



The place of Trotsky in history

Richard Brenner Fri, 20/08/2010 - 11:11

Richard Brenner

In the first of two articles, we reproduce extracts from Richard Brenner's recently republished book, Trotsky - an introduction

Today capitalism is in crisis, a system in decline. But in its early years, the capitalist class - the bourgeoisie - had to fight to establish its rule and overthrow the preceding system of feudalism.

In its revolutionary past, the bourgeoisie had its share of genuinely great leaders, people like Cromwell and Robespierre who led the revolutionary destruction of the monarchy and the feudal system. They owe their place in history to their ruthless and uncompromising struggle for the interests of their rising class.

The working class movement also has its share of such extraordinary individuals.

Among the greatest of them is Leon Trotsky, who stood at the head of the most successful working class struggle that history has yet seen.

In October 1917, as chairman of the Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (the 'Soviet') in the capital of the Russian Empire, he organised an armed uprising that overthrew the capitalist government, dissolved their secret police and state apparatus, and installed in its place a state based on delegates elected by the mass of the working class.

The Russian Revolution faced an immediate threat. Armies from 14 capitalist states, including France, Britain and Japan, invaded revolutionary Russia and fought alongside the 'White Armies' of the old ruling class.

Trotsky took the lead in building up, from the exhausted and war-weary peasants and workers of Russia, a new Red Army, an army unlike any other before or since, which resisted and defeated the Whites.

So different from narrow nationalist politicians of the bourgeois type, Trotsky looked beyond the boundaries of Russia to the working class movements of Germany, Britain, France, China and the East. He called on them to come to the aid of the Soviet republic by settling accounts with the capitalists in their own countries.

When the workers of the western countries failed to follow the Russian example with successful revolutions of their own, the revolution in Russia was thrown into isolation and retreat. A growing caste of bureaucrats and middlemen began to elevate their own interests above the international revolution and the working class.

From as early as 1923 Trotsky opposed this slide into bureaucratic dictatorship. He denounced the aspiring dictator Stalin, to his face, as the 'gravedigger of the revolution'. In a mounting campaign of repression, hundreds of thousands of the most self-sacrificing communists were imprisoned, tortured and murdered by Stalin and his henchmen.

Fourth International

Trotsky was the only leading Russian revolutionary not to give up the fight against this bloody regime. And as the Communist Parties around the world, united in the Third International, defended Stalin to the hilt, Trotsky fought to build a Fourth International, a new world party of social revolution.

Trotsky was cast into exile, first confined to the wilderness of the Soviet east. Expelled to Turkey, he was to be

hounded to Norway, through France and finally to Mexico where he was assassinated by a Stalinist agent on 19 August 1940. The 70th anniversary of his death is an opportunity for us to reflect on the meaning and significance of his life for the struggle today.

Millions are looking for a way to fightback against the huge cuts in jobs and welfare that capitalism is imposing on working people all over the world. The answer is to link our struggles to the fight for revolution, and Trotsky's struggle for the workers' councils to take the power has lessons for us today.

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution (see below) will be key to this, revealing as it does both the role the working class needs to lay in the revolution, and how a revolution in one country will be intimately connected to the fight in other countries.

Today millions of people who detest capitalism fear that if we overthrow it we could end up living under a one-party dictatorship that cannot provide a decent life for the people, like in the former USSR. But Trotsky's struggle against Stalin (also see below) shows that there is a real communist alternative, not just to capitalism but to the excuse for socialism that Stalinism represented.

Finally Trotsky's fight for the Fourth International is a model for us today, because the crisis of capitalism is a worldwide phenomenon, and we urgently need to learn how we can build a new world party of socialist revolution - a Fifth International.

In all these struggles, Trotsky's ideas and work give powerful insights into what we need to do, and how we need to do it.

Permanent Revolution

The theory of permanent revolution is one of the main contributions made by Trotsky to Marxism. It deals with two main questions. The first is the role of the working class in revolutions in 'backward' countries. The second is the international character of the socialist revolution.

Both are burning questions today. Repeatedly the capitalist class has resorted to the most drastic measures, including civil war and dictatorship, to prevent revolution. But this was not always the case. To establish their power in the first place, the bourgeoisie had no option but to turn to revolution.

The French Revolution of 1789 was a classic example. It swept away the old land-owning class and the monarchy, and opened the way for the development of modern capitalism. The bourgeoisie encouraged the mass of the people - the peasants and the urban poor - to rise up and fight for 'Liberty, Fraternity and Equality'.

Bourgeois revolution

But once the King and the aristocracy had been overthrown, the poor were left without power, without the vote, and without rights. The capitalists had made their revolution: now the impoverished population should settle down and get to work - for the capitalists. By the turn of the century Russia was still so backward that it had not had even a bourgeois revolution. There was no parliament and no free speech; the land was still in the hands of the old aristocracy. Marxists all agreed that the coming revolution would be bourgeois.

But who would lead it? The weak bourgeoisie would not carry out even their own revolution. Both VI Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks, and Trotsky agreed that the workers would have to rely on themselves and build up their own organisations. But Trotsky went a step further.

His starting point was the theory of uneven and combined development. Native Americans that came into contact with settlers swapped their bows and arrows for rifles, without having to discover gunpowder themselves. This uneven and combined development applies not only to technology but to the way society develops. It suggested to Trotsky that a country could 'skip' a stage of development, and that backward Russia could go directly from the bourgeois revolution to the seizure of power by the working class.

Already the great dress rehearsal for 1917 - the defeated Russian Revolution of 1905 - had seen a huge general strike, the formation of workers' Soviets and an armed workers' uprising. This had proved beyond doubt that the working class would play the leading role in the revolution against the Tsar.

But what would happen after the Tsar had been overthrown? The workers would have to form a government. The first steps of this revolutionary government would be to complete the bourgeois revolution, abolishing the monarchy, granting freedom to oppressed nationalities and recognising the peasants' right to land.

But should the workers then guarantee to preserve the capitalist system? Trotsky said no. The workers' government would have to go further and take socialist measures to meet the workers' need, not the capitalists' greed.

The only alternative would be to limit the revolution strictly to capitalist measures, which would mean siding with the bosses whenever workers took action. To avoid this, the new government would have to confiscate the property of the capitalists. In Trotsky's words, 'the democratic revolution grows over directly into the socialist revolution and thereby becomes a permanent revolution.'

Today, in the Third World, Trotsky's theory is crucial. The Stalinists argue that revolutions should stop at the 'democratic stage', i.e. capitalism. But if revolutions against dictatorship, for national independence, for equal votes, for land, are to secure lasting gains they cannot stop halfway leaving power in the hands of the bosses, but need to go further, to working class power and socialism.

Trotsky never believed that Russia would be able to build socialism alone. He argued that the key was to spread the revolution to other countries. The overthrow of the powerful capitalists of Germany, Britain and France would remove the greatest threat to the survival of the Russian workers' republic. A federation of workers' states would help to overcome Russia's isolation and backwardness.

This was the second vital element of the theory of permanent revolution. As Trotsky put it:

'The conquest of power by the proletariat does not complete the revolution, but only opens it. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.'

Today, in the era of worldwide crisis, those words are more relevant than ever.

Trotsky versus Stalinism

Leon Trotsky warned that Stalinism was a sickness within the Soviet Union and the socialist movement. Stalin's regime blocked the road to socialism, and without working class democracy and socialist revolution around the world, the Soviet Union could not survive.

Russia emerged from the revolution in a terribly weakened state. In Petrograd, industry in 1921 was producing only an eighth of its 1913 output. The number of industrial workers dropped from 230,000 to under 80,000 between 1918 and 1920.

Grain had to be seized from the peasants to make sure the cities were fed. Experts had to be appointed in industry to raise production. The workers' councils - soviets - became smaller and less representative as millions joined the Red Army.

Lenin and Trotsky never tried to cover this up. They knew that special, temporary measures had to be taken to ensure the survival of the workers' state. This took the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Instead of seizing the peasants' grain, the state now took a fixed part. The remainder could be sold as under capitalism. This would avoid the danger of a peasant war and boost production. But NEP also allowed rich peasants - Kulaks - to secure privileges for themselves. A layer of so-called NEP-men, who organised the distribution of products, grew up

within the Communist Party and the state apparatus.

In 1921 Lenin and Trotsky tried to make sure the growth of this privileged layer did not lead to the corruption of the Communist Party itself by banning factions in the party. This was a serious mistake that achieved the opposite of what Lenin and Trotsky had intended.

A privileged bureaucracy was already growing up within the party. This emerging layer of bureaucrats found a champion in the general secretary of the party, Joseph Stalin. As the ban on factions increased his control, any criticism was soon ruled out of order. By autumn 1923, he demanded that factions should be reported either to the leadership or to the secret police.

Trotsky launched a fight against Stalinism that would last the rest of his life. The Opposition demanded a 'regime of comradely unity and internal party democracy', without fear of repression. He fought to rebuild the soviets and give them real control. He wanted the party to adopt a democratic plan of production to build up large-scale modern industry and agriculture moving towards socialist production for need rather than profit.

But the absence of party democracy allowed Stalin's faction to misrepresent Trotsky's views and prevent party members - in Russia and abroad - from looking at what he was really saying.

Stalin's offensive

First the Stalinists used jeers and smears instead of arguments. The Opposition were 'counter-revolutionaries' who wanted to 'rob the peasants'. The threat from the Kulaks had been 'exaggerated'. In November 1927 Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party, the Opposition declared illegal. The police attacked their demonstrations. By 1928 the leaders of the Opposition were all expelled. Trotsky was sent into exile.

No sooner had the Opposition been defeated than the Kulaks moved against the workers' state. In the winter of 1927-28 they refused to sell their grain unless the state raised prices. Trotsky's warnings had proved to be correct. The threat from the Kulaks had to be confronted. Yet in place of a democratically managed plan for steady progress, Stalin used force, command from above and brute terror. Whereas Lenin and Trotsky had argued for voluntary collectives the Stalinists now collectivised farms by force; 320,000 peasants were deported in the first months of the new turn.

In industry the Stalinists also adopted the plans of the Opposition but in a warped and distorted form. After mocking the idea of an economic plan, the Stalinists now planned each industry, but this was carried out by command, from above. Real advances were made, but Stalinism held the enormous potential of the planned economy back, its dynamism undermined by the absence of working class democracy.

By 1932 Stalin's rule was total - but unstable. The Great Purges of the 1930s were the result. Millions died in a frenzy of persecution and oppression. Oppositionists were threatened, tortured, and forced to 'recant' their views. They were framed with ludicrous charges, then shot after grotesque 'show trials'.

Trotsky - alone of the former Bolshevik leaders - did not capitulate to Stalin. He was also the only anti-Stalinist to use Marxism to understand the degeneration of the Russian revolution. The backwardness and isolation of Russia were the main causes of the retreat of the revolution and the rise of the bureaucracy.

How then could the Soviet state be defined? The Stalinists insisted that it was socialist. But a socialist state:

'has as its premise the dying away of the state as the guardian of property, the mitigation of inequality and the gradual dissolution of the property concept even in the morals and customs of society. The real development in the Soviet Union in recent years has followed a directly opposite road. Inequality grows, and with it, state coercion.'

Was the USSR capitalist then? Trotsky thought not. Under capitalism everything is produced for sale on the market, including labour power - the ability of working people to work. Production goes through sharp cycles of boom and slump. Unemployment and inflation ravage the economy. The ruling class draws enormous profits - legally - by

exploiting the workers.

In the USSR all this was different. Goods were not produced to make a profit when sold on the market. Rather, production was organised according to requirements fixed by the bureaucrats in their central plan. All property was in the hands of the state. Labour power was not bought and sold but allocated by officials; wages were fixed.

Class nature of USSR

The economy developed without booms and slumps. There was no mass unemployment. For decades inflation was almost unknown. The bureaucracy grew rich, but illegally, by robbing the state and fixing the figures.

For these reasons, Trotsky defined the USSR as a 'degenerated workers' state'. The capitalists and their system had been overthrown. But the transition to socialism had been blocked by the Stalinist bureaucracy, who had taken political power out of the hands of the working class and kept it by means of massive repression.

Trotsky concluded that the USSR needed to be defended against attempts to restore capitalism. But at the same time he said a new workers' revolution would be necessary to smash the Stalinist state and restore power to genuine soviets.

This approach is vital for socialists with regard to states like Cuba today - they must be defended unconditionally against the US and counter-revolution, but power needs to pass from the bureaucracy back into the hands of councils of elected workers' delegates and the revolution must be spread across the Caribbean and Latin America.

How should we judge Trotsky's struggle against Stalin? Clearly Trotsky and his followers failed to overthrow Stalin, and eventually the Stalinist bureaucracy collapsed, handing power back to the capitalists in 1991.

Some suggest that if Trotsky had really understood what was going on, he would never have lost power. This can be roughly translated as: Stalin was right because he won. If this is true, then justice is on the side of every tyrant on the earth.

But socialism has not failed. The great attempt of the Russian revolution has shown that there is an alternative to capitalism. Struggles against capitalism have not ceased, and as the Great Crisis of 2008 has shown, they will not cease while capitalism and its economic failure continues.

Today, as millions look for an alternative to capitalism, the ideas of the early years of the Soviet Republic will find a new audience among workers and youth all over the world. These are the ideas that Leon Trotsky kept alive - the ideas that will triumph in the future.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/place-trotsky-history>