

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article356>



Trotsky Dossier

# Trotsky's Final Struggle

- IV Online magazine - 2000 - IV324 - October 2000 -

Publication date: Saturday 7 October 2000

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**More than 60 years after it was founded, the Fourth International remains very weak numerically. At a time of triumphant "globalisation", however, it remains the only existing International.**

In their 1848 Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels showed that Capital could only develop by eliminating national borders, and that the struggles of workers (those who only have their labour power to sell) had to respond accordingly. We are currently seeing a deepening of this tendency. While international movements against the effects of capitalist globalisation have finally appeared on the scene - against the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO, and for the cancellation of the Third-World debt - the Fourth International is the only political organisation that exists in a number of countries and is therefore able to carry out a collective analysis of the world situation and formulate demands in keeping with the need to put an end to capitalism.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/trotskystudy.jpg>]

In a number of countries, there have been revolutionary parties much bigger and much more rooted than the local section of the Fourth International. Most have vanished. To survive into the long term, an organisation needs a vision that goes beyond its own national borders. It needs the broader context that can only come from ongoing exchange and debate with revolutionary organisations in other countries. Only an International that constantly deals with the difficulties of its different sections is in a position to help them move forward.

In the early days the Left Opposition was not international. The "Bolshevik-Leninist faction" was only active within the Communist Party of the USSR. Although it had contacts with individuals and groups outside the country, it alone decided its political line. The Left Opposition was formed in 1923 in the USSR; party members gathered around Trotsky in opposition to Stalin's positions. In December 1922, Lenin suffered a stroke soon after Stalin was made general secretary of the party. During a period of some 80 days - in what became known as "Lenin's last struggle" - he managed to wage a struggle against the rising bureaucracy, with Trotsky's support. But in March 1923 a relapse sidelined Lenin from political activity; the triumph of the Stalinist apparatus was assured.

## Internationalism

From the start, the Left Opposition stood out for its internationalism. With the defeat of the German revolution in October 1923, the turn of the world situation led the Opposition to focus and take positions on international matters as much as on the "Russian question".

The year 1923 brought to a close the period of revolutionary crisis that had shaken Europe for five years. A new phase of reversals began for the working-class movement.

The defeat of the revolution in a number of places (especially Hungary and Germany) created widespread disappointment in the USSR. The working-class movement was demoralised and became passive. Its best elements had either been killed during the civil war or had been given a leadership role in the state and in the economy and tended towards bureaucratisation. The Opposition argued in favour of a "new course" - the title of a collection of Trotsky's articles from this period - to fight the bureaucratisation of the party and state. It argued against the zigzags in economic policy. At first, economic policy was heavily weighted in favour of the kulaks (rich peasants) and "nepmen" (those who had grown rich thanks to the New Economic Policy inaugurated in 1921); then there was a sudden and brutal turn in 1928 towards forced collectivisation of the land and the breakneck development of heavy

industry.

Internationally, the Opposition denounced the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee - which brought together the heads of British and Soviet trade unions - for abandoning British miners who had gone on strike for several months in 1926. It harshly criticised Comintern (Communist International) support to the Kuomintang (party of the Chinese commercial and industrial bourgeoisie), which went on to carry out full-scale massacres of Chinese communists between 1925 and 1927.

In the area of theory, these differences were summed up in the conflict between two approaches: "socialism in a single country" and "permanent revolution". After Lenin's death, Stalin said it was perfectly feasible to build socialism in a single backward and isolated country, simultaneously building confidence among the main capitalist powers. The Opposition argued that this was a suicidal illusion and that the only way the Russian Revolution could survive was by contributing to revolutionary developments elsewhere in the world and especially in the industrialised countries. This latter position had been the position of the entire Bolshevik Party while Lenin was alive.

## Platform

In the Platform of the Left Opposition, written in 1927 - during the short time Zinoviev had joined the Opposition - a number of concrete proposals were put forward with the 15th Party congress in mind. The Platform called for limits on the growth in the number and wealth of kulaks in the countryside; for the development of agricultural co-operatives (kolkhozes and sovkhozes); and especially for the defence of the state monopoly on foreign trade. At the same time, the great-Russian chauvinism of the state apparatus is severely criticised and a number of suggestions are made to restore "genuine internal democracy in the party, as in Lenin's time" (although, strangely, no call is made for restoring the right to form tendencies in the Party).

The Platform also looked at the international situation. The Opposition argued that the imperialists were preparing a war against the USSR and that "anyone not in favour of defending the USSR is, without possible exception, a traitor to the world proletariat." However, this "defence of the land of the Soviets" could only take place by calling on workers of other countries to overthrow their bourgeoisie, and not by seeking friendly relations with hostile ruling classes. The aborted Chinese revolution was used as an example of what shouldn't be done.

At the 15th party congress of 1927, Stalin called upon the Opposition to "capitulate fully and unconditionally on both the political and organisational level." The Zinoviev current threw in the towel. The long-time members of the Opposition rejected the ultimatum and were excluded from the party and then deported. In 1928, Trotsky was banished to Alma Ata (Almaty) in Kazakhstan. In 1929, Trotsky was deported to the Turkish island of Prinkipo.

A number of Trotsky's allies - Radek, Smilga, Preobrazhenski - gave in to Stalin when they felt he had adopted the ideas of the Opposition (five-year plan, collectivisation of agriculture) in response to peasant refusal to deliver their wheat. In fact, Stalin implemented a caricature of the Opposition program and this had devastating consequences - millions of famine related deaths. The Russian Bolshevik Leninist faction found itself totally isolated.

While capitalism was going through its worst ever economic crisis, Trotsky was trying to set up an international Bolshevik-Leninist faction to rectify the course of the Comintern. The world over, millions of workers were losing their jobs while the USSR appeared to be developing smoothly thanks to the implementation of the five-year plan. Arguing, from 1928 onwards, that the revolution was on the agenda everywhere in the world, the Comintern claimed that a "third period" had begun - the first period being the revolutionary upsurge until 1923, the second being the phase of reversals between 1923 and 1928.

# Invasion

The Comintern argued that the USSR faced imminent invasion and pursued an extremely sectarian policy - saying, for example, that Social Democrats were the twin brothers of the fascists. According to Stalin, the Social Democrats were "social fascists" with whom no united action was possible (except with the rank and file). Exploiting the tragic division of the German working-class movement, Hitler took power in January 1933 through entirely legal channels. German Communists and Social Democrats were the first ones sent off to the Nazi concentration camps - including Communist leader Ernst Thaelmann who had earlier declared that one shouldn't "miss the Social-Democratic forest for the National Socialist (Nazi) tree".

At that time, there were three currents in the Soviet party and in the International. There was a "rightist" current represented in the USSR by leaders such as Bukharin, Rykov, Smirnov, Kalinin (who expected a great deal from the middle peasantry) and Tomsky (representing the interests of upper-level state officials). In Germany, this current was represented by Brandler, who had played a central role in the failure of the 1923 revolution. After having more or less supported this rightist current until 1928, Stalin abruptly broke the alliance when the turn was made to large-scale collectivisation and rapid industrialisation.

There was a "centrist" Stalinist faction around Stalin, Molotov, Mikoyan and Kirov. This current was in charge of the Party, the trade unions and the state. It also ran the Comintern (through Manouilsky and Dimitrov), which merely implements the line decided by the Stalinist faction.

# Expulsion

The Left Opposition around Trotsky and Rakovsky was only organised on an international level after Trotsky's expulsion in 1929. It set itself the task of defending communist principles within the Comintern and organising a team of cadres. In 1929, a small group formed around Alfred Rosmer in France - the Ligue Communiste, which published the weekly paper *La Vérité* ("the truth"). They put out the call for the first Conference of Bolshevik-Leninists, which was held in Paris in April 1930 and nominated an International Secretariat. This was the founding event of the international movement which would immediately be labelled "Trotskyite" by its enemies - a label which it was never able to shake off.

The international Left Opposition sought to rectify the political course of the Communist International and the Soviet state. Its main positions were:

- ▶ Defence of the USSR, still seen as a workers state given its economic infrastructure, even though the political system would have to be thoroughly transformed. In this sense, the Opposition was "reformist".
- ▶ Fight for the united front against fascism. From 1930 onwards, Trotsky showed exceptional foresight with respect to the Nazi threat and the suicidal policy the Comintern imposed on the German CP.
- ▶ Struggle for a rectification of the Communist International, many of whose members remained genuine revolutionaries.

In response to the coming to power of Hitler in Germany - a historic defeat for the proletariat - Trotsky argued that the project of winning back the Communist International was no longer relevant. Indeed, the Comintern continued to justify its mad policy of calling the Social Democrats "social fascists" - a policy which paved the way for Nazi victory.

The time had come for a new International.

The main features of the international situation were the historic defeat in Germany, the mis-leadership given by Stalinist leaders to workers' struggles in France and Spain, and the Stalinist mass terror and liquidation of the Bolshevik old guard in the USSR. Hitler took power in Germany. In January 1933, President Hindenburg named him chancellor of the Reich. Soon after, repression was unleashed against the German working class movement. Trotsky declared, "the German working class will rise again - Stalinism never!"

Popular Front governments came to power in France and Spain in 1936. In France, an attempted reactionary coup on February 6, 1934 had provoked a firm response from the working class, leading to unity in action between French Communists and Socialists. A joint electoral platform was drawn up by the two parties, but the CP subsequently insisted that the main party of the bourgeoisie, the Radical Party, should be a part of the alliance. The Popular Front election victory unleashed a massive social movement, with two million workers occupying their workplaces. While Trotsky wrote that "the French revolution has begun" and the left Socialist Marceau Pivert proclaimed that "everything is possible!" the main Communist leader Maurice Thorez declared that "one has to know how to end a strike". Unfortunately, the influence of the CP was far greater than that of the small groups of the Left Opposition and the strike was brought to a close. Things could have gone much further otherwise.

## Rebellion

In Spain the left's electoral victory in February 1936 led to the July military rebellion and a civil war which ended in the victory of Franco, supported by Hitler and Mussolini, while the Popular Front government in France and the British respected the principle of "non-intervention" and the Stalinists, while arming the "republican" camp, imposed on it a political self-limitation and unleashed a ferocious repression against the anarchist and left communist oppositionists.

In the USSR the assassination of Kirov, the head of the party in Leningrad, marked the beginning to the mass terror of which the three trials in Moscow were only the most visible part. In 1934 Trotsky's old companion Rakovsky capitulated (in circumstances which remain unclear) which did not stop him from being later arrested in January 1937, sentenced, deported and finally executed in 1941.

The capitulation of the German CP before Hitler was considered by Trotsky as a historic test; this CP was no longer reformable and neither was the Comintern. The change of orientation would take place in several stages between 1933 and 1935. Starting from March 1933 the Opposition believed that the German CP was no longer reformable but still hoped for some healthy reactions from other CPs after the German catastrophe.

As nothing happened, in the course of the summer of 1933 came a new change of line - the CI was no longer reformable and it was necessary to build a new revolutionary international and new revolutionary parties in every country.

## Political revolution

Finally, in 1935 it was clearly established that the road of reform was insufficient in the USSR and that a genuine political revolution was needed to overthrow the bureaucracy while conserving the state property inherited from the October Revolution.

The construction of a new international - the Fourth - could only be envisaged on the basis of the greatest firmness of principles combined with the greatest flexibility of organisation.

These principles are laid down in a number of documents, notably in the Declaration of Four signed in August 1933 by the International Communist League and 3 sympathetic organisations, 2 Dutch and 1 German. It was on the basis of these principles that the three main struggles were led:

- ▶ Against the policy of Popular Fronts, particularly in Spain and in France. This was inaugurated in 1934 by a Stalin at last worried by the Nazi triumph and led the CPs to pass from an outrageous sectarianism (the struggle against the social fascists) to an unbridled opportunism (the union of all good republicans). This was the first great experience of the class collaboration of the Stalinists.
- ▶ Against centrism, that is the tendency to seek accommodation between a reformist policy and a revolutionary one. Different groups were thus characterised in France, Spain, Holland, Sweden, Poland and German "migr" groups. But it was with Nin and Maurin, the Spanish founders of the Marxist Party of Workers' Unity (POUM), that the discussion was the sharpest given their equivocal position on the Popular Front.
- ▶ Against the Stalinist terror and the Moscow trials, denounced notably by Trotsky and his son, exiled with his father, in their Red Book on the Moscow trials.

## Entryism

After Moscow's abandonment of its ultra-sectarian policy in 1934 and the rapid development of workers' parties in several countries, Trotsky concluded it was necessary to keep contact with the most combative elements of the working class and he proposed the tactic of "entryism" in the socialist organisations. The Bolshevik-Leninists would temporarily lose their organisational independence while continuing to be organised as a faction. In France entryism was employed in the main social democratic party, the SFIO, in September and October 1934. It allowed the renewal of the ranks of the organisation, notably through recruitment from the Socialist youth. The leadership expelled the Trotskyist faction at the end of 1935, before the Popular Front. The French section, reduced and isolated, was prey to internal struggles and intertwined political differences and personal conflicts (on the one hand Raymond Molinier and Pierre Frank, on the other Pierre Naville and Jean Rous) which gave birth to several micro-organisations which only reunified at the end of the Second World War. Entryism was also carried out with good results in Belgium and the USA.

In June 1936 the first international conference for the Fourth International was held in Paris (officially in Geneva, for security reasons). The International Communist League became the Movement for the Fourth International.

After the Stalinist purges in the USSR, when the revolution was practically crushed in Spain and the great powers had capitulated before Hitler in signing the Munich accords, the conference which was to found the Fourth International met in a Paris suburb. It was held in secret, the plenary assembly only lasted one day and 11 sections were represented (France, USA, Italy, Great Britain, Holland, Greece, Brazil, USSR, Poland, Belgium and Germany). The major text adopted was the Transitional Programme drawn up by Trotsky. It demonstrated how to develop working class consciousness, starting from immediate demands and putting forward a series of demands which make sense to the proletariat but are unacceptable for the bourgeoisie.

It also adopted a number of resolutions as well as some quite rigid statutes; corresponding to this pre-war epoch the

"world party of socialist revolution" should be centralised and very disciplined.

The most controversial point was certainly the question of whether it was timely to proclaim the Fourth International: three delegates were firmly opposed, the two Polish delegates (Stefan Lamed and Hersch Mendel) as well as Yvan Craipeau, representing the French minority. They argued that in a period of setbacks it was very risky to proclaim the birth of a new international and thus compromise the idea. The three previous internationals had been set up at a time when the proletariat was on the offensive and from their beginnings had several parties which were influential in their countries. The other delegates were not convinced and followed Trotsky's proposals to found the Fourth International, given the immense difficulties presented by the inevitable arrival of a new world war.

## Emergency

In May 1940, when France was invaded an emergency conference of the Fourth International was held in New York because of a profound crisis within the US section - a minority around James Burnham and Max Schachtman considered that after the Soviet-German pact it was necessary to abandon defence of the USSR. During this conference the first attempt to assassinate Trotsky before his murder on August 20, 1940 took place.

This rapid overview shows the difficulties faced by those few militants who, before the war, devoted their lives to the revolutionary cause and would face not only the repression of the bourgeois state, but also the physical violence of the Stalinists. The international that they founded is still living. Certainly the conditions are not the same, the Fourth International only considers itself as one of the components of a future mass revolutionary international, but its experience and its theoretical conceptions will make an invaluable contribution.