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Retrieved on 23 January 2024 from anarchism.pageabode.com.
Published in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 3–22.
PDF available online at blackflag.org.uk.

theanarchistlibrary.org

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capitalism economically" and had been under Trotsky when a "bureaucratic machine was created, appalling in its inefficiency, corruption, brutality."[94] Indeed, her accounts of the regime are more useful to understanding its degeneration than Trotsky's *post hoc* apologetics for they were informed by Bakunin's prescient polemics with Marx and the critiques of Marxism raised by later anarchists like Kropotkin and Malatesta. As Kropotkin said: "We have always pointed out the effects of Marxism in action. Why be surprised now?"[95]

[94] "There Is No Communism in Russia", *To Remain Silent is Impossible: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in Russia* (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority!, 2013), 226, 220.

[95] Quoted by Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London: Active Distribution, 2017), 58.

An article exploring Trotsky's (limited) opposition to Stalinism and showing that it reflected Bolshevik orthodoxy in terms of advocating the dictatorship of the party and one-man management. Needless to say, almost all Trotskyist accounts fail to mention this. It first appeared in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2023).

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Trotsky's "New Course" articles which saw the beginnings of his opposition to developments within the USSR which led to the rise of Stalin, his exile in February 1929 and eventual assassination in 1940.[1] We can expect a raft of articles from what remains of the Trotskyist sects across the world marking the event and suggesting it represented more than it actually did. Here, we will clarify the nature of Trotsky's opposition to Stalinism and debunk the exaggerations and selectiveness of previous hagiographies – not to mention the distortions and inventions.

Trotsky's "Left Opposition" of 1923–7 is undoubtedly the best known of the various dissident groupings within the Russian Bolsheviks which developed after 1917. This is mainly because it spawned numerous Trotskyist sects across the globe as well as the "Fourth International". It is also the one most lauded by subsequent dissident Leninists – unsurprisingly, as earlier ones developed when Lenin and Trotsky held the reins and so are either ignored or dismissed in passing.[2]

An American Trotskyist suggests that it was only "[a]fter Lenin's death" that "the Russian Revolution's goal of soviet

[1] These articles were published in *Pravda* in December 1923 and issued, with additional material appended, as a book in January 1924.

[2] Space excludes discussing these oppositions beyond noting that they tended to focus their critique on the economic policies of the regime and supported the party's monopoly of power. This includes the best known of these earlier groups, the "Workers' Opposition".

democracy and the commitment to a liberating revolution worldwide gave way to a bureaucratic dictatorship under Joseph Stalin".[3] Chris Harman likewise argued that it was after "Lenin's illness and subsequent death" when the "principles of October were abandoned one by one." He adds that "there was always an alternative to Stalinism. It meant, in the late 1920s, returning to genuine workers' democracy and consciously linking the fate of Russia to the fate of world revolution." The "historical merit of the 'Left Opposition'" was that it "did link the question of the expansion of industry with that of working-class democracy and internationalism."[4]

Other Leninists make similar claims. Victor Serge, a member of the "Left Opposition" in Russia and then Trotskyist in exile, stated that its programme was "the reform of the Soviet State by a return to working-class democracy."[5] Discussing attempts to rehabilitate Trotsky in the 1980s, Hillel Ticktin asserted that "[a]lthough the left opposition is history, a working-class critique is not, and the left opposition produced the first such critique."[6] David McNally proclaims its importance in rousing rhetoric:

> Grouped around Leon Trotsky were the forces known as the 'Left Opposition'… By the mid-1920s, the programme of the Left Opposition had two central planks. First, democracy had to be re-established in the Bolshevik party and in the mass organisations such as the trade unions and the soviets. Secondly, the Soviet gov-

[3] Paul Le Blanc, *Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US History* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 218.

[4] *Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 1974), 14, 19.

[5] *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 256.

[6] *Origins of the crisis in the USSR: essays on the political economy of a disintegrating system* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 78.

ers Group and Workers Truth in 1923 (as sanctioned by Trotsky[92]). Some were simply murdered, many more arrested and joined anarchist, Menshevik, Social Revolutionary and other dissidents in prison camps from which few returned. Outside the USSR, the same slanders made against earlier anarchist critics of Bolshevism were now made against Trotsky and his followers, often by the very same people.[93] When they had power, such as in Spain, they murdered their critics whether anarchists or dissident Leninists like the POUM. Which shows a difference between Lenin's and Stalin's regime: under Lenin, the opposition *outside* the party was brutally repressed, under Stalin these methods were applied to oppositions *within* it.

Finally, it must be stressed that anarchists like Emma Goldman had no difficulty in recognising that Stalin's Russia was "an absolute despotism politically and the crassest form of state

[92] "Trotsky, in the very letters to the politburo in which he fired his first broadsides against the 'unhealthy regime' and lack of internal party democracy, supported repressive action against the far left." Indeed, he "welcomed an instruction by Dzerzhinskii to party members immediately to report 'any groupings within the party', i.e. the Workers Group and Workers Truth, not only to the CC [Central Committee] but also to the GPU [the secret police], and emphasized that making such reports was 'the elementary duty of every party member'." (Simon Pirani, *The Russian revolution in retreat, 1920–24: Soviet workers and the new Communist elite* [New York: Routledge, 2008], 215)

[93] Emma Goldman recounts how she was accused of being well-paid by the capitalist press for her warnings and she had "receiving support from the American Secret Service Department" while in Russia (*Living My Life* [New York: Dover Books, 1970] 2: 938, 954). The source of the latter claim, William Z Foster (a former anarchist-syndicalist) later denounced Trotsky, "a petty bourgeois individualist intellectual", for making a "bargain with the fascists", being "paid highly for his writings by the bourgeois press" and becoming "one of [the] hired capitalist slanderers of the Soviet Union." Foster compared him to Goldman, who he said was "reaping a golden harvest from Hearst for her counter-revolutionary attacks" upon the Soviet Government and who, "like Trotsky, covered [her] political surrender with a cloud of revolutionary phrases." (*Questions and Answers on the Piatakov-Radek Trial* [New York City: Workers Library Publishers, 1937], 10, 11, 30, 16–7)

ratus to act in any other fashion than according to their social position – yet Trotsky does so. Apparently being part of the vanguard party – or being part of an immense social institution policed by this small body – negates the objective pressures created by such hierarchies and the authoritarian (and so inevitably exploitative) social relations they produce.

As such, Trotsky failed to understand the "social forces" at work in Russia for he failed to understand the class nature of the bureaucracy. He failed to understand that the bureaucracy overcame the party because the party itself was – inevitably – corrupted by the social position it held. Moreover, it *does* matter if workplaces are run by their workers for if they do not then someone else does – replacing capitalists with state bureaucrats just changes the face of the boss as anarchists have been arguing since Proudhon. That the political power of the party could not withstand the economic power given to the bureaucracy by that party's policies should not come as a surprise.

Given the identical social relations between Leninism and Stalinism, all that is left to the supporters of Leninism seeking to differentiate it from Stalinism is to focus on the regime within the Communist Party itself. It is stressed that the Bolshevik party under Lenin was far more democratic than under Stalin and, moreover, the repression of the late 1920s onwards simply did not exist. True, although the suppression of opposition currents within Bolshevism did not start under Stalinism for it had existed to some degree from the start. Indeed, "Left Opposition" faced the same bureaucratic manoeuvres used under Lenin and Trotsky to weaken oppositional groups within the party.

Of course, the Stalinists did not stop there. Its members experienced the same repression by the secret police faced by non-Bolshevik groups as well as the dissident Bolsheviks of the Work-

> ernment had to abandon all such retrograde notions as socialism in one country…
>
> During the terrible decades of the 1920s and 1940s when Stalin was committing barbarous crimes in the name of 'socialism', the lone voice of Leon Trotsky kept alive some of the basic elements of socialism from below… It was Trotsky's great virtue to insist against all odds that socialism was rooted in the struggle for human freedom… Throughout the 1920s and until his death at the hands of Stalinist agent in 1940, Trotsky fought desperately to build a revolutionary socialist movement based on the principles of Marx and Lenin… Trotsky's contribution to keeping alive the socialist flame during the 1930s… insured him a lasting place in the history of international socialism[7]

Unfortunately, such claims are not true. As Serge himself noted elsewhere, Trotsky may have "ever since 1923 [been] for the renovation of the party through inner party democracy and the struggle against bureaucracy" but "the greatest reach of boldness of the Left Opposition in the Bolshevik Party was to demand the restoration of inner-Party democracy, and it never dared dispute the theory of single-party government".[8]

Here we show that this was, indeed, the case and that Trotsky was no advocate of freedom or "Socialism from Below". He did not question the fundamental features of the Soviet Union and sought a change in who was in charge rather than its class structure. This

[7] *Socialism from Below* (Chicago: International Socialism Organization, 1984). This pamphlet is mostly a rehash of Hal Draper's *The Two Souls of Socialism* (1966), including Draper's diatribe on anarchism based on distorted account of the ideas of Proudhon and Bakunin (the former based on J.S. Schapiro's knowingly misleading account of Proudhon's ideas – see "Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Harbinger of Anarchism", *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Volume 1 Number 2 [Summer 2021]).

[8] *The Serge-Trotsky Papers* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), 201, 181.

should be unsurprising as he was a leading Bolshevik who, like others (and before Stalin) had had two towns named after him: Ivanshchenkovo from 1919 until 1929 and Gatchina between 1923 and 1929.[9]

Before *The New Course*

Space precludes discussing the Bolshevik regime in detail nor its onslaught on workers' democracy – in the soviets, factory committees and armed forces – which started in early 1918.

Trotsky – just appointed as People's Commissar of Army and Navy Affairs – ended democracy within the armed forces in mid-March 1918: "the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree."[10] The following month saw him arguing that once elected the government was to be given total power to appoint people as required as it is "better able to judge in the matter than" the masses. The workers were expected to simply obey their public servants until such time as they "dismiss that government and appoint another." Trotsky raised the question of whether it was possible for the government to act "against the interests of the labouring and peasant masses" and answered no for "there can be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members".[11] The weakness of this can be

[9] G.R.F. Bursa, "Political Changes of Names of Soviet Towns", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 1985), 165, 169. Ivanshchenkovo served as a base for secret military production until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. This renaming after Trotsky was quite fitting, as he had sanctioned the use of chemical warfare against the Kronstadt rebels in 1921. (Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* [New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1970], 211–2).

[10] *How the Revolution Armed: the military writings and speeches of Leon Trotsky* (London: New Park Publications, 1979) 1: 47.

[11] *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 113.

> lessen the guilt of Leon Trotsky as one of the actors in the revolutionary drama[91]

This was hidden by various Left Oppositionists – including Trotsky himself – who revised history to exclude their own role in creating the evils they now denounced. All that they could argue is that their industrialisation would have been less brutal, less oppressive and with fewer privileges for the bureaucracy… yet a nicer ruling class is still a ruling class.

Given this, it is easy to understand why we will ignore as fundamentally meaningless the pseudo-scientific comments on the relative weight of "social forces" (such as Russian "economic backwardness") in the rise of the bureaucracy so beloved by certain Trotskyists. This is because, ultimately, it is speculation on what could be the "objective" conditions required for a benevolent (party) dictatorship and state-capitalist economy to exist – a pointless task, for obvious reasons. While popular resistance and protest can make a ruling class less oppressive and exploitative, it is something else completely to suggest that it can stop a ruling class being exploitative and oppressive *as such*. However, as Trotsky refused to recognise the class nature of the bureaucracy – and the identical social relations that existing under Lenin and which Trotsky did not question – perhaps this is unsurprising after all. Indeed, perhaps all the talk of "social forces" and such like is just an attempt to obscure the real issue – the actual, objective, class relationships under the Bolshevik regime (the state bureaucracy as a class in itself with its own interests).

In addition, it should be basic materialism that it is a person's real social position which shape their consciousness. As such, it is illusory to expect the rulers of a party dictatorship, the managers of state-capitalist firms or bureaucrats in a highly centralised appa-

[91] "Trotsky Protests Too Much", *Writings of Emma Goldman: Essays on Anarchism, Feminism, Socialism, and Communism* (St. Petersburg, Florida: Red and Black Publishers, 2013), 251–2

> was saying an absurd thing about the "historical absurdity". In history there is no absurdity. An autocratic bureaucracy is a class, therefore it is not absurd that it should exist in a society where classes remain: bureaucratic and proletarian. If the USSR were a "classless" society, it would also be a society without a bureaucratic autocracy, which is the natural fruit of the permanent existence of the State… The bureaucratic wound has not been opened and infected by Stalinism: it is contemporaneous with the Bolshevik dictatorship.[90]

It may have been that if the Trotskyists had won the inter-bureaucracy struggle in the mid-1920s then the Soviet Union could have avoided the horrors of Stalinism but it would have remained a state capitalist party dictatorship and, as such, a class system in which the few exploit, oppress and repress the many. That this few would have exploited the many less ruthlessly and aimed to impose similar regimes internationally rather than concentrating on building "socialism in one country" does not mean much. As Emma Goldman noted:

> In point of truth I see no marked difference between the two protagonists of the benevolent system of the dictatorship except that Leon Trotsky is no longer in power to enforce its blessings, and Josef Stalin is… Stalin did not come down as a gift from heaven to the hapless Russian people. He is merely continuing the Bolshevik traditions, even if in a more relentless manner… I admit, the dictatorship under Stalin's rule has become monstrous. That does not, however,

[90] Camillo Berneri, "The State and Classes", *The State – Or Revolution: Selected Works of Camillo Berneri* (London: Freedom Press, 2023), 87.

seen from the history of trade unionism which is full of examples of committees betraying their membership.[12]

Within months of these comments, the regime had become a state-capitalist party dictatorship with the imposition of "one-man management" within industry and the gerrymandering, packing and dissolving of the local soviets in the spring of 1918 as well as the packing of the 5th All-Russian Soviet Congress of early July 1918 which denied the Left-SRs their rightful majority. With the building of a new State and a centralised vision of "socialism" based on State ownership and control, the numbers, power and privileges of the bureaucracy rose and rose. The new regime met with worker and peasant resistance which – like the State repression protest faced – started before the outbreak of the Civil War at the end of May 1918 nor linked to its phases nor did it end with the defeat of Wrangel in November 1920 for its continued well into the 1920s.[13]

Ideology soon followed practice, with Victor Serge later recalling how "at the start of 1919 I was horrified to read an article by Zinoviev… on the monopoly of the party in power."[14] He failed to mention how well he hid that horror.[15] Trotsky, as a leading Bolshevik, embraced the party's political and economic policies. This can be seen in his infamous book, *Terrorism and Communism*. Written in 1920 to refute Karl Kautsky's critique of Bolshevism from a

[12] Interestingly, Marx dismissed Bakunin's prophetic warnings that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would become the "dictatorship *over* the proletariat" by asking: "Can it really be that in a trade union, for example, the entire union forms its executive committee". (*The Marx-Engels Reader* [London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1978], 544)

[13] See section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2008). This is summarised in "The State and Revolution: Theory and Practice", *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution* (Edinburgh/Chico: AK Press, 2017).

[14] *The Serge-Trotsky Papers*, 188. In his memoirs, Serge dates the article as January 1919 and notes its title: "The Monopoly of Power". (*Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 69)

[15] See: "Victor Serge: The Worst of the Anarchists", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 61 (Winter 2014); "The Trotskyist School of Falsification", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 79 (Spring 2020).

pre-war Marxist orthodox position, Trotsky has no qualms defending the party's dictatorship:

> In the hands of the party is concentrated the general control… it has the final word in all fundamental questions… the last word belongs to the Central Committee of the party … Such a regime is possible only in the presence of the unquestioned authority of the party, and the faultlessness of its discipline…
>
> The exclusive role of the Communist Party under the conditions of a victorious proletarian revolution is quite comprehensible… The revolutionary supremacy of the proletariat pre-supposes within the proletariat itself the political supremacy of a party, with a clear programme of action and a faultless internal discipline …
>
> We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the clarity of its theoretical vision and its strong revolutionary organisation that the party has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour. In this "substitution" of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all.[16]

He argued against those who suggested that the dictatorship should be carried out by the whole class: "It is not easy to under-

[16] *Terrorism and Communism*: *a reply to Karl Kautsky* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 107–9.

> by one… The very feeble echoes of their critique of the bureaucracy that can be found later in the (Trotskyist) 'Left Opposition' after 1923 do not have the same signification. Trotsky was opposed to the *bad policies* of the bureaucracy and to the excesses of its power. He never put into question its essential nature. Until practically the end of his life, he never brought up the questions raised by the various oppositions of the period from 1918 to 1921 (in essence: 'Who manages production?' and 'What is the proletariat supposed to do during the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' other than work and follow the orders of 'its' party?').[89]

While previous oppositional groups like the "Left Communists" and "Workers' Opposition" had challenged Lenin's state capitalist economic policies while upholding the Bolshevik monopoly of power (implicitly or explicitly), Trotsky did not even manage that. His opposition was firmly limited to internal reforms to the party which he hoped would result in wider participation in the soviets and trade unions. Just as he did not bother to explain why continuing party dictatorship would reinvigorate the soviets or unions, he did not explain how benevolent dictatorship was possible nor why an economic regime marked by wage-labour employed by the state rather than by capitalists would not be exploitative. Instead, these positions were simply asserted – for they were, after all, Leninist orthodoxy. That the Bolshevik vision of socialism was simply state-capitalism was something he could never see and this produced a limited critique:

> When Trotsky wrote (6 September 1935): "The historical absurdity of an autocratic bureaucracy in a 'classless' society cannot and will not endlessly endure," he

[89] "The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy", *Blood-Stained,* 289.

Opposition] from his exile… to the effect that, since the Right represented the danger of a slide towards capitalism, we had to support the 'Centre' – Stalin – against it."[87]

Serge's comments on "working-class democracy" are somewhat incredulous, given (as noted above) that he knew fine well that the Opposition did not stand for it. This conviction was so strong that, even in the prison camps, "almost all the Trotskyists continued to consider that 'freedom of party' would be 'the end of the revolution.' 'Freedom to choose one's party – that is Menshevism,' was the Trotskyists' final verdict." The similarities did not stop there, for the Trotskyists "who were in prison for anti-Stalinism could find nothing better to do than to indulge in Stalinism themselves [in their political groups] while in prison. This absurdity was only apparent; it merely served to prove that between Trotskyism and Stalinism there were many points in common". The outlook of the Trotskyist majority "was not very different from that of the Stalinist bureaucracy; they were slightly more polite and human, that was all."[88]

These similarities reflect that both shared the same Bolshevik ideological legacy and same class position. Yet even within these limits, Trotsky's opposition was by far the weakest politically as it questioned far fewer things. As Cornelius Castoriadis points out:

> From the beginning of 1918 until the banning of factions in March 1921, tendencies within the Bolshevik party were formed that, with farsightedness and sometimes an astonishing clarity, expressed opposition to the Party's bureaucratic line and to its very rapid bureaucratisation. These were the 'Left Communists' (at the beginning of 1918), then the 'Democratic Centralist' tendency (1919), and finally the 'Workers' Opposition' (1920–21)… these oppositions were defeated one

[87] Serge, 252, 253.
[88] Ciliga, 280, 218, 263.

stand what actually they imagine when they say this. The dictatorship of the proletariat, in its very essence, signifies the immediate supremacy of the revolutionary vanguard, which relies upon the heavy masses, and, where necessary, obliges the backward tail to dress by the head."[17] This rejection of democracy also applied to the workplace:

> our Party Congress… expressed itself in favour of the principle of one-man management in the administration of industry… It would be the greatest possible mistake… to consider this decision as a blow to the independence of the working class… It would consequently be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production… and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered… I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully.[18]

Thus the workers were excluded from economic power which rested in the hands of the State (that is, its bureaucrats) and, as under private capitalism, had two roles – follow orders and work hard. In this, as with party dictatorship, he was simply repeating Bolshevik orthodoxy – Lenin had been arguing for state-appointed one-man management (armed with "dictatorial" authority) since

[17] Trotsky, 110.
[18] Trotsky, 161–3.

the spring of 1918.[19] Trotsky did not deny how authoritarian this regime was:

> Both economic and political compulsion are only forms of the expression of the dictatorship of the working class in two closely connected regions… the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State… Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction… No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour.[20]

An example of this regime was provided in early 1920 when Trotsky argued that the working class "cannot be left wandering round all over Russia. They must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers" and that "[d]eserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps".[21] It would be churlish, but essential, to note the links of this draconian regime to the "[e]stablishment of industrial armies" and the need to "centralise all instruments of production… of credit… of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State" advocated by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*.[22]

[19] Maurice Brinton, "The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control", *For Workers' Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* (Chico: AK Press, 2020).

[20] Trotsky, 169–170.

[21] Quoted by Brinton, 451.

[22] *Marx-Engels Reader*, 490.

important and, in fact, was applicable *only* within the party. The privileged place of the party explains Trotsky's unwillingness to call on social forces outside it to resist the bureaucracy (which existed in spite of the Bolshevik regime's longstanding repression of strikes and other protests). Likewise with the capitulation of many of the "Left Opposition" to Stalin once he started a policy of industrialisation. As Ante Ciliga saw first-hand in the prison camps:

> the majority of the Opposition were… looking for a road to reconciliation; whilst criticising the Five Year Plan, they put stress not on the part of exploited class played by the proletariat, but on the technical errors made by the Government *qua* employer in the matter of insufficient harmony within the system and inferior quality of production. This criticism did not lead to an appeal to the workers against the Central Committee and against bureaucratic authority; it restricted itself to proposing amendments in a programme of which the essentials were approved. The socialist nature of State industry was taken for granted. They denied the fact that the proletariat was exploited; for "we were in a period of proletarian dictatorship."[86]

As Serge noted, "[f]rom 1928–9 onwards, the Politbureau turned to its own use the great fundamental ideas of the now expelled Opposition (excepting, of course, that of working-class democracy) and implemented them with ruthless violence." While acknowledging that the Stalinists had applied these ideas in a more extreme form than the Opposition planned, he also acknowledged that "[b]eginning in those years, a good many Oppositionists rallied to the 'general line' and renounced their errors since, as they put it, 'After all, it is our programme that is being applied.'" Nor did it help that at "the end of 1928, Trotsky wrote to [the

[86] Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma* (London: Ink Links Ltd, 1979), 213.

they saw it as treason against them; which in a sense it was, since the Opposition itself belonged to the ruling bureaucracy."[83]

Like Lenin, the "Left Opposition" did *not* question the Bolshevik's monopoly of power and explicitly supported the idea of party dictatorship. This fact helps explains what Harman was puzzled by, namely that Trotsky "continued to his death to harbour the illusion that somehow, despite the lack of workers' democracy, Russia was a 'workers' state.'"[84] Strangely, Harman does not explain why Russia was a "workers' state" under Lenin and Trotsky, given its "lack of workers' democracy" from mid-1918 onwards. Like Trotsky, he avoided looking at the social relations under Lenin in case obvious similarities were noticed to those under Stalin. Yet this is a common feature of Leninists – who somehow manage to combine statements on how socialism *has* to be democratic to count as socialist with support for the Bolshevik dictatorship under Lenin and Trotsky because it was "socialist". Such double-think is allowed because of nonsense by their party's leading members about the regime only abandoning the "principles of October" after Lenin's death.[85]

For Trotsky like the rest of the Communist Party including its "Left Opposition", *genuine* workers' democracy was *not* considered

[83] *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 225.

[84] Harman, 20.

[85] Likewise with notions that there was state-capitalist "counter-revolution" only when Stalin came to power in 1928, an event which was "not violent in the classic sense" due to the working class having "few forces with which to resist the growing power of the bureaucracy." (Harman, 14) In reality, the Bolsheviks had been repressing working class resistance (strikes, protests) from 1918 onwards which reached a climax with the martial law imposed across Russia in early 1921 – a counter-revolution in the "classic sense" of troops in the streets which secured the bureaucracy in its position against the only force which could displace it, the working class. The regime continued to repress workers' strikes and protests after 1921 and so the "few forces" Harman bemoans was not a natural occurrence but rather the product of ten years of Bolshevik rule. That Stalinist repression was undoubtedly worse does not mean the class structure of the regime somehow changed.

Such a regime was beneficial in all aspects of life for "the striving of the military organization to bring clearness, definiteness, exactness of relations and responsibilities, to the highest degree of development" meant that "every class prefers to have in its service those of its members who, other things being equal, have passed through the military school… This experience is a great and valuable experience. And when a former regimental commissary returns to his trade union, he becomes not a bad organizer."[23]

Against those who argued that by "[d]estroying or driving underground the other parties, you have thereby prevented their political competition with you, and consequently you have deprived yourselves of the possibility of testing your line of action" Trotsky replied by pointing to the efficiency of Bolshevik repression: "In a period in which… the political struggle swiftly passes into a civil war, the ruling party has sufficient material standard by which to test its line of action, without the possible circulation of Menshevik papers. Noske crushes the Communists, but they grow. We have suppressed the Mensheviks and the SRs – and they have disappeared. This criterion is sufficient for us." From this he concluded that Bolshevism "expresses the interests of historical development."[24] Needless to say, he did not repeat this "might-makes-right" criteria when the Stalinists made the Trotskyists disappear in the 1920s and 1930s.

Of course, this was written during the Civil War and may be excused in terms of the circumstances in which it was written. However, this ignores the awkward fact that Trotsky's arguments reflected the theoretical conclusions required to produce what was considered as a *successful* revolution by him and other leading Bolsheviks.

This dismissal of working-class democracy was party orthodoxy, as can be seen from the awkward fact that Trotsky continued

[23] Trotsky, 172–3.

[24] Trotsky, 109–110.

to argue for party dictatorship after the end of the civil war in November 1920. Thus we discover him in early in 1921 arguing again for Party dictatorship at the Communist Party's Tenth Congress:

> The Workers' Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans, making a fetish of democratic principles! They place the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy. It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birth right of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering even in the working classes. This awareness is for us the indispensable element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy.[25]

It should be noted that Trotsky was being too generous to the Workers' Opposition, for "while demanding more freedom of initiative for the workers" in economic matters, "it was quite content to leave untouched the state of affairs in which a few hundred thousand imposed their will on many millions" and it "had no wish to disturb the communist party's monopoly of political power."[26] So even limited industrial democracy was considered too much by Trotsky:

> Formally speaking this [the creation of factory committees] is indeed the clearest line of workers' democ-

[25] Quoted by Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 209.

[26] Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State: The First Phase, 1917–1922* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 294.

against the corruptions, cynicism, and murderous authoritarianism of Stalinism."[82]

Thus the reality was that any Bolshevik-style revolution in Western Europe or America – and least we forget, Trotskyists are convinced that only a Bolshevik-style revolution can succeed – would have followed Bolshevik ideology with regards to the necessity of the dictatorship of the party, nationalisation, one-man management and so. In so doing, it would have also resulted in the political and economic dispossession of the working class by "its" party. As such, a successful revolution in the West would *not* have seen the Russian dictatorship over the proletariat ended but rather reinforced as the non-Russian Leninist parties would have simply repeated the "lessons" learned by the Bolsheviks and communicated internationally via the Comintern.

To Conclude

Trotsky's "opposition" in no way presented any real alternative to Stalinism. At no time did he question the fundamental social relationships within Soviet society. He saw Stalinism as the victory of the state bureaucracy over the party and *its* dictatorship. While he, like Lenin, railed against bureaucracy, he did not question the Bolshevism ideology and policies which increased its numbers, powers and privileges.

This explains his continual self-imposed role after his exile of loyal opposition to Stalinism in spite of the violence applied to him and his followers. It also explains the lack of excitement by the Russian working class over the "Left Opposition" for their choice was between two factions within the master class. As Serge acknowledged, the bureaucrats were "[o]utraged by the Opposition, [as]

[82] *Left Americana*, 218.

This was reflected in the defences of the suppression of the Kronstadt Revolt of early 1921, which was used as evidence for the necessity of party dictatorship in any revolution. Thus leading German Communist Karl Radek expounded the lesson that the mass "may well hesitate in the days of great difficulties, defeats, and it may even despair of victory and long to capitulate" and so "there can arise situations where the revolutionary minority of the working class must shoulder the full weight of the struggle and where the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be maintained, provisionally at least, as the dictatorship of the Communist Party." The party's "firm decision to retain power by all possible means" is "the greatest lesson of the Kronstadt events, the international lesson." He linked this lesson to "our discussions with that faction of Communists [in Germany] who wished to oppose… the dictatorship of the Communist Party" as it illuminated "the problem of the relationship between the Communist Party and the mass of the proletariat and the form of the dictatorship: dictatorship of the Party or dictatorship of the class".[80] Radek significantly referred to the resolutions on the role of the party made at the Second Comintern Congress and his argument reflected Lenin's comments in *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

These positions were held by Trotskyists across the globe. The first issue of the official American Trotskyist journal, for example made its position clear by seeking to refute the notion that the dictatorship of the party was an alien concept brought into Bolshevism by Stalin. It did so by "quotations from Lenin, Trotsky and others so as to establish… the dictatorship of the party is Leninist" rather than "a Stalinist innovation".[81] The very American Trotskyists whom Paul Le Blanc proclaimed were "standing as a beacon" for the "revolutionary-democratic ideals of early Communism

[80] Karl Radek, "Cronstadt", *Bulletin communiste* (12 May 1921), 324–5.

[81] Max Shachtman, "Dictatorship of Party or Proletariat? Remarks on a Conception of the AWP… and Others", *New International*, July 1934.

> racy. But we are against it. Why? For a basic reason, to preserve the party's dictatorship, and for subordinate reasons: management would be inefficient[27]

Note well, the necessity to secure the party dictatorship was paramount and even a slight increase in worker democracy (rigorously controlled by the party) was a danger. In terms of his "subordinate" reason, it should suffice to note the waste and inefficiency (not to mention corruption) in the economy which occurred after he and Lenin imposed "one-man management" and the "militarisation of labour".[28]

Trotsky re-iterated this position In late March 1921, in relation to the crushing of the Kronstadt revolt for soviet democracy by asserting that the "economic, political, and national independence of Russia is possible only under the dictatorship of the soviets. The backbone of this dictatorship is the Communist Party. There is no other party that can play this part, nor can there be."[29] The following year saw him stating that "we maintain the dictatorship of our party!"[30]

In April 1923, he argued that "[i]f there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party, and its leadership in all spheres of our work." He stressed that "[o]ur party is the ruling party… To allow any changes whatever in this field, to allow the idea of a partial… curtailment of the leading role of our party would mean to bring into question all

[27] Quoted by Alec Nove, "Trotsky, collectivization and the five year plan", *Socialism, Economics and Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 100.

[28] Not to mention that the vast majority of studies on workers' control have concluded it leads to increases in efficient and productivity (these experiments have usually been ended by management fearful of losing their power and privileges, not because of economic considerations).

[29] Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt* (New York: Monad Press, 1986), 73.

[30] *The First Five Years of the Communist International* (London: New Park Publications, 1974) 2: 255

the achievements of the revolution and its future." He indicated the fate of those who *did* question this: "Whoever makes an attempt on the party's leading role will, I hope, be unanimously dumped by all of us on the other side of the barricade."[31]

In this he just expressed party orthodoxy for in March 1923 the Central Committee of the Communist Party (of which he was a leading member) summarised the lessons gained from the Russian revolution, namely that "the party of the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat." Vacillations are expressed by workers' democracy and so this was rejected: "The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the party."[32]

This was also the case in the economic domain and so we find him arguing in 1923 that the "system of actual one-man management must be applied in the organisation of industry from top to bottom. For leading economic organs of industry to really direct industry and to bear responsibility for its fate, it is essential for them to have authority over the selection of functionaries and their transfer and removal" as well as "appointment."[33]

For Trotsky, economic democracy was not an issue and so it played no role in determining the socialist nature of a society. Consequently, he did not question one-man management in the workplace nor the capitalist social relationships it generated. For Trotsky, it *was* "necessary for each state-owned factory, with its technical director and with its commercial director, to be subjected not only to control from the top – by the state organs – but also

[31] *Leon Trotsky Speaks*, 158, 160.

[32] "To the Workers of the USSR", included in Grigorii Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party: A Popular Outline* (London: New Park Publications, 1973), 213, 214.

[33] Quoted by Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960) 1: 237.

This perspective was repeated in other countries. In Italy the pro-Bolsheviks raised the necessity of party dictatorship and were being opposed by the libertarians during the revolutionary crisis in 1920:

> Up to now, when we said that what the socialists call the *dictatorship of the proletariat* is in reality nothing other than the dictatorship of a few men who, with the assistance of a party, place themselves above the proletariat and impose themselves on it, we have been treated as slanderers… Moscow has become the Mecca of the proletariat; the source of light, and… peremptory orders concerning the ideas that those who, with permission from their superiors, wished to call themselves communists ought to profess and the conduct they should follow… the official journal of the Italian Socialist Party, the most important organ authorised, so far, for the voice of Moscow,… *Avanti!* of the 26th [September, 1920]… writes:
>
> 'In Russia, under the soviet regime, the Party really directs all State policy and all public activities; individuals as well as groups being utterly subordinated to the decisions of the Party, so that *the dictatorship of the proletariat is really the dictatorship of the party and, as such of its central committee.*'
>
> So now we know what awaits us: the dictatorship of the leadership of the Socialist Party, or of the as yet unborn Communist Party… a revolution made with an authoritarian outlook with dictatorial objectives… by measures arbitrarily imposed from above.[79]

[79] Errico Malatesta, "*At Last! What is the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'?*", *Anarchistes, Socialistes et Communistes* (Annecy: Group 1er Mai, 1982), 208–10.

proletarian sovereignty were the workers councils… It was not long before they saw their cherished ideals defeated by the united party's oligarchy. On April 7, 1919, elections were held for the Budapest Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The syndicalist controlled Budapest Eighth district elected a slate consisting solely of syndicalist and anarchist write-in deputies in place of the single-party ticket. The Revolutionary Governing Council voided the results of the election and a week later the official slate 'won'".[76] As in Russia, the "wrong" people had been elected to the soviets and so the Communist regime simply nullified workers' democracy.

At the Second Congress of the Communist International, held in July-August 1920, leading Bolshevik Grigory Zinoviev told the assembled revolutionaries that "people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least!… the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party."[77] Trotsky repeated the argument when he told the delegate from the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT who made the important decisions during a Revolution:

> We have the Council of People's Commissars but it has to be subject to some supervision. Whose supervision? That of the working class as an amorphous, chaotic mass? No. The Central Committee of the party is convened to discuss… and to decide… Who will solve these questions in Spain? The Communist Party of Spain.[78]

[76] Rudolf L. Tokes, *Bela Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic*: *The Origins and Role of the Communist Party of Hungary in the Revolutions of 1918–1919* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), 38, 151–2

[77] *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite* 1 :151–2.

[78] *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920* (New York: Pathfinder, 1991) 1: 174.

from below, by the market which will remain the regulator of the state economy for a long time to come." In spite of the obvious fact that the workers did not control their labour or its product, Trotsky asserted that "[n]o class exploitation exists here, and consequently neither does capitalism exist." Moreover, "socialist industry… utilises methods of development which were invented by capitalist economy." Ultimately, it was not self-management that mattered, it was "the growth of Soviet state industry [which] signifies the growth of socialism itself, a direct strengthening of the power of the proletariat".[34]

Whether on political or economic matter he was repeating arguments made during the civil war to defend the regime but by 1923 even he could not fail to see that something was going wrong.[35]

The New Course

This is the context of the launching of *The New Course* – an ideological commitment to party dictatorship and one-man management. Yet *The New Course* – while generally accepted as being the first public expression of his opposition to the developing Stalinist regime – did not challenge any of this, quite the reverse, as he stated that "[w]e are the only party in the country, and in the period of the dictatorship it could not be otherwise" for this was "an epoch when the Communist Party is obliged to monopolize the direction of political life." Moreover, it was "incontestable that factions [within the party] are a scourge in the present situation" and so the party "does not want factions and will not tolerate them."[36]

[34] *The First 5 Years of the Communist International* 2: 237, 245

[35] For a good discussion of the similarities between the Stalinists and the Trotskyist Opposition and the latter's limitations, see John Eric Marot, "Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Rise of Stalinism: Theory and Practice", *Historical Materialism* Vol. 14 No. 3 (2006).

[36] "The New Course", *The Challenge of the "Left Opposition" (1923–25)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), 78, 79, 80, 86.

However, confusion creeps into accounts of Trotsky's Opposition to Stalin because of his use of the words "workers' democracy". However, a close reading of his argument soon clarifies this issue: he simply redefined "workers' democracy" to mean "party democracy" and so could talk about "party dictatorship" and "workers' democracy" without contradiction. As his supporter Max Eastman noted a few years later, Trotsky was in favour of the "programme of democracy within the party – called 'Workers' Democracy' by Lenin." This "was not something new or especially devised… It was part of the essential policy of Lenin for going forward toward the creation of a Communist society – a principle adopted under his leadership at the Tenth Congress of the party, immediately after the cessation of the civil war."[37] The "New Course Resolution" passed in December 1923 stresses this:

> Workers' democracy means the liberty of frank discussion of the most important questions of party life by all members, and the election of all leading party functionaries and commissions by those bodies immediately under them. It does not, however, imply the freedom to form factional groupings, which are extremely dangerous for the ruling party, since they always threaten to split or fragment the government and the state apparatus as a whole.
>
> Within a party, which represents a voluntary union of people on the basis of definite ideals and practice, it is obvious that there can be no toleration of the formation of groupings whose ideological content is directed against the party as a whole and against the dictatorship of the proletariat, as for instance the Workers' Truth and Workers' Group.[38]

[37] *Since Lenin Died* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), 35.
[38] "The New Course Resolution", 408.

would not have resulted in socialism, no matter how many revolutions in the west the "Left Opposition" encouraged. Hence Ida Mett:

> Some claim that the Bolsheviks allowed themselves such actions (as the suppression of Kronstadt) in the hope of a forthcoming world revolution, of which they considered themselves the vanguard. But would not a revolution in another country have been influenced by the spirit of the Russian Revolution? When one considers the enormous moral authority of the Russian Revolution throughout the world one may ask oneself whether the deviations of this Revolution would not eventually have left an imprint on other countries. Many historical facts allow such a judgement. One may recognise the impossibility of genuine socialist construction in a single country, yet have doubts as to whether the bureaucratic deformations of the Bolshevik regime would have been straightened out by the winds coming from revolutions in other countries.[75]

This is indeed the case – from the start, the Bolsheviks were considered by many socialists across the globe as showing the correct path in terms of revolutionary strategy and actions. This included the dogma on the necessity of party dictatorship which had become Bolshevik orthodoxy by the start of 1919 at the latest (reflecting its practice by mid-1918).

Thus we see, for example, during the Hungarian Revolution which had seen libertarians form the first workers' councils in December 1917 by 1919 they "felt that the powers of the [Communist] Revolutionary Governing Council [of Bela Kun] were excessive… For the syndicalists the legitimate holders of

[75] "The Kronstadt Commune", *Bloodstained*, 203.

"armed with the resources of the state" and *not* the proletariat as a whole we are left with one obvious conclusion, namely party dictatorship rather than working class freedom. This is because such a position means denying exactly what workers' democracy is meant to be all about – namely that working people can recall and replace their delegates when those delegates do not follow the wishes and mandates of the electors. If the governors determine what is and what is not in the "real" interests of the masses and "overcome" (i.e., repress) the governed, then we have dictatorship, not democracy.

Trotsky, of course, made no attempt to reconcile this with his passing comment in *The Revolution Betrayed* that a workers' state required "active control by the masses".[74]

International implications

It is considered a truism amongst dissident Leninists that the failure of the Russia Revolution to spread to the West ensured its degeneration. Without a wider Revolution then the shoots of socialism planted by the Bolsheviks were doomed by an inhospitable environment.

Yet, the *nature* of any such revolution is what counts. If Trotsky's Opposition had succeeded, it would have encouraged revolutions which followed (to re-quote its Platform) the "Leninist principle" ("inviolable for every Bolshevik") that "the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party." It would have urged centralisation. It would have opposed workers' self-management in favour of nationalisation and one-man management. And so on.

In short, the influence of the "Left Opposition" would have been as detrimental to the global workers' movement and other revolutions as Stalin's was (or, for that matter, Lenin's) although, of course, in different ways. Generalising Lenin's state capitalism

[74] *The Revolution Betrayed*, 62.

These two groups, it should be noted, actually advocated *genuine* workers' democracy – that is, they opposed the party's monopoly of power and supported multi-party elections.

So there was talk of "workers' democracy" but the "New Course Resolution" was clear that that term in fact meant only internal party democracy as per the current orthodoxy. Likewise with the banning of factions *within* the Communist party, with Trotsky keen to stress at the 13th Party Congress in 1924 that "party democracy in no way implies freedom for factional groupings which are extremely dangerous for the ruling party, since they threaten to split or divide the government and the state apparatus as a whole. I believe this is undisputed and indisputable". He re-iterated his position for the decisions of the Tenth Party Congress: "I have never recognized freedom for groupings inside the party, nor do I now recognise it".[39] He even went so far as to declare his faith in the party in spite of the corruption long manifesting itself due to its social position:

> Comrades, none of us wants to be or can be right against the party. In the last analysis, the party is always right, because the party is the sole historical instrument that the working class possesses for the solution of its fundamental tasks. I have already said that nothing would be simpler than to say before the party that all these criticisms, all these declarations, warnings, and protests – all were mistaken from beginning to end. I cannot say so, however, comrades, because I do not think it. I know that no one can be right against the party. It is only possible to be right with the party and through it since history has not created any other way to determine the correct position.[40]

[39] "Speech at the Thirteenth Party Congress," Op. Cit., 153, 154.

[40] Trotsky, 161.

He did acknowledge that "even the party itself can make occasional mistakes" but argued that the duty of a party member was to follow its decisions if they could not convince the party that it had made one of these.[41] He seemed unaware of how these arguments gave his opponents weapons they happily later used against him and other members of the opposition.

As can be seen, Trotsky's opposition was a loyal one, initially accepting defeats and following party discipline. In fact, he made a great deal of being the true heir of Lenin and so not only did not question Bolshevik orthodoxy but instead championed it in every detail:

> Of course, the foundation of our regime is the dictatorship of the class. But this in turn assumes that it is the class not only "in itself" but also "for itself," that is, that it is a class that has come to self-consciousness through its vanguard, which is to say, through the party. Without this, the dictatorship could not exist. To present matters as though the party were only the teacher, while the class puts the dictatorship into effect, is to prettify the truth of the matter. Dictatorship is the most highly concentrated function of a class, and therefore the basic instrument of a dictatorship is a party. In the most fundamental respects a class realizes its dictatorship through a party. That is why Lenin spoke not only of the class dictatorship but also of the dictatorship of the party and, *in a certain sense*, made them identical.[42]

This was the basis of his critique of Stalin, seizing upon such incredulous comments as "[p]eople often say that we have a 'dictatorship over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history… The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution… Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the 'dictatorship' of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions.[71]

His advice on what to do during the Spanish Revolution followed this pattern: "Because the leaders of the CNT renounced dictatorship for themselves they left the place open for the Stalinist dictatorship."[72] He repeated this plea for party power the year before his murder by Stalinist agents:

> The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves… if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.[73]

Yet everyone, *by definition*, is "backward" when compared to the "vanguard of the proletariat." As it is this "vanguard" which is

[41] Trotsky, 162.

[42] "Party bureaucratism and party democracy", *The Challenge of the "Left Opposition" (1926–27)* (New York: Pathfinder, 2014), 86.

[71] Trotsky, 513–4.

[72] Trotsky, 514.

[73] "The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism", 53–66, *Their Morals and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 59.

Reiterating Orthodoxy

Any apparent support for Soviet Democracy expressed in *The Revolution Betrayed* was short-lived.

Writing in 1937, Trotsky was again reiterating the privileged position of the party. In his essay "Bolshevism and Stalinism" he argued quite explicitly that "the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard" and that "the necessity for state power arises from an insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity." Only with "support of the vanguard by the class" can there be the "conquest of power" and it was in "this sense the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard." Thus, rather than the working class as a whole seizing power, it is the "vanguard" which takes power – "a revolutionary party, even after seizing power… is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society." Note, the party is "the sovereign ruler of society," *not* the working class and state power is required to *govern the masses***,** who cannot exercise power themselves as "[t]hose who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the Bolshevik leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat."[70]

Later that same year he repeated this position clearly and unambiguously:

> The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities – the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump

[70] *Writings 1936–37* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 490, 488, 495.

tatorship of the Party'… some comrades think that ours is a dictatorship of the Party, not of the working class. But that is sheer nonsense, comrades… If the contention about 'dictatorship of the Party' were correct, there would be no need for the Soviets… very little thought is required to realise the utter absurdity of substituting the dictatorship of the Party for the dictatorship of the class."[43]

This, Trotsky argued, meant that Stalin's policies were, in fact, a ploy to substitute the dictatorship of the party apparatus for the dictatorship of the party. Such a substitution had its roots in a "disproportion" between the workers and peasants. As long as there were "proper 'proportions'" between the two and "the advance of democratic methods in the party and working class organizations," then "the identification of the dictatorship of the class with that of the party is fully and completely justified historically and politically." Trotsky did not bother to ask how much democracy (of *any* kind) was possible under a party dictatorship nor how a class could run society or have democratic organisations if subjected to such a dictatorship. For him it was a truism that the "dictatorship of a party does not contradict the dictatorship of the class either theoretically or practically, but is an expression of it."[44] Stalin was wrong not because he denied the reality of the Bolshevik regime and its ideology but because he was undermining both:

> Stalin's way of putting the question of the dictatorship of the class, counterposing it to the dictatorship of the party, leads inevitably to the dictatorship of the apparatus, because a class with a disorganized vanguard (and the lack of free discussion, of control over the apparatus, and of election rights means a disorganized vanguard) cannot help but become a mere object in the hands of the leadership of a centralized apparatus,

[43] Stalin, "The Results of the Thirteenth Congress of the RCP(B)", *Works* 6: 270

[44] "Party bureaucratism and party democracy", Op. Cit., 86–7.

> which in turn removes itself further and further from the party and is more and more bound to come under the pressure of hostile class forces.[45]

This – "on the question of the dictatorship of the party" – was just one of a whole series of mistakes by Stalin, although "the most serious of all, which he is making now, is his theory of socialism in one country."[46] This was because "[w]e can get through this difficult period only on the condition… of the capacity of the proletarian party to manoeuvre decisively, for which absolute concentration of the dictatorship in its hands is necessary."[47] This was the case internationally as well, with Trotsky commenting upon events in China in 1927 by stressing that "[w]ith us the dictatorship of the party (quite falsely disputed theoretically by Stalin) is the expression of the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat… The dictatorship of a party is a part of the socialist revolution".[48]

Platform of the Opposition

Party dictatorship *was* Bolshevik orthodoxy and it had existed in reality and in theory under Lenin. It is unsurprising, then, that the "Left Opposition" raised it in the 1927 *Platform of the Opposition*.

Alongside demands for the "consistent development of a workers' democracy in the party, the trade unions, and the soviets" and the need to "convert the urban soviets into real institutions of proletarian power", it attacked the "growing substitution of the apparatus for the party [which] is promoted by a 'theory' of Stalin's which denies the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realized only

[45] Trotsky, 88.

[46] "Speech to the Seventh Plenum of the ECCI", Op. Cit., 227

[47] "Thesis on Revolution and Counterrevolution", Op. Cit., 215.

[48] *Leon Trotsky on China* (New York: Monad Press, 2002), 251.

The revisionism of Trotsky's work is also of note. For example, he asserts that the "commanding staff needs democratic control" and that the "organizers of the Red Army were aware of this from the beginning"[67], apparently forgetting that he had abolished soldier's committees and elected officers in March 1918 when he organised the Red Army. He noted the wider impact of this decision with the "demobilisation of the Red Army of five million played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war."[68] That he praised the introduction of such a regime everywhere in 1920 went unmentioned – along with the fact that the bureaucracy existed and grew from the moment the Bolsheviks seized power.

Ironically, then, "the social conquests of the proletarian revolution"[69] he points to in order to justify his view that the USSR should be defended were the very source of the power and privileges of the bureaucracy he denounced (and which made it a "degenerated workers' State" rather than a state-capitalist regime). Ultimately, the limitations of his critique are rooted in the fact that any serious analysis of the class structure of the USSR would see its roots in the regime of Lenin and… Trotsky. The same can be said of neo-Trotskyist suggestions (like Tony Cliff's) that Stalinism was "State capitalist" – indeed it was but, by whatever criteria used, so was the Leninism which preceded it.

this ignored the bureaucracy's socio-economic position and role, it completely missed the point.

[67] Trotsky, 211.

[68] Trotsky, 89–90.

[69] Trotsky, 249.

the "nationalization of land, the means of industrial production, transport and exchange" shows "the nature of the Soviet Union as a proletarian state". Trotsky artificially divided distribution and production, seeing the bureaucracy as a *gendarme* which appears in the process of distribution, controlling the distribution of goods and "[n]obody who has wealth to distribute ever omits himself". There was a "contrast between forms of property and norms of distribution", the first being a "socialist property system" and the second reflecting "bourgeois" norms.[64]

Yet the bureaucracy did not only control the product (distribution) but also the workplace (production). Trotsky acknowledged that "the transfer of the factories to the State changed the situation of the worker only juridically" and that "means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy". He also admitted the reality faced by the worker in Stalinist Russia: "In the bureaucracy he sees the manager, in the state, the employer." The bureaucracy was "in the full sense of the word the sole privileged and commanding stratum" in the society and that state property under its command was "the source of its power and income", yet bizarrely concluded that it was "this aspect of its activity" which meant it "remains a weapon of proletarian dictatorship".[65]

Yet, if the relations of distribution in Russia were not socialist then neither were the relations of production. The reason why he failed to recognise the class nature of the regime is obvious enough – to do so would mean recognising that this class structure existed when he was in power and that Bolshevism created the very bureaucracy Trotsky denounced as betraying the revolution.[66]

[64] Trotsky. 239, 235**,** 111, 231–2.

[65] Trotsky, 228, 229, 235–6.

[66] Trotsky's attempt to refute the state-capitalist analysis of the Soviet Union in *The Revolution Betrayed* rested on the notion that capitalism is marked by individual ownership and as the members of the bureaucracy did not own nor bequeath to its children the means of production, it could not be a ruling class. As

through the dictatorship of the party." The "dictatorship of the proletariat imperiously demands a single and united proletarian party as the leader of the working masses and the poor peasantry." The Opposition would "fight with all our power against the idea of two parties, because the dictatorship of the proletariat demands as its very core a single proletarian party. It demands a single party."[49]

The Platform did not bother to explain how workers' democracy *could* develop within a party dictatorship nor how soviets could become institutions of power when real power would, obviously, lie with the party. But, then, it did not have to as by "workers' democracy" the Platform meant inter-party democracy as can be seen when it "affirm[s]" the "New Course Resolution" definition.[50] So, again, "workers' democracy" had a very specific meaning, namely one limited to within the party and *not* a call for *genuine* democracy in the unions or soviets. Such a definition, obviously, in no way undermines the dictatorship of the party – but it does allow the use of quotations by Leninists to bolster a false narrative on the nature of Bolshevism.

Unsurprisingly, Trotsky gets the process by which Stalinism arose wrong. "The dying out of inner-party democracy," the Platform asserts, "leads to a dying out of workers' democracy in general – in the trade unions, and in all other nonparty mass organizations."[51] Rather, the destruction of workers' democracy under Lenin in the soviets, trades unions and other mass organisations means that political disputes had to be raised in the party, leading to the dreaded factions and groupings within it. The same necessity which saw workers' democracy destroyed – there was no passive "dying out" caused by some kind of natural force! – by the Bolsheviks to secure their rule arose in the party itself, so necessitating the banning of factions just as it had other parties and groups. In such,

[49] "The Platform of the Opposition", *The Challenge of the "Left Opposition" (1926–27)*, 440, 441, 453, 503, 506.

[50] "The Platform of the Opposition", 461.

[51] "The Platform of the Opposition", 453.

the causality flows in the opposite direction than that asserted by Trotsky.[52]

Politically, then, the opposition urged the benevolent dictatorship of an internally democratic party. Economically, it was for a benevolent state capitalism, one which exploited the workers less harshly while they toiled for the party dictatorship. This can be seen by the Platform arguing that "nationalization of the means of production was a decisive step toward the socialist reorganization of the entire social system based on the exploitation of some by others" and that the "appropriation of surplus value by a workers' state is not, of course, exploitation." However, it also acknowledged that "we have a workers' state with bureaucratic distortions" and a "swollen and privileged administrative apparatus devours a very considerable part of our surplus value" while "all the data indicate that the growth of wages is lagging behind the growth of labor productivity." This, however, is not linked to the recognition that "[n]ever before have the trade unions and the working mass stood so far from the management of socialist industry as now" and that "[p]re-revolutionary relations between foremen and workmen are frequently found."[53]

The Platform noted that the "present rate of industrialization and the tempo indicated for the coming years are obviously inadequate" and so it argued for an acceleration of industrialisation for the "Soviet Union must not fall further behind the capitalist countries in the years ahead, but must catch up with them." Thus industrialisation "must be sufficient to guarantee the defense of the country and in particular the adequate growth of the war indus-

[52] This was later admitted by Trotsky: "A struggle of groups and factions [within the ruling party] to a certain degree replaced the struggle of parties." (*The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and where is it going* [London: Faber and Faber, 1937], 251).

[53] "The Platform of the Opposition", 398, 399, 401, 406, 405.

It would be remiss to not note that Trotsky's position was limited to the Soviet Union and so does not automatically negate his previous arguments on party dictatorship made to the international socialist movement. Indeed, a close reading of his argument suggests that this argument can be reconciled with his previous ones.

"Bureaucratic autocracy must give place to Soviet democracy", proclaimed Trotsky, and that meant "freedom of Soviet parties, beginning with the party of the Bolsheviks".[62] So, initially, only *his* party would be free and in power – and we would again have the dictatorship of the party which would, at its leisure and whim, decree which other groupings constitute true "Soviet parties" and be allowed to exist and participate in elections. If the opposition parties gain influence – as the Mensheviks did under the Bolsheviks – then the party can decide they are no longer "Soviet parties" and so it maintains its rule. As such, there is no guarantee that once the Bolsheviks had been revived (i.e., his faction took over) they did not conclude, as before, that none of the other parties were, in fact, Soviet parties after all – "freedom of Soviet Parties" could begin and end with his faction.

In this manner the apparent Soviet democrat of 1936 can be reconciled with the advocate of party dictatorship of the previous years. After all, did he not suggest that the "dictatorship of the Bolshevik party proved one of the most powerful instruments of progress in history"?[63]

Worse, the economic structure of the regime appears to present no qualms to Trotsky. There is no discussion of workers' management of production although there is a comment about the "restoration of democracy in the trade unions". For Trotsky – reflecting Marxist orthodoxy stretching back to at least *The Communist Manifesto* which likewise made no comment about workers' control –

[62] Trotsky, 273.

[63] Trotsky, 104.

was combined with revisionism in the events of the Russian Revolution. It would be fair to suggest that Trotskyist account of Trotsky's ideas may be based solely on this work for in stark contrast to his early arguments he now stated that when "the Soviet bureaucracy is overthrown by a revolutionary party having all the attributes of the old Bolshevism" then it "would begin with the restoration of democracy in the trade unions and the Soviets" and it "would be able to, and would have to, restore freedom of Soviet parties."[59]

Given his previous comments on the matter, the reader would be justified in wondering whether, rather than a sincere change of heart, Trotsky's position was a limited and temporary aberration. Indeed, Victor Serge, who later broke with Trotsky over this issue, stated that he "had prevailed on him to include in" this book "a declaration of freedom for all parties accepting the Soviet system."[60]

The evidence suggests the latter, that it was a temporary aberration – particularly given the book's misleading account of the rise of the Bolshevik dictatorship. Thus we find Trotsky suggesting that it was 1924–26 that saw "the complete suppression of party and Soviet democracy" when, as noted above, he publicly acknowledged the reality of party dictatorship in 1920. Unsurprisingly, the acknowledgement of party dictatorship as a principle of Leninism was overlooked in favour of the suggestion that the civil war resulted in the opposition parties being "forbidden one after the other" and while this was "obviously in conflict with the spirit of Soviet democracy, the leaders of Bolshevism regarded [it] not as a principle, but as an episodic act of self-defence."[61] It would be churlish to note that it *was* considered a principle (a "Leninist principle", no less!) and that the final abolition of opposition parties – like factions within the ruling party – occurred *after* the end of the civil war.

[59] *The Revolution Betrayed*, 238–9.
[60] *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 348.
[61] Trotsky., 34, 96.

tries."[54] Thus the surplus appropriated from labour was to increase and directed by the party to its ends – not least building up the forces which had been regularly used against worker and peasant protest.

Trotsky, then, considered an economic regime marked by one-man management by state-appointed bosses under a party dictatorship as without exploitation even though someone other than the workers controlled both their labour and how its product (and any surplus) was used. That *capitalist* class relations would result in both accumulation directed by the few and that few enriching themselves at the expense of many is not recognised, presumably because Bolshevik ideology excluded acknowledging that workers becoming wage-slaves to the state machine equated to state capitalism rather than "socialism". Likewise, it did not discuss what would happen if the workers, in pursuing their class interests, struggled to lower the rate of accumulation decided upon by the party dictatorship – undoubtedly a repeat of previous Bolshevik repression of strikes and other protests.

It is hardly surprising that the new master class sought their own benefit; what is surprising is that the "Left Opposition" could not see the reality of state-capitalism. Rather, it paid lip-service to the living standards of the working class while seeking to increase industrialisation and so extract more surplus from its labour; it paid no attention to the relations of production in the workplace and raised no proposals nor demands about establishing workers' control of industry; it did not question the party dictatorship. Given its self-proclaimed role as defender of Leninist orthodoxy and the so-

[54] "The Platform of the Opposition", 423–4. Harman's party – the British SWP – argues that the USSR under Stalin was "state capitalist" due to "international arms competition." (Harman, 17) He does not explain why Trotsky not an advocate of state capitalism in the 1920s nor why Lenin's regime during the civil war was not. Suffice to say, explaining Russia's State capitalist nature without reference to its internal social relations is doomed to failure, although understandable as to do so would mean concluding that it had been so under Lenin.

cial relations it had created, perhaps this is not so surprising after all.

In Exile

As is well known, the Opposition was crushed and Trotsky forced into exile. This did not lead to a fundamental re-evaluation of what caused the degeneration of the revolution nor the need for genuine soviet and economic democracy.

A key task was "[t]o stop the dissolution of the party into the class in the USSR" and so Soviet democracy went unmentioned.[55] Repeating previous arguments, Trotsky was fundamentally concerned about the dangers "if the vanguard is dissolved into the amorphous mass" for "the party is not the class, but its vanguard; it cannot pay for its numerical growth by the lowering of its political level". There was "the demand of party democracy" for the dictatorship of the proletariat "is inconceivable without a ruling proletarian party" but nothing on working class freedom or democracy. Perhaps this is unsurprising: "What we mean by the restoration of party democracy is that the real revolutionary, proletarian core of the party win the right to curb the bureaucracy and to really purge the party". In other words, the first act of the successful Opposition would have been the reduction in numbers of those who had some kind of meaningful vote. Rest assured, though, because the new party regime "means that the party directs the proletarian dictatorship but does not strangle the mass organisations of the toilers" and the secret ballot is "one of the most important means to discipline the entire apparatus and subordinate it to the party".[56]

In 1932, he was arguing that the "same class can rule with the help of different political systems and methods according to

[55] *Writings 1930* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2003) 148.

[56] *Writings 1930–31* (New York: Pathfinder, 2002), 241, 244, 247, 255–6, 70, 130.

circumstances. So the bourgeoisie on its historical road carried through its rule under absolute monarchy, bonapartism, parliamentary republic and fascist dictatorship… the Soviet regime means the rule of the proletariat, irrespective of how broad the stratum on whose hands the power is *immediately concentrated*." This was justification for his denial that there was "a small group in the Kremlin who exercise oligarchical powers" ("No, that is not so").[57]

Trotsky seemed to have forgotten that the bourgeoisie was a minority class which controlled the economic life of a country. Given this, it is not surprising that it could still be the ruling class under dictatorships. The same cannot be said of the working class – particularly if, as under Lenin and Trotsky, its democratic control of work and so the economy was replaced by one-man management. Yet Trotsky had no alternative than to make such an obviously wrong assertion – to acknowledge the truth, that socialism needs meaningful workers' social and economic democracy to qualify as genuinely socialist – would have meant raising questions over the nature of the Bolshevik regime between 1918 and 1923 when he was at its commanding heights. Hence clearly incorrect assertions like the "dictatorship of a class does not mean by a long shot that its entire mass always participates in the management of the state" and "[s]o long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class" under Stalin's brutal regime (presumably proletarians in the forced-labour camps had imprisoned themselves).[58]

The Revolution Betrayed

In 1936 Trotsky finally appeared to revise his ideas in *The Revolution Betrayed*, although his revisionism in terms of democracy

[57] *Writings 1932* (New York: Pathfinder, 1999) 217.

[58] *Writings 1933–34* (New York: Pathfinder, 2003), 124, 125.