this, putting the interests of Soviet foreign policy way above the interests of the socialist revolution in Britain.
Flattering his new found allies, he painted them as champions of the working class and the leaders of the struggle against capitalism in Britain, and in particular as staunch opponents of any imperialist attack on the Soviet Union.

Trotsky and the Opposition opposed this. They warned that the union leaders were enemies of revolution, and would use their influence to sabotage the British workers' struggle for power.

While taking every opportunity to reach practical agreements with them, the task of the Communists was not to sing hymns of praise to these traitors, but to challenge them, to organise a fight to replace them.

Every expression of faith in the union leaders, every sugary phrase from Stalin and the Communist International, would be used by the union leaders to defend themselves against the challenge from the British Communists.

Soon enough, the Theory of Socialism in One Country met its first great test. In the middle of an all-out strike by the powerful British miners' union, solidarity from other workers reached such heights that the union leaders could not hold it back.

A General Strike in May 1926 paralysed Britain and provoked the greatest class confrontation for decades. The government was desperate. They had only one weapon left to use against the strikers - the union leaders themselves.

Suddenly, after nine days of heroic struggle, with the strike growing in strength, the union leaders simply caved in to the government and called it off.

The Soviet leadership maintained their bloc with these traitors, whom they had already shielded from criticism. The Anglo-Russian Committee had proved itself to be an instrument for covering up the real role of the trade union bureaucrats in Britain, not an instrument for the revolutionary defence of the USSR.

Even after the sell-out of the General Strike, the Russians kept the Committee going. Incredibly, they signed a joint statement that recognised the General Council as the only spokesmen for the British trade unions and announced that they would not interfere in the affairs of the movement in each others' countries!

In doing so, Moscow renounced the fight to change the leadership of the British labour movement and instead concentrated on a deal with the sell-out merchants at the top.

The theory of Socialism in One Country reduced the British Communists to the role of winning influential friends and allies. The fight for revolution abroad was sacrificed in the interests of the prestige and security of the Stalin clique in the Kremlin.

Disaster in China: 1925-27
There was only one consistent alternative to Stalin's theory - Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.

In 1923 and 1924 it became the target of a concerted attack by leading members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. By 1925 Stalin was writing that:

?The whole course of the October revolution, in its whole development, demonstrated and proved the utter bankruptcy of the theory of permanent revolution? and its absolute incompatibility with the foundations of Leninism.?

As we have seen this was cynical nonsense. The Russian revolution had proved Trotsky's theory correct in its four essential points.

The capitalist class in a backward country like Russia was too weak to lead the bourgeois revolution to victory. That task would be carried out by the working class, or not at all.
Once they had taken power the workers would have to begin the socialist transformation of society.

The final victory of socialism depended on the revolution spreading to other countries, and achieving a society more economically advanced that capitalism.

Only this would make possible the replacement of the global system of capitalism with world socialism.

Stalin and his allies were about to prove the theory of permanent revolution correct again. But while Lenin and Trotsky?s policy in 1917 had proved it positively, the Communist International?s response to the Chinese revolution of 1925-27 was to prove it negatively.

By abandoning the strategy of permanent revolution in China, the Stalinists ended up pursuing an identical policy to that pursued by the Mensheviks in Russia before 1917. The results were catastrophic.

In Chapter 2 we saw how Lenin and the Mensheviks had approached the Russian revolution completely differently. In a bourgeois revolution, when national independence, democracy and land reform ? key bourgeois tasks ? are the main issues of the day, the working class has to understand its own role clearly.

The Mensheviks argued that because the Russian revolution began as a bourgeois revolution, the workers should support the bourgeoisie.

Lenin argued that because it was a bourgeois revolution, the workers should distrust the bourgeoisie, and rely only on their own strength. In this lay the difference between the Bolshevik programme of revolution and socialism, and the Menshevik policy of reform and democratic capitalism.

The Chinese Revolution began as a struggle against the domination of China by foreign imperialist powers. This was a bourgeois democratic task.

For this reason, Stalin and Bukharin, both central figures in the ruling bloc, argued that the Chinese workers should enter into an alliance with all those capitalists who were prepared to fight for China?s independence.

But how could this alliance between class enemies be kept together? Stalin answered that the workers and their leadership in the Communist Party should not fight for the movement to adopt socialist aims.

The revolution would first have to pass through a stage of democratic capitalism. By stressing this again and again, the alliance with the Chinese bourgeoisie could, Stalin thought, be maintained.

Stalin and Bukharin put forward this ?stages theory? ? first a bourgeois revolution and only later a working class revolution ? under the cover of Lenin?s old slogan of the ?Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry?.

Lenin himself had already abandoned this in 1917 as outdated. Indeed he had said that anyone who limited themselves to this slogan had lost touch with life, gone over to the middle classes and ought to be put in a museum!

But this did not matter to Stalin ? the slogan allowed him to cloak his Menshevism in ?Leninist? language, and to attack the true policy of Lenin as ?Trotskyism?.

Stalin instructed the Chinese Communists to enter into a ?Block of Four Classes? ? with the ?national bourgeoisie?, the peasantry and the urban middle classes, or petit-bourgeoisie.

Unlike the Bolshevik method of fighting against the influence of the capitalists and the peasant parties to bring the workers to the head of the struggle, Stalin used all his authority to keep the workers from doing this.

The revolution would have to go through set stages, fixed not by the laws of history but by command from Moscow.

Any attempt to combine the stages was denounced by the Communist International:
?it is] all the more harmful because such a formulation of the question eliminates the most important national peculiarity of the Chinese revolution, which is a semi-colonial revolution?

This was extremely dangerous. Every revolution in a formally independent but economically backward country dominated by imperialism (a ?semi-colony?) would now be subjected to Stalin and Bukharin?s theory of stages. Socialism would be taken off the agenda.

To describe a revolution as bourgeois, democratic or even ?semi-colonial?, tells us only what the spark is that ignites the masses, the deep social problems that make revolution inevitable.

It does not tell us which class can lead the revolution to victory. But this was the mistake that Stalin made in China and every subsequent bourgeois revolution.

Moscow instructed the Communists to ally themselves with the main bourgeois nationalist party, the Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai-Shek.

If the agreement had been strictly limited to military alliances in certain areas, or to action against foreign imperialists, this would have been sensible and useful.

Even then, at all times the Communists should have kept their independence and been ready to break the alliance and fight the Kuomintang when necessary, just as the Bolsheviks had fought the SRs and Kerensky for the leadership of the Russian revolution.

But the ?Block of Four Classes? sacrificed the interests of the workers to keep the alliance in place. Stalin instructed the Communists to agree to laws in Kuomintang areas that made strikes illegal once the authorities had decided the outcome of any disputes.

The employers had a field day ? the Communists told the workers not to resist.

When the revolutionary struggle spread across China and working class militancy was at its height, the Communist International forbade the Communists from setting up Soviets.

They argued these were organisations for making a socialist revolution, and were not necessary at the democratic stage. Stalin even argued that Soviets would ?scare off? the Chinese masses. Trotsky wrote later:

?Only Chiang Kai-Shek would be scared off by it, but not the workers, not the peasants, to whom, after 1917, the Soviets had become symbols of emancipation.?

The Communists issued a statement in which they declared that their differences with the Kuomintang were only minor ones.

They did not criticise the policies of the Kuomintang, even when trade unions and Communist Party cells were kept illegal in many areas under their control. They did not even attempt to win the soldiers in the Kuomintang armies to Communism. Instead the Communist International wrote that :

?The Chinese Communist Party must not under any circumstances pursue a tactic which would disorganise the revolutionary armies just because the influence of the bourgeoisie is to a certain degree strong there.? 

Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought against this betrayal. Armed with the Theory of Permanent Revolution, they showed how the national capitalist class in China was more afraid of its own working class than it was of foreign imperialism.

The capitalists were bound by a thousand ties of money and interest to the big landowners and foreign banks.
When the Stalinists accused Trotsky of ?underestimating the peasantry?, he replied by showing how only the working class could act as firm allies of those peasants who were struggling for land ? the capitalists would be unable and unwilling to break with the landowners.

Despite all of Stalin?s overtures to the Kuomintang, despite his restraint of the workers and Communists, despite his phrases about the ?Block of Four Classes?, the ?Democratic Dictatorship? and the ?Stages? theory, the real laws of history thwarted him.

Class realities prevailed in the end. The Kuomintang, as Trotsky had warned, turned on the working class as soon as it got the chance.

In 1927 Chiang Kai-Shek sent his troops into Shanghai and massacred every Communist, trade unionist or worker militant they could find. Scores of thousands were killed.

Still Stalin did not change course. Chiang was blamed for the massacres, but not a word of self-criticism was uttered about the policy that had left the Communists defenceless and unprepared.

Stalin now continued in the same vein. After Chiang?s betrayal a government of the ?Left Kuomintang? was set up in Wuhan. Two Communists joined the bourgeois government as ministers. But this government was no less reactionary than Chiang?s Kuomintang.

To maintain his alliance in government with these ?Left? nationalists, and sticking closely to his stages theory, Stalin ordered the Communist ministers to support their allies? policies.

The Communist Tang Ping Shan ? as minister of agriculture ? was sent by the government into the countryside at the head of an army to crush a movement of armed peasants who were fighting against their landlords!

The campaign against the theory of Permanent Revolution by Stalin led the Communists to block the Chinese Revolution from reaching its own ?October?.

As Trotsky observed, the slogan of the ?democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry? had become ?a noose around the neck of the proletariat and peasantry?. The stages theory had transformed the Communists from a force for workers? revolution into an unwitting force against the revolution.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition campaigned throughout the international Communist movement against Stalin?s programme for the Chinese revolution.

The disaster had proved to Trotsky that the theory of Permanent Revolution applied not only to Russia but to all other backward, colonial and semi-colonial countries in which the tasks of the bourgeois revolution had not yet been completed.

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