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Trotsky Dossier

Understanding fascism in order to fight it

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

Publication date: Saturday 7 October 2000

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Since the incorporation of the GDR in 1990, there has been in Germany a debate in the scattered ranks of the left intelligentsia on the specificity of the Nazi regime and the singularity of its crimes. A number of authors stress above all the consciously organised genocide of the Jewish population in Europe.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/Nazis.gif>] Hitler at Nuremberg

In a political-functional sense this reflects a legitimate need: the fight against the relativisation of the Nazi crimes. The systematic comparison of these latter with other historic crimes is indeed typical of modern German bourgeois ideology and was introduced aggressively into the debate by 'historical revisionism' (which goes still further, explaining the excesses of Nazi barbarism as a 'reaction' to the Stalinist ['Communist'] crimes). In truth, when one thinks of the dangers to envisage for a possible future, it is necessary to admit that the thesis of 'singularity' tends to weaken sensitivities: the truth is that this 'singularity' could not only be equalled but even surpassed.

Means of destruction

The reason is simple. In comparison with the years 1933-1945, the means of destruction have increased tenfold. The heritage of the cold war and the arms race, still growing, opens the way to the objective possibility of rapid self-destruction of all humanity. The Hitlerian regime did not possess the atomic bomb (but it came near to it). With the means of which such a regime would dispose today, the result could be a historic catastrophe of such dimensions that even the terrible misdeeds of the Nazi regime could be reduced to a prelude.

In his remarkable introduction to a new edition of Trotsky's writings on Germany (Schriften Œoer Deutschland), [1] Ernest Mandel wrote in 1969: "Under the conditions of a predominantly prosperous and conservative petty bourgeoisie, neo-fascism has no objective possibility of winning a broad mass base. Wealthy property owners don't fight street battles with revolutionary workers or radical students. They prefer to call the police and provide them with better weapons to 'take care of unrest'." And, some lines further on, he explains that some changes in economic development can transform all that and that it is very probable (given the contradictions of contemporary capitalism) that such changes would happen in the future.

In this respect, where are we today, for example in Europe? In several countries there are political parties or movements of the far right (whether fascist, post-fascist, proto-fascist, populist) which already have a mass electoral base, and in these same countries and in others there is a growth of organised far right militancy, the preparation of armed terrorism by far right nuclei, racist attacks and anti-Semitic provocations committed by people influenced by the far right.

Balkans

There have been the wars in the Balkans with their waves of violence of "ethnic" motivation. There has been mass unemployment for some years, and it is only partially reducing, even during a period of conjunctural economic upturn. There are more and more poor, excluded, including the dispossessed originating from the middle layers. To add to this there is increased atomisation in the workplace and leisure and a new layer of people are formally 'entrepreneurs', even if they have only their labour power (more or less qualified) to sell.

The attempt to understand the nature of historic fascism, to debate the different approaches to the phenomenon and the means to fight it is in no way academic today. It amounts to a past with a multitude of links to the present. The possibility of drawing lessons for the future - with all the prudence necessary, in that history never repeats itself exactly - cannot then be denied. And Trotsky's motivation was very rational: to understand fascism, Nazism in its social, political and historic context, to understand it in order better to fight it, to stop it from seizing power, to destroy it with all its roots.

Germany and the struggle against the Hitlerian danger are at the centre of Trotsky's preoccupations before the coming to power of the Nazis in 1933. The origin of the movement being Italy, the application of this notion to the Nazi movement is explained in part by the proclaimed affinity of the NSDAP itself to the original fascism and above all by the objective similarity of the social and political nature. Mussolini's seizure of power not only signified the installation of a very repressive regime abolishing elementary democratic rights, but also the physical destruction of the workers' movement, its parties, trade unions and all its independent associations. Fascist propaganda mythologised a renaissance of a national glory situated far in the past; its symbolism alluded to the ancient Roman Empire.

Terrorism

Fascism was a mass movement which, during the period of its ascension to power, combined street terrorism, attacking organisations of the left and the workers' movement and its demonstrations, firing the 'Houses of the People' and so on with participation in the official political game, finally establishing a totalitarian dictatorship excluding all self-organisation from below and nearly all public criticism. Fascism, in order to create a broad popular base for itself, practised a 'social' demagogy appealing to the 'anti-capitalist' or 'anti-rich' resentments, but as a regime it did not attack the foundations of the capitalist economy, acting in conformity with the interests of the bourgeoisie as dominant social class and "forgetting" that it had promised, not to finish with the capitalists, but to force them to take into account the interests of the workers.

After the First World War there was a mass revolutionary movement in Italy, leading to a wave of factory occupations by workers in revolt in Turin in September 1920. Afterwards came a downturn in the autonomous activity of the exploited and oppressed. In this atmosphere fascism developed as a new form of political reaction. In October 1922, Mussolini took power. From November 5 to December 5 1922, the Fourth congress of the Communist International (CI) met, first in Petrograd then in Moscow, and discussed among others the fascist phenomenon, after the debate on the "tactic" (the workers' united front and the slogan of the workers' government being at the centre of the preoccupations).

New phenomenon

It was a historically new political phenomenon. But Radek, speaking in the name of the executive, explained the petty bourgeois social base of fascism, resting first of all on a layer of the nationalist "middle classes", disappointed by the outcome of the war and full of resentments, originating in the crisis of the traditional bourgeois parties and institutions, its demagogic character and the fact that its seizure of power had been a consequence of the incapacity of the workers' movement and above all the Italian Socialist Party, based on the mass movement of the post-war period to itself take power and overthrow capitalism.

In conclusion, Radek said: "The fascists are the petty bourgeoisie who arrive in power supported by the bourgeoisie and who will be forced to apply, not the programme of the petty bourgeoisie, but that of capitalism (...). And precisely

that which constitutes fascism's strength will be also the reason for its death, because it has become a petty bourgeois party, it disposes of this broad front, with which it has fought us. But because it is a big petty bourgeois party, it cannot put into practice the policy of Italian capital without unleashing big revolts in its own camps". The analysis was lucid, but the outlook too optimistic, underestimating the possibilities for the fascist leadership, once in power, to control and drive back its own social base.

After Radek's speech, the Italian Communist leader Bordiga gave a precise description of the history and nature of the fascist movement and explained how it had been able to win after the socialist movement had shown its incapacity to overthrow the established order: 'The consequence of these faults were a total change of the sentiments of the bourgeoisie and other classes. The proletariat was divided and demoralised... One can say that the Italian bourgeoisie in 1919 and the first half of 1920 was more or less accommodated to the idea of seeing the victory of the revolution.

The middle class and the petty bourgeoisie tended to play a passive role, not following the big bourgeoisie, but following the proletariat which was ready to triumph... When the middle class saw that the Socialist Party was not capable of organising itself in a manner that would allow it to take the heights, it articulated its discontent; it lost little by little the confidence it had in the proletariat and swung towards the opposite side. It was at this moment that the bourgeoisie passed onto the offensive".

Incapacity

Bordiga also stressed the incapacity of the Socialist Party to win over the small peasantry that aspired to own a little cultivable land, which offered an important social base to the fascists. 'Fascism bases itself on the general situation, on the growing discontent each day of all the petty bourgeois layers, small traders, small landowners, veterans, ex-officers, who were disappointed by their situation and idealised what they had during the war... Fascism rallied all the demobilised elements who had not found their place in society after the war, and used to its ends their fighting experience.'

The analysis was the same as that of Radek, but Bordiga had a tendency to ignore the substantial difference between the fascist regime and bourgeois democracy, identified as a simple 'system of lies', and explained that fascism would not abolish all democratic liberties and even that 'fascism will be liberal and democratic'. [\[2\]](#)

With this debate, the Communist International began the analysis and comprehension of the fascist phenomenon, albeit with some serious underestimations. However, after the victory of the Stalinist faction inside the Russian party and the CI, certain weaknesses of appreciation typical of Bordiga, who represented an ultra-left current which was fairly weak in the world Communist movement, were taken up and 'deepened' by the Stalinised leadership.

Leon Trotsky, assassinated on the order of Stalin in 1940, was not able to analyse fascism and above all its terrible German version after the end of the Hitlerite Third Reich. Given this, he had been very clairvoyant as to the danger and the dimension of the catastrophe, and moreover also very sensitive to the difference between the Italian original and the German copy. Well before the implementation of the genocide, he had understood that the pseudo-zoological 'materialism', racism and extremely aggressive anti-Semitism of the Nazis had a menacing specificity.

'On the plane of politics, racism is a vapid and bombastic variety of chauvinism in alliance with phrenology. As the ruined nobility sought solace in the gentility of its blood, so the pauperised petty bourgeoisie befuddles itself with fairy tales concerning the special superiorities of its race." [\[3\]](#)

Threats

There was another sizeable difference between the Italian and German variants of fascism: imperialist Germany was capable of creating the material bases to launch and lead a world war against the other imperialist states and against the USSR - which implied the possibility of the bloody implementation of the black dreams of "Mein Kampf".

Italy, in the material and military domains, had not this possibility of playing a role on the first level. It was then normal, after the conquest of power by Italian fascism and in the period of the rise of the Nazi movement, to concentrate on the German case, while trying to draw from the lessons of the Italian experience, which had already cost the life of the organised workers' movement.

Trotsky's contribution is firmly in the Marxist fashion of approaching the problem of fascism, that is situating it in the framework of a critical approach to capitalist class society in its imperialist stage and its structural economic, social and political crisis. The bourgeois ideologues, sometimes unconsciously, have had an interest in denying the link between the capitalist system and the domination of the bourgeois class on the one hand and on the other, the rise of the fascist movement and the exercise of power by the fascist regimes. The bourgeois ideologues focus on partial aspects of the behaviour of the fascist leaderships and movements, which represent their affinity with other anti-democratic, violent and repressive policies.

Trotsky had called the Stalinist regime "totalitarian" [\[4\]](#) well before this notion was fashionable, but he emphasised the importance of the social base of the Stalinist bureaucracy, different from that of the Nazis, which led to a whole catalogue of differences as to the mechanisms of power, the dynamic of foreign policy and the methods of struggle to be employed against the respective regimes. The essence of the 'theory of totalitarianism' of the ideologues of the bourgeoisie is summed up in the simplistic equation 'brown equals red', fascism, Nazism, Francoism, Communism (identified with Stalinism), all as more or less the same thing, to be opposed by the values and virtues of bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

False

It is naturally false to identify communism, the aspiration to the socialist revolution and thus the emancipation of the proletariat as the lever for a universal emancipation, to Stalinism which oppresses self-organisation and emancipation and which is largely the result of the weak economic development and isolation of the Soviet Union. But it is also false to identify the Stalinism with fascism, forgetting that under Stalin, the capitalist market did not reign in the means of production and that the bourgeoisie was no longer the dominant class in society but a beaten class, disintegrated and almost destroyed.

The German bourgeois ideologues deny the pro-capitalist character of the regime of the Nazis. There are some "Marxist" analyses which are too mechanical and thus not very convincing: one fine day the capitalists get together around a round table and decide to put in place a fascist regime. Hitler and the NSDAP being the best (and the nastiest) candidates, it is them that are helped into power. And afterwards - the propagandist postcards of Heartfield popularised this vision of things - one had Hitler, the slave of big capital, a marionette in the service of Krupp, Thyssen, Flick, the Deutsche Bank, IG Farben and so on.

Of course, things did not happen like that. The

historian Ernst Nolte thinks that the true nature of Nazism is situated in human nature.. In the last analysis, it is clear: without human beings, no fascism. Opium makes us sleep because of its soporific qualities. But Hitler, to take power, needed the support or at least the tolerance of big capital and some summits of the apparatus of the civil and military

state. And the bourgeoisie, among other motives of an economic and expansionist character, could not see any other way out of the crisis of its system of political representation.

Domination

In normal times, as Trotsky explained very well, the bourgeoisie prefers the parliamentary democratic system as a system which assures its domination. This system renders possible the integration of the top of the leaderships of the mass workers' organisations, which reinforces considerably the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of a great part of the population. But in times of exacerbation of the structural crisis of the system, things change. The bourgeoisie fears the revolts, which could challenge its power, the liberal and moderate conservative political representatives lose their credibility.

What is more, sometimes (in Germany this was the case), the bourgeoisie aspires to war to enlarge the terrain providing it with resources and its markets. The bourgeoisie seeks then a massive new social force, capable of combating and destroying the organised workers' movement, allowing a historic victory for the capitalists in the area of wages and social rights, allowing a spectacular increase in the rate of exploitation (the rate of surplus-value) and with this a reversal of the tendency to the lowering of the rate of profit. An analysis of the empirical material on Hitler's Third Reich shows very well, that not only the general interests of big capital were well served, but also that the big capitalists remained very influential inside the regime, even in consideration of their particular interests.

Ernest Mandel, in the work quoted, gives two examples: In the middle of the war, in 1940, the Flick trust negotiated the price for its new grenades with the representative of the state apparatus dominated by the leadership of the NSDAP. These latter had calculated that a price of 24 Reichsmark (RM) for each would include a "justified profit" for the trust. Flick demanded 39.25 RM. The 'compromise', quickly arrived at, was 37 RM!

In 1942, the same trust demanded the acquisition of a steel making enterprise constructed with public finances by the Nazi state. On March 31 of that year, the real value of it was evaluated at 9.8 million RM, the nominal value only 3.6 millions. Flick bought the firm at the nominal price! It is very important to note that the Nazis did not even bring the arms industry into state ownership. The general tendency of their economic policy was rather privatisation than nationalisation.

That said, it is clear that the installation of a fascist regime - and thus also of the Nazi regime - implies a political dispossession of the bourgeoisie. It is something forgotten by the simplistic 'Marxists', and it is an omission exploited by the bourgeois ideologues. This delegation of power includes enormous risks, and that is why Hitler had to persuade the magnates of industry, banks and the army that the social-demagogic part of his programme would not be carried out - but the aggressive imperialist and revanchist policy that he advocated was welcomed by the said gentlemen. It is indeed adventurist and very irresponsible to bet on a 'horse' with an ideology of the style of "Mein Kampf". But such was the state of mind of the German bourgeoisie.

Consciousness

In the second place, Trotsky's contribution reflects the level of political consciousness inside the leadership of the world Communist movement before its grave deformation and bureaucratic degeneration. Even today, what is called 'Trotskyist' represents very often simply the general level of analysis and programmatic identity of the Communist International and Bolshevism in the lifetime of Lenin or until the Fourth World Congress of the Third International.

Afterwards, the debates, analyses and positions were systematically deformed by the pragmatic considerations of struggles inside the bureaucratic apparatus and the little leading clique of this apparatus. Hence, the level had fallen very rapidly. Trotsky took as point of departure the debate on Italian fascism at the Fourth Congress of the CI and was thus well armed to understand the dual nature of the fascist movement: its social base of 'petty bourgeois counter-revolutionary despair' and the bourgeois nature of the essence of its politics as 'last card' of the German capitalist-imperialist system in crisis.

Already the Italian social-democrat leaders (like Zibordi or Turati) explained the victory of fascism by the 'extremist' and 'philo-Bolshevik' excesses of the Communists and workers in struggle. They had 'frightened' the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie and had thus drove them straight into the arms of the movement of Mussolini. The Belgian social-democratic theorist Hendrik de Man would draw a similar balance sheet of Hitler's victory, and when there was a wave of workers' mobilisations in Belgium and a growing will to organise a general strike in 1935, the social-democratic leadership under his influence did everything to restrain it - which created the conditions for the growth of the Belgian fascist movement the following year.

Golden mean

The German social-democratic leadership pursued a policy of the 'golden mean'. It wanted to simultaneously combat the 'two extremes', that of the left (the Communist Party) and that of the right (the organisations of the far right like the Stahlhelm and Nazism), basing itself on the police and legal apparatus of the bourgeois state. Contrary to what some vulgarisers believe Trotsky did not this latter did not argue there was an equidistance vis-à-vis the SPD on the one hand and the KPD led by Thaelmann on the other. If he held the official policy of the KPD responsible for the lack of a real struggle against the Nazis, and the capitulation without a fight in 1933, it was because it had facilitated the dirty work of the social-democracy, which was primarily responsible for this terrible defeat of the workers' movement.

Trotsky explained the concrete role of the social-democracy inside capitalist society and its bourgeois democratic regime. Starting from the support given by the SPD to the war of 'its' bourgeoisie in 1914, the SPD was no longer an open party for a revolutionary alternative (although a Marxist phraseology remained still in force for a long time). After the war, in 1918-19, the leadership of the SPD played a key role in saving the bourgeoisie from the masses in revolt and the workers and soldiers organised in autonomous councils and thus potential alternative organs of power to the bourgeois state.

The SPD obstructed the seizure of power of the councils, in which it had a majority, and organised the bloody counter-revolution in collaboration with the army and the repressive apparatus of the state. To justify this a posteriori, the social-democratic theoreticians claimed that the 'objective situation was not ripe' for a socialist revolution. But in 1918-19 the same people claimed that the 'socialist republic' was already a fact.

Parliamentary regime

The result was the installation of a parliamentary regime and the legal installation of significant democratic and social gains : the general right to vote including for women, the 8 hour working day and so on. But the result was also the preservation of the domination of the capitalist class and the state apparatus inherited from the Wilhelmian Empire, the establishment of a network of paramilitary ultra-reactionary forces formed by the same pre-fascist 'Freikorps' that the leadership of the SPD under Ebert, Scheidemann and Noske had set up against the 'Spartakists', the workers' vanguard and the radicalised masses. Of course, all these 'partners' remained sworn enemies not only of the

Communism of the Spartakusbund, but also of the workers' movement as a whole, including the SPD and the trade unions under the social-democratic influence.

After 1919, there were still several phases of rise of the mass movement challenging the capitalist regime, beginning with the 'lost revolution' (as Trotsky in any case believed) of 1923. In the years preceding 1933, the very fact of the rise of the Nazi movement was a proof that the denouement of the big social conflicts would not take place in the routine of the parliamentary system. For the rise of a movement of the fascist type signifies an atmosphere of prolonged civil war. The fascist gangs attacked physically, and it was necessary to defend oneself.

The structural crisis of the system and the exasperation of broad masses found no alternative credible response on the part of the political leadership of the majority current in the workers' movement, for the SPD feared struggles which could 'go too far' and challenge a system to which it was linked by the symbiosis of its bureaucratic layer with the thousand and one institutions of the parliamentary system.

Network

The SPD and the workers' movement influenced and led by it was not only the relationship between a political leadership and an electorate, it disposed of a broad network of organised forces, anchored deeply in the workers' town, including organisations of combat like the 'Reichsbanner'. The SPD, fearing above all the loss of its organisational gains, would have been able to appeal effectively for struggle - and there was the positive experience of the 'Kapp Putsch', a reactionary coup d'etat beaten by a general strike. But the other side of the coin was the radicalisation produced by this experience, creating a broad left current alongside of social-democracy, which knew also that in Bolshevik Russia, its Menshevik homologue had lost its influence and was even oppressed by the Communist government.

Trotsky explained that the idea of 'saving the organisation' without mobilisation or struggle was an illusion. The SPD participated in the repression of the Communists with the means of police apparatus of the state, but, here again, these 'partners' hated the social-democrats and the trade unions of the ADGB with a fierce and primitive class hatred.

The SPD continued to bet on the electoral card and the perspective of a conjunctural economic upturn to be able to combat unemployment and thus the demoralisation of a part of the working class. But even if such a conjunctural upturn was not ruled out, there remained the structural crisis, including that of the institutions. In the area of social struggles, the 'moderation' of the SPD only reinforced despair, and despair translated itself politically in the strengthening of the movement of the far right and the Nazis. Even electorally, one had the impression that the SPD, co-responsible for all the growing miseries of the system, would be crushed sooner or later between the "two extremes", the KPD and the NSDAP.

Only Otto Bauer, the recognised leader of Austrian social democracy, had a clear analysis of the fascist danger, fairly close to that of Trotsky: the declassing of a whole petty bourgeois layer by the war and economic crisis led it to break with bourgeois parliamentary democracy; the bourgeoisie's desire to escape its economic crisis through a radical cut in wages and a massive dismantling of social gains, and in order to do this, dismantle the organisational gains of the workers' movement; the necessity of this latter preparing for a physical confrontation by its own means of workers self-organisation.

It is this attitude that led to the heroic struggle of the 'Schutzbund' in February 1934. This orientation was good, but it lacked a perspective of transitional struggle in the area of economic and social demands - then an overall alternative response to the structural crisis of the system.

Third Period

Starting from 1929, the leadership of the KPD applied the policy of the so-called "Third period", which was an ultra-sectarian policy towards the SPD. Trotsky and the Left Opposition concentrated their criticisms on this because, for them, a policy appropriate to the demands of the situation led by the revolutionary party, a party with a considerable mass influence, would have the chance of reversing the situation, defeating "national socialism" and overthrowing the bourgeois regime.

The origin of the notion of the "Third period" (of capitalism after the First World War) is a little nebulous. When Bukharin introduced it at the 6th Congress of the CI in 1928 (officially in the name of the Executive and of the Soviet delegation), nobody was too sure what it meant. He said that the "philosophy" of the Third period was "to stress that the stabilisation of capitalism would have a certain duration". But starting from the tenth plenary session of the Executive of the CI (from July 3 to 19, 1929), the meaning of the expression "Third period" was changed into its opposite.

In the meantime Stalin and his faction had beaten through administrative measures the "right" current in the party (led by Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky) and was ready to bring the other parties of the CI into line. Stalin used the term "Third period" for his own ends. At the latest starting from the tenth plenary session of the executive, there were no longer any genuine political discussions in the CI - all content was artificially put to the service of the internal struggle and of bureaucratic control of the organisation.

Zigzag

The objective of the tenth plenary session was to defeat and expel the "right" ("the friends of Bukharin") in the parties of the CI, after the Left Opposition ("the friends of Trotsky") had already been expelled. But the resulting political line was an ultra left and ultra-sectarian "zigzag" which would have heavy consequences, above all in Germany.

The CI, and thus the KPD, abandoned the tactic of the workers' united front, saying that it was necessary to limit themselves to the "united front from below".

There was then no longer an appeal to common action with the SPD as a whole, but only appeals to common action to the members of the SPD, ignoring the leadership. But it did not stop there. The CI and the KPD denounced the SPD as being a "social-fascist" party to be fought in the same way as the fascists. Thus even unity from below was no longer sought. The social democrats became the "main enemy".

In the Rote Fahne, the central organ of the KPD, one could read that it was necessary to combat the "social-fascists" everywhere, combat the "little Noskes, Zörgiebels and Scheidemanns" in the factories, the schools and even the kindergartens! In the trade unions, the KPD pursued the same logic: it was the "RGO line", the line of "revolutionary opposition" in the mass trade unions of the ADGB, with a split perspective (since the "social-fascists" led these unions with majority support). Thus, the militants of the KPD quickly cut themselves off from the workers' vanguard.

The KPD became a party capable of attracting a mass of youth, unemployed and diverse radicalised elements, as sympathisers and as electorate, but it lost its possibility of rooting itself in the factories and its real capacity of initiative towards the militants of the SPD active in the factories and in the unions.

National liberation

On the other hand, the KPD, to the extent that the Nazis became stronger and more menacing, began to "copy" their style of intervention and propaganda. It even began even to take the same line as them in certain areas, above all in the denunciation of the winners of the First World War and the campaign against the treaty of Versailles and against "reparations": the KPD proclaimed itself for "national liberation"(!). The Nazis, in August 1931, campaigned for a "brown referendum" and for the resignation of the SPD minority government of Prussia. The KPD supported this demand calling the referendum "red" instead of "brown"!

The underestimation of the real fascist danger was systematic. Parliamentary democracy, military dictatorship or fascist regime - it didn't matter much as in any case these are all versions of the same bourgeois state, and the alternative to all that was the dictatorship of the proletariat, the socialist revolution which was on the agenda. The authoritarian regimes of Papen, Brüning, Schleicher (pre-Bonapartist or Bonapartist in the analyses of Trotsky) were already forms of "fascism" (when the SPD in government was already "social-fascism", why not...).

It did not take into account the specific contradiction of fascism, which takes its exceptional force from the fact that it constitutes a movement of enraged "from below", ready for anything, including blind generalised terror. The official line of the KPD culminated in the slogan "after Hitler, us!" The leadership of the KPD had no longer even the project of defeating the Nazis, of preventing them from seizing power.

It said that Hitler in government would quickly lose credibility. It was then a real capitulation "without a fight" which was being prepared, not only on the part of the SPD but also that of the KPD, although with the latter the capitulation was camouflaged by a muscular verbal radicalism.

Against this course, Trotsky defended and understood the old gains of the political analyses of the CI and the lessons of the Italian experience. All the articles and pamphlets by Trotsky and the Left Opposition read today as a rare example of clairvoyance, of good political sense and of theoretical coherence.

The Stalinists denounced Trotsky in their German press and the International as "fascist"(!) because they favoured joint action with the SPD. Trotsky was, of course, a sworn enemy of the bourgeois state, even under its republican-democratic form. But for him, the form of government is of great importance for the workers' movement as a whole, including for its revolutionary component.

Democratic rights

What had to be defended was not the "the Republic" as such, rather the democratic rights which give the working class possibilities of organising and acting, and above all the "islands of workers' democracy" inside the bourgeois parliamentary democratic republic: the multitude of forms of self-organisation represented by the trade unions, the parties, the mutual, cultural, associative organisations. It is not about abstract ideals: the possibility of organising, meeting, acting implies some material bases, some meeting places.

The historic vocation of a fascist mass movement which mobilises the despair of the uprooted petty-bourgeois layers and can draw with it a great number of down and outs, is precisely to destroy these material bases and destroy the workers' movement in its entirety, to stop the working class from acting collectively, from defending its interests, including its immediate and elementary interests.

The taking of power by such a movement (concretely by the Nazis) signified in the eyes of Trotsky and the International Left Opposition a historic defeat for the working class.

The revolutionary party should appeal to the SPD in its entirety and exert a maximum pressure on the leadership to arrive at joint action against the fascist enemy, for even if the leadership of the SPD wished in no way to break the power of the bourgeoisie and fight for a socialist republic, even if its policy is deliberately counter-revolutionary, the SPD as party and workers' movement dominated by it are materially linked to the democratic-parliamentary form of the capitalist system.

Mortal danger

Fascism is then a mortal danger for them as for the revolutionary part of the workers' movement. And to the extent that the revolutionary party succeeds in drawing the SPD into unitary anti-fascist defence struggles but also socio-economic struggles, it can create a different political climate in the whole country. If the mass base of fascism sees the workers' movement unite and act seriously it can quickly be shaken: the petty bourgeois, above all, likes to bet on the "winning horse", as Trotsky explained. The country approached the dénouement of its terrible systemic crisis - either the victory of the Nazis, the destruction of the workers' movement, barbarism, and at the end of the day war, above all against the USSR, or socialist revolution.

But the socialist revolution will not come through making propaganda for socialism. It is necessary to win the majority of the working class, which can draw in the majority of the nation and one can only win it in responding to its elementary needs (starting with the need for self-defence), and doing everything to make it act as a class.

The Left Opposition was not the only Communist current criticising the official line of the KPD. The so-called Right Opposition, led by Brandler and Thalheimer (the KPO), was also opposed to the line of "social fascism" and argued for a policy of the united workers' front as well as for the abandonment of the sectarian line in general and in the mass trade unions in particular. One can pose the question of why the Right Opposition and the Left Opposition, both banned and slandered in the party, did not work together?

To Trotsky, from the point of view of method, the international position was the basis for the national position. The KPO, even after Stalin's break with Bukharin and the 'right', thought there was no real alternative to the policy of the Russian party (including the repression of the Left Opposition!) and the official policy of the CI, whereas its judgement of the policy of the German party led by Thaelmann/Stalin was that this policy led to catastrophe! Since for any Marxist (and for any clear-sighted observer), the outcome in Germany was the key for the future of the international situation, it did not amount to a very coherent position.

Besides the SPD and the KPD, who were the two workers' parties of a mass character, there were also some little independent organisations, above all the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (SAP), born from a left split in the SPD at the end of 1931, with some thousands of members. The SAP was not only favourable to the workers' united front, but took it up as its favourite theme, and since this was even more true of the Vereinigte Linke Opposition (VLO, the name of the Left Opposition in Germany), one can ask why Trotsky and the VLO did not seek to broaden their forces and their audience by joining with the SAP or entering it. Trotsky did not favour "entry" in the KPD and the SPD.

The SPD was a party linked to the system, member of the yellow Second International, he explained, and the KPD is the revolutionary party, member of the red Third International, even if this party and this International are very badly led. But so long as they are not lost to the revolutionary cause by their practice and in the eyes of the broad masses (like the SPD and the Second International in 1914), it is necessary to situate in their camp and work to correct their

policy and replace their leadership.

Propaganda

The SAP, as a small organisation outside of the two big mass parties, said Trotsky, could not claim a special place inside the united front to be built. The propaganda for the workers' united front is not the same thing as the policy of the workers' united front. The SAP had no clear response on the key questions: imminence of the revolution or not, liaison between defence against fascism and counter-offensive or not, perspective of proletarian seizure of power to overcome the crisis of the system or not. In these conditions, propaganda for the united front becomes an attractive, but void of content.

Since the VLO had only around 600 members in 1932 one could ask if it was able to do anything but propaganda. Its approach, to remain turned towards the KPD, persuade its militants that it was necessary to change the policy and the leadership, did not seem very realistic given the relationship of forces, above all if one takes into account the systematic calumnies in the KPD press.

Happily there are some examples (exceptional, of course) of a beginning of implementation of the ideas of Trotsky and the Left Opposition which validate at least partially the course followed, for they show that, if this line had been able to be imposed more widely the seizure of power by Hitler without unitary combat of the workers' movement would not have taken place. [\[5\]](#)

In Bruchsal, a small town in Baden (in the south west of Germany), the VLO had its strongest town section, well implanted among rank and file trades unionists, the unemployed and in the workers' sports associations. It even had some representatives on the local council. The official KPD did not exist in the town. At the end of 1931, the section succeeded in establishing a "committee of action" bringing together the local trade union confederation of the ADGB, the "League of victims of the war and of work", the SPD and the VLO.

This committee could mobilise some 1,500 workers "against the lowering of wages and the imminent threat of the terror of the fascists in government". At the national elections of July 1932, the SPD in Bruchsal obtained 500 votes, whereas the VLO obtained 1,000 for the KPD list. The VLO passed from 50 members in autumn 1931 to around 100 in spring 1932.

Example

Another enlightening example took place in Oranienburg, to the north of Berlin, in the region of Brandenburg. There, at the beginning of 1932, the leader of the "League of struggle against fascism" was expelled from the KPD with 56 of his partisans. Under the influence of Trotsky's writings, they made contact with the VLO and joined it. For May 1 1932, at their initiative, there was the project of a joint SPD-KPD-VLO demonstration, which the official KPD sabotaged.

But the KPD was forced to make a public self-criticism, and it returned to a unitary committee ("workers' struggle committee"). This committee organised groups of protection against fascists, a "proletarian-unitary" list of parents of schoolchildren and ensured the organisational preparation of elections of trade union delegates in the workplaces.

The impact of this example was such that it was taken up in a more or less similar fashion in the neighbouring communes, among others in Sachsenhausen and Zehlendorf. The climate created by this kind of practice is incompatible with a fascist hegemony and at the same time, as shown by the electoral results in Bruchsal, this unitary line of march creates the conditions necessary to break the hegemony of the social-democracy in the workers movement (and to counteract the sectarianism of other forces...).

The official leadership of the KPD since Stalinisation until the terrible defeat of 1933, despite some superficial turns, was absolutely not capable of learning from living experience. The NSDAP enjoyed its first great electoral success on the occasion of the communal elections of December 1929 in Prussia. In March 1930, the predominantly social-democratic Müller government was replaced by the government of Heinrich Brüning (of the Catholic "Zentrum" party), governing by decree.

On September 14 1930 elections for the Reichstag (parliament) were held. The KPD obtained 4.6 million votes (up by 1.3 million compared to the elections of May 1928), the SPD 8.64 million (down 0.6 million) and the NSDAP 6.4 million (up 5.6 million). The tendency was clear: the SPD, party of the "golden mean" wishing to save the Republic of Weimar, and practicing "tolerance" towards the minority government of the Catholic "centre", was under strong pressure from the two "extreme" parties. But the rate of electoral growth of the Communist party was much weaker than that of the Nazi party.

Thus even these simple electoral figures show a serious danger and the necessity of well thought out political initiatives to isolate and combat the Nazis. In May 1932 the government of von Papen was formed, a very reactionary monarchist linked to Hindenburg. This government organised a coup to eliminate the Prussian social-democratic government of Severing in July.

Tendencies

The November 6 1932 elections for the Reichstag gave the following results: KPD nearly 6 million votes, SPD 7.25 million, NSDAP 11.75 million. The same tendencies were reinforced then. On December 2, 1932, the government of general Schleicher, the head of the Reichswehr (army) was formed. It was the last attempt of the traditional réactionary/conservative milieus to find an alternative to a government led by Hitler. But on January 30, 1933, Hindenburg named Hitler as chancellor of a coalition government of the extreme right. This same marshal Hindenburg had won the presidential elections in March and April 1932. It should be recalled that the SPD, in the second round, had called for a vote for him as the "lesser evil" in comparison with Hitler!

And the leadership of the KPD, for whom the governments had already been more or less fascist for some time, did not yet even understand the danger when Hitler became chancellor. The SPD gave no signal for combat under the pretext that the Hitler government was "constitutional" and legal. The KPD, for its part thought that the Hitler government would quickly lose its mass base because it could not realise its demagogic social promises.

After the Reichstag fire and the beginning of the persecution of the Communists, in March 1933 new elections gave 4.8 million votes for the KPD, 7.1 million for the SPD, and 17.2 million for the NSDAP. The time of the true dictatorship of the fascist type had begun. It was the beginning of the end of the of the organised workers' movement of a mass character, in Germany and later elsewhere. But according to the central committee of the KPD - Thaelmann was already imprisoned by the Nazis - these elections "were not a victory of fascism"!

Turning the tide

For Trotsky, there was a chance of turning the tide until the last moment, even at the beginning of 1933. And it is clearly established that the mass of social-democratic workers were ready to fight and awaited the signal from their leadership. The organisations under social-democratic leadership could not only organise a truly general strike, but under the names of the "Reichsbanner" and "Eiserne Front" there were mass combat organisations. The KPD was very strongly isolated from the rank and file of social democracy. Moreover, it had already begun to build "revolutionary trade unions" outside of the ADGB and had become a "party of the unemployed" rather than a "party of workers". Its calling alone for a general strike would not have been effective.

But the will to act together had become very strong at the base, so a call by the leaderships, even at the last minute, would have aroused a formidable mobilisation, including the great majority of employees and unemployed, the poor, the marginalised, with a great attraction even for a part of the radicalised petty bourgeoisie and certainly on a very great part of the youth.

In the SPD, formally, there was a democratic functioning. But in truth, it was a bureaucratic apparatus which led the party in a very authoritarian manner. Education in discipline has a purpose: the will to act effectively. The problem begins when the militants are no longer capable of taking initiatives in an autonomous manner, even when they are persuaded that their very existence is at stake.

In the KPD, "Bolshevisation" (in truth Stalinisation) had made ravages. There were no more internal debates with a real confrontation of ideas. The leadership was not incapable of learning, even if its leader, Thaelmann, was not known for an excessive intellectual capacity. It was the totally undemocratic regime that it had imposed in the party in the image of the Russian party under Stalin which meant it no longer had the means to learn.

The expulsion of all those who criticised the leadership or proposed alternatives had transformed democratic centralism into a bureaucratic "centralism" and an element vital to a revolutionary party had been lost: the capacity to elaborate its political line by taking into account living experiences and the capacities of analysis of its militants.

It is only after the beginning of the massive repression when the leaderships of the SPD and ADGB were still trying to preserve a form of legal organisation through opportunist manoeuvres with Hitler's government that the CI and KPD called on social-democracy to joint action. But it was a "propagandist" appeal, without real attempt to arrive at an agreement. The "united front" between the militants of the SPD and KPD was only realised... in the Nazi concentration camps.

Even after the defeat, the CI was not capable of changing line. The presidium of the executive of the CI declared in April 1933 that the line of the KPD under Thaelmann's leadership had been "completely correct", that Hitler would not be in power for long, and so on. The 13th plenary session of the CI executive (November/December 1933!) repeated this judgement. Kuusinen said in the "discussion": "Trotsky has written that there has been a "catastrophe"... But the overwhelming majority of the labouring masses of Germany think completely otherwise...".

After this official "balance sheet" of the CI was in no way contradicted in the sections outside of Russia and Germany, Trotsky drew the conclusion that the capitulation without struggle before Hitler and the defeat without sincere balance sheet marked the end of the Communist International as revolutionary factor. The Left Opposition could no longer consider itself as a faction (albeit expelled) of the Stalinised official Communist movement. It was only from this moment that Trotsky and his followers proclaimed the necessity of building a new revolutionary International, the Fourth.

Popular Front

It was only at the 7th congress of the CI in 1935 that the "correct line" of combat against fascism was changed. The era of the policy of the "Popular Front" began. Now, all of a sudden, the united front against fascism became the "correct line". But it was a united front not with merely the whole of social-democracy, but also with the "democratic" or "progressive" or "antifascist" component of the bourgeoisie!

The united front in its "Popular Front" version means, at the end of the day, the submission of the social-democratic and Communist parties to the demands of the bourgeois parties and the self-limitation of the workers demands, meaning that it was out of the question to attack private property.

Yet, at certain moments of the struggle, above all if it takes the form of a prolonged civil war as in Spain, victory can only be assured by measures of expropriation of the big capitalists and/or big landowners. Defeat comes then not from the fact that the united front is not realised, but from the fact that a certain stage of the process, the road to the resolution of the conflict in favour of the antifascist camp is barred by a too great respect for private property.

But there is also a "theoretical" link between the ultra left phase and the turn towards the policy of the Popular Front which often escapes those who praise the wisdom of the latter: this link is the impoverishment of the comprehension and the definition of the phenomenon of fascism itself.

Mass base

Already in the "third period", the definition of fascism was that it amounted simply to the "terrorist dictatorship of finance capital". The distinguishing aspect of a fascist dictatorship from a "classic" military or Bonapartist dictatorship, the mass base in the petty-bourgeoisie, which had already been understood in the CI in 1922, had been completely "forgotten". This led to a complete theoretical disarmament vis-à-vis the real fascist danger.

In 1935, the famous definition of the 7th congress of the Stalinised CI, formulated by Dimitrov, was virtually the same. It was a dictatorship "of the most reactionary, the most chauvinist etc. component" of financial capital. But now, the political finality was to justify a front so broad that it divided the bourgeoisie in two and isolates then its "most reactionary, aggressive etc." sectors. Indeed, the necessity of neutralising or attracting the petty bourgeoisie implies a working class in action for its own interests, not halting like cowards before the doors of the capitalist tabernacle: indeed, this approach is excluded by the policy of the Popular Front.

Trotsky's definition of fascism is rooted in the tradition of thought prevalent in the CI before its Stalinisation. He writes for example: "Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force and of police terror. Fascism is a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society. The task of fascism lies not only in destroying the Communist vanguard but in holding the entire class in a state of forced disunity. To this end the physical annihilation of the most revolutionary section of the workers does not suffice. It is also necessary to smash all independent and voluntary organisations, to demolish all the defensive bulwarks of the proletariat, and to uproot whatever has been achieved during three quarters of a century by the Social Democracy and the trade unions." [6]

"Fascism is a specific means of mobilising and organising the petty bourgeoisie in the social interests of finance capital." [7]

After the seizure of power, Trotsky explains, there is necessarily a reflux of the fascist mass movement. Social demagogy can not be transformed into real "anti-capitalist" measures. The fascist regime "bureaucratizes itself" in some fashion and can become a form of specific Bonapartist dictatorship (the Francoist regime in its final years can be characterised thus).

But the taking of power on a wave of mobilisations, pushed by a mass movement, has consequences. First, because the leaders are in the image of the phantasms they evoke in the soul of the enraged petty bourgeois. Then, because a repression is much more complete and "totalitarian" when it rests above all on a network of informers in every corner and recess of society.

Against the Stalinist simplifiers, the aspect of the mass character of fascism as movement of the desperate had to be stressed. Against the liberal bourgeois ideologues and most social-democrats, Trotsky stressed the function of fascism in the class struggle, for the physical destruction of the workers' movement allows a historic victory to the bourgeoisie in the area of wages, social protection, the capacity to launch itself into warlike adventures. It can ratchet up the rate of exploitation of wage-earners, and at the same time enlarge the global field of action of imperialist capital in a given country.

There is then little point in "combating" fascism by moralising about violence and so on while swearing fealty to the values of capitalist, democratic and liberal society. If there is already a dangerous fascist movement, it means the system is in crisis, and that only a radical alternative can attract the masses, above all the youth. This means that one is not far from a situation of civil war and that it is necessary to prepare, basing oneself on the interests of the working class, which is alone capable of destroying a movement made up of what Trotsky called "human dust".

The last card

Trotsky was conscious of the fact that formulae like "combat organisation of the bourgeoisie" should not be interpreted in a mechanical manner. It was not about decisions taken at some "round table". The Mussolinis and Hitlers were not "waiters" receiving "orders" from the bourgeoisie. Trotsky knew that fascism is only the "last card" for the bourgeoisie. The fascist movement develops from below.

From a certain moment, the bourgeoisie can decide to tolerate the fascist seizure of power, and a part of the bourgeoisie can support or co-organise this seizure of power, and the bourgeoisie as a whole can co-operate with a regime which substantially weakens wage-earners vis-à-vis the employers. But the bourgeoisie, so doing, confides political power to a personnel which dispossesses the entire nation politically, and thus also the bourgeoisie.

And in the months preceding the dénouement, it has no guarantee that fascism will emerge victorious from the conflict. In Germany, the big bourgeoisie was afraid that the coming to power of Hitler would unleash a generalised civil war and that the proletariat could emerge victorious. That is why Hitler was truly the "very last card": all the others had been tried before.

The comprehension of the fascist phenomenon shown by Trotsky included also the aspects of "mass psychology", of desperate elements allying themselves to a barbarous cause. The fascist ideology is a conglomerate of resentments and allusions to a distant past. In the eyes of a modernist rationalism, it includes very many archaic elements. There is the phantasm of the heroic warrior rather more compatible with bows, arrows and axes than with machine guns, canons and tanks.

There is the ideal of the pioneering peasant organically linked to the land that he cultivates which does not go well with an industrialised society in which the town dominates the country. There is a cult of race and/or the nation which denies the supranational reality created by the world capitalist market. There is a cult of patriarchy and the family which holds to the image of an idealised past and which does not fit comfortably with the crisis of the family structure and traditional roles engendered by industrialised capitalist society.

Trotsky explained it by a social reality that should not be identified with a pure model of capitalism, but seen rather as a society governed by the capitalist mode of production, in which all kinds of phenomena inherited from bygone forms of societies survive, which is itself full of archaisms and can then at any moment bring to the surface phenomena which seem very outdated.

Above all in periods of crisis and turbulence - with "normal" securities and stabilities shaken - the search for points of support, images projected, heroes from the past, is typical. Fascism systematically replaces rational political action by the direction of phantasms with the deliberate goal (articulated openly by Hitler in "Mein Kampf") of manipulating people.

The first lesson to draw from it is to in no way copy it. We must defend a style of action and political communication which targets the capacities of rational judgement of interests, of ends and means to choose in relation to the ends and the obstacles which oppose them.

At the beginning of this presentation we saw that the debate on fascism and the contribution of Trotsky to its understanding is not only of historic interest. There are also incorrect appreciations still current today that Trotsky fought against. One of them is "pan-fascism", which sees "fascism" in each act of repression, in each group or party of the far right or in each police state or military dictatorship, even in the poor countries. To see fascism everywhere is to repeat a grave error of the KPD before 1933: one underestimates the real danger. In Turkey for example, many organisations of the far left opposed to the Kémalist regime believing themselves to be fighting a real fascist dictatorship. In truth the real fascism ("grey") had its rise still to come.

Fascisation

In Germany (and in other countries), in the 1970s, some far left groups like the Komunistische Bund (KB) borrowed the notion of "fascisation" from the old Stalinist arsenal and thought that the bourgeois parliamentary regime could, little by little, with the help of reinforcements of the executive and the adoption of repressive legislation, become transformed into a fascist regime. To sound a false alarm means, among others, that nobody will listen when the real alarm sounds.

Trotsky would probably not have liked talk of "Trotsky's theory of fascism". There is not really a theory specific to Trotsky, but rather a reflexive and political continuity of Trotsky with the Communist movement before its Stalinisation. It is not really a codified theory, but rather a coherent ensemble of political analyses, political interventions and generalisations useful to the understanding and combating better fascism.

If we wish to use the heritage of Trotsky in this area for our antifascist struggle today, some caveats should be entered:

- ▶ some aspects of reality have changed significantly. Today the degree of activity and organisation (and armament!) of members of the traditional big left parties, above all social-democracy, is much weaker than in the time of Trotsky.

Understanding fascism in order to fight it

- ▶ Society as a whole has greatly changed. There are new forms of atomisation in the workplace and beyond. The "traditional" working class no longer has the same weight among wage-earners in the broad sense of the word.
- ▶ There is once more great poverty and misery, even in the rich countries. But the poverty of a working class family, unemployed or not, at the time of the Weimar Republic was all the same entirely another thing than what exists today; and the despair of the demobilised sub-officer, ready to fight in the street against the "reds", is not yet equalled by the sentiments of the majority of those who vote for Le Pen for example.
- ▶ Trotsky's slogan "dictatorship of the proletariat or fascist dictatorship!" which seemed so justified in the 1930s should not lead us to systematically organise our thought and thus our agitation in opposed simple alternatives. Very often, the concrete historic outcome is a third unforeseen variant.

For Trotsky, a real policy of the united front could only be a policy of real political-practical initiatives, of small scale unity in action, of the task of convincing the members of a reformist party: are you ready to act together with us in the sense of immediate common interests or not?

The efficient implementation of a united front is moreover not possible on the basis simply of the general principle. One is forced to respond to changing concrete situations. There is then also a useful heritage from Trotsky in combating false "orthodoxies" (even Trotskyist ones): there is no way to escape the necessity of reflecting each time anew on the dynamic of a given situation and on the initiatives to take.

Except that, without taking on the experiences and the best politico-theoretical elaborations of the past, it is still more difficult. It is then very important to study, for example, Trotsky's writings on Germany and discuss parallels and differences with the problems which are posed to us today.

[1] Translated into English as *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1971.

[2] Pierre Frank, *Histoire de l'Internationale communiste*, Éditions la brèche, 1979, volume 1, pp 215-234.

[3] "What is National Socialism?" June 1933, in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, op. cit., p. 404.

[4] Trotsky had already used this expression in 1936 in *The Revolution Betrayed*: "The regime had become "totalitarian" in character several years before this word arrived from Germany".

[5] Wolfgang Alles, *Zur Politik und Geschichte der deutschen Trotskisten ab 1930*, Frankfurt, ISP Verlag, 1987.

[6] "What Next?" in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, op. cit., p.144.

[7] Bonapartism and Fascism, in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, op. cit., p.441.