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"We will storm the sky and the whole earth"

Seventy years since the formation of the Fourth International

- Features -

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“Workers – men and women – of the world, unite under the banner of the Fourth International. It is the banner of your approaching victory!”

This proclamation could have been hurled towards the participants of a powerful revolutionary congress in Lausanne, Switzerland. And even if the gathered delegates from all corners of the world admitted, with insight, that the movement was still in its initial stage, they were reassured that millions would soon follow their banners and clean up fascism, capitalism and Stalinism.

In reality they consisted of about twenty people who met in secret in a small house in Périgny outside of Paris on 3rd September 1938. They represented a few scattered political groupings in eleven countries with handfuls of members. Amongst the most experienced were the Polish, with roots in the movement of Rosa Luxemburg, but they mainly warned against underestimating the influence of the social democrats and communists and of making the proclamation of the Fourth International an “empty gesture”. With nineteen votes to three the decision to form the “world party of the socialist revolution” was made.

It would be easy to depict this event as a tragic farce. The small house was provided by the legendary French revolutionary Alfred Rosmer, who himself didn't attend the meeting as he considered the whole project as utterly unrealistic. The secretive security arrangements were no more effective than allowing for Stalin's secret police to be directly represented in the form of the Russian delegate “Ãtienne”. And the American interpreter, Sylvia Agelof, had after her arrival from New York not only fallen in love with Paris but also with a man whom she dragged along to the secret meeting. He called himself Jacques Mornad and would nearly two years later place an icepick in Leo Trotsky's head as ordered by Stalin. Leon Trotsky was the obvious leader of the movement, safely out of reach in Mexico.

As the heir to the three first internationals, the self-proclaimed Fourth was not just miniscule. It was also formed under completely different conditions.

The first International during Marx's and Bakunin's time was formed in 1864 when the struggle against slavery in North America, the Polish uprising against Tsar Russia and Garibaldi's Italian liberation movement had created a radical climate for the first generation of workers' organisations in Europe and North America.

The second International of 1889 was carried forward by quickly growing mass movements, with the successful German social democracy in the forefront. The third, communist, International was formed in 1919 amidst the revolutionary stormy period after Russia's Bolshevik revolution.

But the spring of 1938 was the spring of fascism. When the small group gathered in Périgny, the Spanish republic was busy counting catastrophic losses after its last large defeat at Ebro. Five months earlier Hitler's troops had marched into Austria and finished off the “Austromarxists” – the radical social democracy that had fought house to house against Catholic dictatorship. At the same time the French people's front, with its radical promises, had fallen apart. Most of Europe's workers' movements had been crushed by fascism, Nazism and dictatorship. There were only days until “Munich” – where the British Prime Minister Chamberlain would sell out Czechoslovakia and give Hitler an open road to the world war.

But it was also the autumn of Stalinism. In March the third large show trial in Moscow, of the Bolsheviks' old guard, had been concluded with the death sentences against the legendary Bolshevik leaders Bukharin, Rykov, Rakovski

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and Krestinski. Now they were almost all gone – the architects of the October Revolution, Lenin's comrades who twenty years earlier had made the bourgeoisie world tremble before the world revolution.

During the so-called Jezjovsjtjina – the terror campaign led by the Soviet security boss Nikolai Jezjov – almost 700 000 of Stalin's imaginary or real political opponents were executed by firing squads. They were usually shot as "saboteurs", "spies" and "Trotskyists" – without being any of it true. But during the large-scale raids the repression had until the end of the 1920s been concentrated on the exiled Leon Trotsky's real followers. These could be counted in their tens of thousands and found not least among those who once had been mobilised into the Red Army and who considered Trotsky as Lenin's obvious heir.

Those who had gathered in Périgny were of course conscious of the death sentences and the mass deportations to the growing Siberian camps in the east. Rumours reached the Polish delegation about what had happened the leadership of the Polish communist party – called to Moscow during the spring had they been shot without any further ceremony. Still, they could not get a complete overview of the impact of the terror.

The illusion was still alive that the new international's Russian supporters – its "largest section" – could provide the movement a cadre of experienced Bolsheviks when the final hour of Stalinism struck.

The desolate echoes of the gunshots in Vorkuta during the spring and winter of 1938 never reached beyond the tundra. There, in the large Gulag system of the Pechora area, were almost a hundred thousand prisoners classified as "Trotskyists" while the truly organised "Bolshevik-Leninists" perhaps reached a few thousands. Many of those had belonged to the left opposition led by Trotsky, which by the early 1920s had turned against Stalin's growing nationalism and the bureaucratising of the Soviet state. Their well-organised hunger strike of 132 days for better conditions in the camps had become well-known – and successful. Many even hoped for amnesty on the anniversary of the October Revolution and new possibilities to spread their message.

But during the winter of 1937-38 the "Trotskyists" were moved to a new isolated camp where they were all shot in groups in the snow, week after week during the whole of March and April. Perhaps "A^tienne" knew their destiny and that the "Russian section" was exterminated until the last man and woman. But the gathered, who proclaimed a new international, still had the hope of a renaissance for the young Russian Bolshevik ideals.

And here the word "farce" is no longer pertinent – and is rather obscene considering the context. Because even if those gathered, in the words of the historian Isaac Deutscher, weren't stopped "even by the obviously hopelessness of the project", they refused to accept the transformation of socialism and the revolution into the slave camps of Stalinism, its despotism and blind obedience. They were convinced that the early Bolshevik ideas about the liberation of the working classes – through unselfish internationalism, independent class struggle and self-activity and solidarity – had to be saved from the formidable collapse of the international workers' movement which was the sign of those times.

The first and only congress day produced a flood of resolutions and statements, both large and small – from statements against the coming world war, the oppression of Stalinism, fascism and American imperialism, to concrete advice concerning the organisation and inner life of this or that group. Added to its faithfulness of ideas were both accurate prophecies and unrealistic predictions. The approach of the barbaric significance of the world wars, the Stalinist extermination of the revolutionary Marxists, and workers' power in the Soviet Union and the uprising of the colonial world was a part of the former. The hope of the collapse of the old social democracy and the Moscow-led communist parties due to a people's revolution – under the banner of the Fourth International – after the world war was part of the wishful thinking.

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Just as the Polish delegates had feared, the proclamation of 1938 seemed to be nothing but an empty gesture. Under the pressure of the pact between Hitler and Stalin, not to mention the new world war, several of the already miniscule supporting groups split. The chairperson of the founding congress, Max Shachtman, belonged to those who only two years later abandoned the whole idea that the workers' state in the Soviet Union, despite the repression, had to be defended against imperialism in the coming world war. The French supporters split between the adherents of a national war of defence against the German invasion in 1940 and the proponents of the revolutionary strategy of the First World War to try to create brotherhood across the trenches. The Chinese "Trotskyists" tried to hold on to its underground plan to organise the working class of the cities, while Mao Zedong's followers chose to build a national peasants' army which was to march into Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai one day to confront their rivals. The founder of the Chinese communist party, Chen Tu-hsiu, who had followed Trotsky, despaired that the movement "tied itself into knots" and "slept away its possibilities" in the city proletariat which had been crushed by the nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek and Japanese occupiers, until he was arrested by police and murdered in 1943.

Thereby he came to share the destiny which already by the time of the founding congress had been sealed for so many of the followers. Trotsky's son and closest collaborator Leon Sedov, his former secretary Rudolf Klement and Erwin Wolf were appointed honorary presidents at the congress, after having been murdered by the Soviet GPU the year before. "Together with our boy has everything that was still young within us also died", Trotsky and his wife Natalia wrote devastated after their son's death, when only two years of Trotsky's life remained. The "Trotskyists" who tried to maintain the Bolshevik revolutionary direction against the global power blocs of the world war was therefore an enemy against all camps – the fascists, the Soviet Union and the Western allies – and paid the ultimate price in the form of repression, imprisonment, executions and murders.

"The next ten years the Fourth International's programme will be embraced by millions and these revolutionary millions will storm the heaven and the whole earth", Trotsky predicted with emphasis in an interview in 1938. Perhaps that was mainly to give courage to the small groups that would have to go through blood and fire for a single microscopic chance to live up to that objective. Concerning spirit and temper there was no similarity whatsoever between the routine of a trade union-representative or a party official and the "Bolshevik-Leninists" of the Fourth International.

The Russian Bolsheviks would have loved to be condemned as "the Muslims of socialism" by a terrified European bourgeoisie at that time. For themselves, many Bolsheviks preferred the comparison with the Jacobins of the French revolution, a view that was shared by those who intended to build up the new world movement.

The faith in the power of their own ideas was also nearly without limits: "We work with the most real and most powerful ideas in the world even if our numerical forces and material resources are insufficient", Trotsky explained. "But real ideas always win in the end and conquer for themselves the necessary material means and forces."

Ten years after that prophecy a world war, which left around 60 million dead and included the extermination of whole peoples, had been fought. A wave of radicalism and a mood of uprisings had, as predicted, swept across the battlefields at the end of the war and in many places "Trotskyists" had played a role, from the large strikes at Renault in Paris to the resistance against the French colonial power in Indochina, among tea workers in Sri Lanka and mine workers in Bolivia.

But the Fourth International as a million-strong army of the world revolution belonged to the dreams of a different time, as reality's nationalist Red army had emerged victorious from the "Great Patriotic War" and social democracy aligned itself with the Western bloc.

When the world in 1948 was frozen into the "balance of terror" between the West and East blocs, the movement

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which had survived the world catastrophe against all odds was marginalised with few exceptions. And the ideas found bearers only in exceptional cases, whom not rarely and untiringly tore each other apart in vain attempts to find passages to real influence. Embittered sects and self-centred compulsive liars were part of the afterbirth, but so were also much alive and creative organisms which could play a role in the post-war new social movements, from the resistance of 1968 against imperialism and war, to today's defence of workers' and women's rights in a globalised solidarity with the powerless of the world.

This is not the place to write that particular history. It lay in an unknown future for those who met in Périgny seventy years ago. They wanted to save the basic idea of socialism - the self-emancipation of working peoples – in a time when everything seemed lost. Perhaps it is exactly that unremitting courage we need today.

Translation: Linn Hjort