

# Leon Trotsky: His Life and Ideas



Leon Trotsky (1879-1940)

**A**t dawn one morning in October 1902, a 23-year-old fugitive from Siberia banged on the door of the London home of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

It was Leon Trotsky, in urgent haste to meet the leader of the Russian revolutionary movement. Trotsky, born Lev Bronstein, the son of a Ukrainian Jewish farmer, was already renowned in radical circles as an organizer, thinker, and gifted writer. After spending 30 months in prison and another two years in Siberia, he had escaped to England at Lenin's request. The Russian socialist movement was beginning to grow by leaps and bounds. And, urged by his comrade and wife Alexandra Sokolovskaya, Trotsky left her and their two baby daughters in Siberia to re-enter the struggle.

Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, led Trotsky into their two-room flat. When she returned with coffee, she found Lenin, still in bed, engaged in animated political discussion with the young rebel. Trotsky always remembered "the kindly expression [on Lenin's face, which] was tinged with a justifiable amazement" at the circumstances of this first meeting.<sup>1</sup>

Thus was launched Trotsky's work with the Russian Social Democratic Party.

## Revolutionary apprentice

Within weeks of Trotsky's arrival in London, he was writing for the party newspaper, *Iskra* (The Spark), and

was sent on a speaking tour of the Russian émigré circles in Western Europe. His passionate oratory roused audiences and swept away opponents.

Trotsky was adept at answering the anti-Marxists because he himself had come to the ideology the hard way—starting out as a romantic idealist who shunned dialectical materialism as cold and mechanistic. He was finally convinced that Marxism was the correct approach through debates with Alexandra Sokolovskaya. Laboriously, he learned the basics of Marxist thought from smuggled books amid the lice and cockroaches of prison and Siberian peasant huts.

Now in England, Trotsky saw himself in the role of a student to the illustrious founders of Russian Marxism who surrounded him. He was awed by the brilliant thinking and heroic histories of the members of the *Iskra* Editorial Board. In addition to Lenin, this included George Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism; Julius Martov, the future leader of the Mensheviks; and Vera Zasulich, who as a young woman had shot the hated head of the Petrograd police and received so much support that she was acquitted by a Russian jury.

Unbeknownst to Trotsky, the veteran revolutionists on the *Iskra* Editorial Board were headed for a split that would determine the future course of the Russian socialist movement.

### **The Menshevik-Bolshevik split**

Nine months after Trotsky's arrival in London, the momentous 1903 Founding Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party took place. It became a showdown between the "hard" and "soft" revolutionaries over the composition of the *Iskra* Editorial Board and the organization of the party.

Lenin was leader of the "hards," soon to be known as

the Bolsheviks (which means the "majority"). He proposed to reorganize the Editorial Board to make it more efficient and he espoused a stringently democratic centralist party—a disciplined organization of committed insurgents, bound by a common program to respect internal democracy and unity in action. He believed such a party was needed as the coordinating center for the overthrow of czarism..

The "soft" Menshevik (meaning "minority") faction saw the reorganization of the Editorial Board as a ruthless casting aside of respected party leaders. On the question of party structure, they wanted a loose, amorphous format.

These differences ultimately resulted in a decisive rupture between the two Social Democratic Party factions. The Bolshevik majority came to represent revolutionary Marxism, and the Menshevik minority degenerated into reformism. But initially, the underlying political differences were unclear to many involved. For example, Plekhanov, soon to be an arch-Menshevik, sided with Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the Congress. And Trotsky lined up with the Mensheviks! No one, including Lenin, had expected the split.

Trotsky was shocked by what he saw as Lenin's unforgivable callousness to the party founders. He cast his lot with the Mensheviks despite repeated attempts by Lenin to win him over. Although Trotsky initially agreed with building a democratic centralist party, he now rejected it. If it meant such harsh ingratitude to his heroes, he didn't want any part of it. He denounced Lenin's centralist party as dictatorial bureaucratism.

Trotsky was wrong. Despite his inexperience, he should have known better; but he was still attached to the bohemian romanticism of the older leaders.

After the congress, Trotsky distanced himself from

both sides. Technically, the two groups were still factions within the Russian Social Democratic Party and Trotsky pressed for their reunification. But he was more and more appalled by the swift political degeneration of the Menshevik leaders. He was also isolated from the Bolsheviks by the accusations he had hurled at Lenin and because he continued to disagree with Lenin's concept of the party.

In the summer of 1904, Trotsky formally resigned from the Menshevik faction and went to Munich. Here he developed the main tenets of Permanent Revolution.

## Permanent Revolution

The theory of Permanent Revolution is the cornerstone of Trotskyism. A grasp of its essentials is necessary to understanding the Russian uprisings of 1905 and 1917, Trotsky's subsequent battles with Stalinism, and his lifelong confidence that international socialism would prevail.

Trotsky's theory was based on his analysis of the peculiarities of Russian capitalism, which developed late and was incestuously tied to Russian feudalism. This situation was in marked contrast to countries where capitalism had developed earlier in *opposition* to feudalism.

The Czar encouraged industry because it provided a tremendous source of revenue for the state. The landed aristocracy became the new capitalists. They were weak politically because of their ties to czarism, and economically they were dominated by the much stronger European capitalists. So instead of being a strong, independent class, the Russian bourgeoisie was incapable of making its own revolution and taking power in its own name. It could not overthrow feudalism without liquidating itself.

For these reasons, Trotsky projected, the Russian

Revolution, although initially concerned with bourgeois demands—the overthrow of czarism and feudal property relations—could not stop there. Progressive forces would be unable to defeat feudalism except by putting the proletariat in power. To survive as a workers state, poor and technologically backward Russia would need the support of international proletarian revolution. These principles apply to all countries struggling for democratic demands under late capitalism.

The central task of the Russian revolution was liquidation of feudal relationships in the country. The urban workers required the support of the peasantry, the vast majority of the population, to overthrow the Czar. But the peasants could not *lead* the assault because they were not united by common interests. The peasantry included both rich capitalist farmers and landless sharecroppers. Their different needs prevented them from being able to develop a program to unite the country against feudalism. In addition, the peasants were scattered far from the urban nerve centers.

The workers however, were concentrated in cities and disciplined by working together in Russia's huge industrial factories, which were financed in large part by European capitalists. Only the workers were in a position to lead the overthrow of feudalism, a goal fully supported by the peasants. Once they gained power, the workers would need to create a nationalized economy and a workers state to lead the country to socialism. After the victory Trotsky foresaw that the aims of the worker and peasant classes would come into conflict. The peasants are defined by their individual ownership of land. But workers' needs can only be met by nationalizing industry and this, ultimately, requires the nationalization of agriculture.

Because of its poverty and internal contradictions, the survival of the Russian Revolution would hinge on the

support of emerging workers states in other countries—especially in highly developed Western Europe. Even after attaining international scope, the momentum of the transformation could never stop but must proceed forward on every plane of economic, technological and cultural existence.

These elements are the fundamentals of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky pictured the workers' rebellion as a massive general strike, a novel concept since no general strikes had yet occurred in Russia or Europe. Trotsky's scientific application of dialectical materialism, his study of history, theory, and people, and his powerful imagination often allowed him to paint future events with amazing accuracy. Here is how he laid out the process of seizing power:

Tear the workers away from the machines and workshops; lead them through the factory gate out into the street; direct them to neighboring factories; proclaim a stoppage there; and carry new masses into the street... Taking possession of the first suitable buildings. . . using them for uninterrupted revolutionary meetings with a permanently shifting and changing audience, you shall bring order into the movement of the masses, raise their confidence, explain to them the purpose and the sense of events; and thus you shall eventually transform the city into a revolutionary camp.<sup>2</sup>

The urban proletariat alone could not win the struggle. They would need the support of the peasantry whom Trotsky described as a "major reservoir of potential revolutionary energy." The workers' uprising would need to "carry the agitation into the countryside, without a day's delay and without missing a single opportunity."<sup>3</sup>

Winning over the army would also be crucial, and Trotsky predicted that a war would bring the army to the breaking point:

Our guns do not fire far enough. Our soldiers are illiterate... barefoot, naked and hungry. Our Red Cross steals. Our supply services steal. Rumors about this . . . corrode like a sharp acid the rust of official indoctrination. Years of our peaceful propaganda could not achieve what one day of war does.

On the decisive day. . . the soldier who yesterday fired his shots in the air, will. . . hand over his weapon to the worker. He will do so as soon as he has gained the confidence that the people is not out merely to riot, that the people knows what it wants and can fight for what it wants.<sup>4</sup>

Trotsky's descriptions came to life in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

## The 1905 Revolution

Before Trotsky's pamphlet on the coming insurrection was even published, Bloody Sunday, January 22, 1905, showed the autocracy's determination to resist the most minimal democratic demands. Twenty thousand workers went to the Czar's palace to "humbly petition" for improvements in their condition. The imperial troops opened fire, killing at least 100 people; hundreds, if not thousands, were wounded. The country erupted in protest. Trotsky immediately left Munich to assist the uprising.

Trotsky was one of the first émigré leaders to return from exile. He began to work with the rank and file of both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and furiously produced scores of proclamations, appeals, essays, leaflets,

and pamphlets on political strategy and tactics. Events made him even more convinced of the need for the proletariat to take power in the coming insurrection.

On October 14, 1905, a general strike broke out in Petrograd (St. Petersburg; later to be renamed Leningrad) Everyone but Trotsky was taken by surprise. The strike was led by a soviet—a council of workers' representatives elected in the workplaces. This new organizational form would become the machinery of worker' power.

Trotsky, now 26 years old, became the acknowledged leader of the Petrograd Soviet. He was involved in constant meetings, and wrote for and edited *three* newspapers. The leadership's most crucial task was to assess moment by moment the strength of the workers so they could judge when to move ahead and when to pull back to avoid defeat.

In *My Life*, Trotsky describes the atmosphere of the revolution:

The 52 days of the existence of the first Soviet were filled to the brim with work... How we managed to live in this whirlpool is still not clear, even to me... We not only whirled in the vortex, but we helped to create it. Everything was done in a hurry, but, after all, not so badly, and some things were even done very well...

A revolutionary chaos is not at all like an earthquake or a flood. In the confusion of a revolution, a new order begins to take shape instantly; men and ideas distribute themselves naturally in new channels. Revolution appears as utter madness only to those whom it sweeps aside and overthrows. To us it was different. We were in our own element, albeit a very stormy one... Some were even able to lead personal lives, to fall in love, to make new friends, and actually to visit revolutionary theaters.<sup>5</sup>

The popular upsurge pushed the Mensheviks to the left. They and the Bolsheviks, still nominally factions within the Russian Social Democratic Party, began planning a merger. With the support of Lenin, the Bolshevik Central Committee passed a resolution stating that there was no longer reasonable grounds for the split. But this reunification was not to be. After the rebellion was suppressed, the Mensheviks resumed a rightward course.

The 1905 revolt was a courageous experiment but it could not succeed. The working class did not have the numbers or the experience to take power. The Soviet began to make the crucial links to the peasants and the army, but it did not have time to complete this process. Since the workers couldn't defeat the Czar with guns, the Soviet called for a financial boycott of the government: no payment of taxes, withdrawal of money from banks, and repudiation of government debts. Fearing these threats to the imperial treasury, the Czar decided the time had come to crush the insurrection and he ordered the arrest of the Soviet leadership.

On December 3, 1905, Trotsky was chairing a session of the Soviet Executive Committee when a police officer came to arrest the entire body. Resistance was impossible, but Trotsky was not willing to preside over a meek and gloomy surrender. Insisting on correct parliamentary procedure, he ruled the officer out of order and asked him to leave. The police officer exited, soon to reappear with a platoon of soldiers. A member of the Soviet exhorted the soldiers not to be used against the people. The officer retreated a second time, afraid the soldiers would turn against him. Finally, a strong detachment of police entered and Trotsky declared the meeting closed.

The leaders of the Petrograd Soviet were imprisoned for 15 months before their trial even began. However, the country was still in political upheaval and they were

treated well and allowed great freedom.

Trotsky used his 15 months in prison to write *Results and Prospects*, a masterful analysis of the Russian rebellion and its lessons—which had proven the theory of Permanent Revolution in every aspect.

The events of 1905 were a dress rehearsal for the next attempt. All the elements of the coming insurgence were there, only on a smaller scale: the workers' soviets, peasant revolts in the countryside, the undermining of the czarist army, and the beginnings of "dual power," in which the rising authority of the Soviet vied for control with government authority.

As Trotsky had expected, the bourgeoisie had taken a reactionary role, backing up the Czar and the counter-revolution. The urban protests had sparked peasant rebellion, and only the proletariat was willing to support their struggle. The new soviet showed the form that a workers' government would take, and events continually pushed it to oppose both the Czar and the bourgeoisie.

## Differences with Lenin

*Results and Prospects* also debated contending strategies for the next uprising.

The Mensheviks insisted that the revolution should only aim to eliminate feudalism and increase democracy and that the movement must be led by the bourgeoisie. Only after the first stage of eliminating feudalism, they argued, could the workers take on the second stage of overthrowing capitalism.

Both Lenin and Trotsky rejected that view. They both thought the liberal Russian bourgeoisie was politically bankrupt and incapable of leadership. They both saw the necessity for a worker-peasant alliance against the monarchy *and* the capitalists. This position was the fundamental dividing line between the revolutionaries and the

reformists.

Although they agreed on the question of the Russian bourgeoisie and on the necessity to replace both feudalism and capitalism, Lenin and Trotsky differed on the class nature of the future state. Lenin thought it possible that the peasantry would develop into an independent force during the struggle. In this case, as a class which upholds private property, the peasantry could derail fulfillment of the workers' socialist demands. To prevent the peasants from taking the lead against the workers, Lenin called for a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" that would cement an alliance between the workers and peasants. This two-class state would implement anti-feudal measures and serve as a launching pad for the workers' continuing battle for socialism. (Lenin used the term "dictatorship" to bring home the point that the new state would forthrightly represent the interests of the worker and peasant classes, just as capitalist governments are disguised dictatorships of the bourgeois class.)

In *Results and Prospects*, Trotsky showed that Lenin's conception of a worker-peasant state was contradictory. If the workers held back on their own demands in order to preserve the alliance with the peasantry, the resulting state would solely represent the peasants. But the peasant class was not strong enough to rule independently. It was internally divided, devoted to private property, and dominated by the rich capitalist farmers. These weaknesses would lead the peasants to create a government that was essentially capitalist, which in Russia meant it would be tied to czarism and imperialism.

Trotsky posed the choices: either a victory for reaction if the bourgeoisie took the lead, or the overthrow of feudalism *and* capitalism by the workers with the support of politicized sectors of the peasantry.

In addition to writing this major theoretical work, Trotsky was also involved in planning the strategy for the defense of the soviet leaders. Massive support for the revolution had forced the Czar to grant a public trial, which opened in September 1906. The defendants seized this opportunity to explain their actions to the nation and the world. Trotsky took the most difficult subject: the defense of the soviet's call for insurrection. In an impassioned courtroom speech, he showed that the criminal brutality of czarism made civil revolt the only form of self-defense open to the people.

Despite the fact that the defendants virtually ruled the courtroom, the verdict was a forgone conclusion. Trotsky and 14 others were deprived of all civil rights and sentenced to exile for life in a Siberian penal colony a thousand miles from the nearest railway.

Once again, Trotsky was making the long trek as a prisoner into Siberia. But 33 days into the trip, before the group of convicts were too far from civilization, Trotsky found a chance to escape. A perilous journey through ice and tundra brought him back to Petrograd. From there he fled Russia and eventually made his way to Vienna.

## Between two revolutions

The period between the political storms of 1905 and 1917 was one of consolidation, of absorbing and teaching the lessons of the first uprising, and preparing for the next showdown, which Trotsky knew was imminent.

Trotsky spent seven years in Vienna—probably the closest he ever came to what would be considered a “normal” life.

During his first exile in Europe, Trotsky had met and become involved with another young Russian Marxist émigré, Natalya Sedova. Their alliance was to last through all the ups and downs of Trotsky's life. While he was in

prison following the 1905 Revolution, she gave birth to their son, Lyova. In Vienna, their second son, Serge, was born.

Trotsky maintained as much contact as possible with his first wife, Alexandra, and helped support their children financially. Like their mother, Trotsky's two daughters became revolutionaries and later staunch members of the Left (anti-Stalinist) Opposition.

In Vienna, Trotsky helped with the housework and child-rearing to free Natalya to participate in political activity and pursue her passionate interest in art. She even succeeded in encouraging Trotsky's appreciation of art, despite his initial lack of interest.

During this period, Trotsky also had more time to devote to his first love, literature. He returned to writing astute and sensitive essays of Marxist literary criticism—an activity he had begun in his first Siberian exile and continued throughout his life.

Trotsky earned a living through journalism and was also occupied with theoretical writing and organizing in Vienna. He attended party congresses and witnessed the growing conservatism of the Mensheviks and the European leaders of the Second International, the world coordinating body of Marxist, Social Democratic parties. Surprisingly, Trotsky was still pushing for the reconciliation of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, a prospect opposed by both groups, especially Lenin. Trotsky later came to see that splits on questions of political principle were sometimes necessary in building a vanguard party.

As the first World War (WWI) approached, Trotsky got a job as a war correspondent in the Balkans. He chillingly depicted the growth of militarism and national chauvinism and the horrors of war. He examined technical aspects of the war such as supply lines, training and battle tactics—knowledge which served him in good stead in his future role as commander of the Red Army.

The outbreak of WWI in 1914, brought the total capitulation of the parties in the Second International. Shamefully bowing to nationalist fervor, each party supported the imperialist war aims of its own country's bourgeoisie.

Opponents of the war, including Trotsky, Lenin and 36 other delegates from eleven countries met in Zimmerwald, Switzerland in September of 1915. Despite fierce debates between the pacifist majority and the revolutionist left wing, the conference unanimously passed a manifesto that condemned the slaughter of the world's workers for the interests of European capitalists.

WWI was a bloodletting of unprecedented horror: a nightmare of trench warfare, bombs, barbed wire and poisonous gas. At least 10 million people were killed in the war and 20 million wounded. Russia was an ill-equipped junior partner of the Allied coalition, which included France, Britain, Japan, the U.S. and others, in a showdown for territory and resources with the Central powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Approximately two-and-a-half million Russians were killed, comprising 40% of all Allied losses. Poorly led by a corrupt military aristocracy, Russia's largely peasant army lacked the most rudimentary level of training, armaments and supplies—often being forced to fight without shoes and on an empty stomach. Needless to say, the soldiers and sailors were swiftly demoralized and radicalized by the experience.

The war forced a series of moves on Trotsky and his family. From Austria, they moved to Switzerland and then to France. As an antiwar leader, Trotsky was expelled from France and then Spain. Finally, the Trotskys ended up in New York City.

Though Trotsky was in New York for only two months, he immediately plunged into the life of the U.S. socialist movement. He studied the development of U.S.

capitalism and was astounded at its explosive growth and power. He foresaw that the U.S. would inevitably displace Europe as the world's economic and cultural center, and he lectured and wrote widely on this subject. In *My Life*, he wrote:

Here I was in New York, city of prose and fantasy, of capitalist automatism, its streets a triumph of cubism, its moral philosophy that of the dollar. New York impressed me tremendously because, more than any other city in the world, it is the fullest expression of our modern age...

If one is to understand the future destiny of humanity, [the decisive role of the United States] is the most important of all subjects...

[It is] the foundry in which the fate of man is to be forged.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Trotsky was very *unimpressed* with the complacent, Sunday-socialist leaders of the U.S. movement. Except for Eugene Debs, whom he greatly admired, he dismissed them all as hopelessly non-revolutionary. Of Morris Hillquit, leader of the Socialist Party, Trotsky said, "A Babbitt of Babbitts is Hillquit, the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists."<sup>7</sup>

## Overthrow of the Czar

In March 1917, the news came of the overthrow of the Russian Czar. Women factory workers had sparked the revolt with a series of strikes beginning March 8, International Women's Day, the holiday proclaimed by socialists in 1910 to honor the struggles of working women. Within days, Trotsky and his family sailed for Russia after a

send-off of flowers and speeches, and—for the first time in their lives—legal Russian passports.

Nevertheless, it wasn't so easy to go back home. Britain, in secret agreement with Russia's new bourgeois government, detained Trotsky and other returning radicals in Canada. They were held in a concentration camp for a month with German prisoners of war and were released only due to pressure from the Russian workers' movement. Once again, they boarded a boat for Russia. This time, their farewell was a rousing chorus of "The International" by the sympathetic German prisoners.

At last on May 4, Trotsky entered Petrograd, the heart of the revolution. As president of the 1905 Soviet, he was greeted by a banner-waving crowd that carried him from the train on their shoulders. The revolution was now ten weeks old. Lenin had arrived from exile a month before.

A Provisional Government had been formed after the Czar's overthrow. This government of liberal representatives of the bourgeoisie had only consented to take power at the insistence of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionary Party, who together had a majority within the newly revived Petrograd Soviet. (The Social Revolutionaries were populists who oriented to the peasants.) But the capitalists were already trying to give the power back to the monarchy. True to the analysis of Lenin and Trotsky, Russian capitalists showed themselves incapable of freeing Russia from feudalism.

In the first six weeks of turmoil (before Lenin returned), Joseph Stalin and Lev Kamenev led the Bolsheviks in a mechanical application of Lenin's earlier slogan of democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. Just as Trotsky had predicted, in life this slogan meant holding back on workers' demands and allowing the bourgeoisie to take power. The Bolsheviks were even getting ready to coalesce with the Mensheviks who were

pushing for a bourgeois government.

The moment Lenin arrived and assessed the situation, he threw out his old slogan and put a stop to negotiations with the Mensheviks. In a fierce but brief inner party struggle, Lenin turned the Bolsheviks toward workers' revolution. The party began organizing around the slogan, "All power to the soviets." This call exposed the moderate socialists at the head of the soviet as incapable of revolutionary leadership and unwilling to take power. Later, when the Bolsheviks became the majority in the soviet, the demand became a rallying cry for insurrection.

Trotsky had returned to Russia with the firm belief that the movement had to go forward to establish a workers state. He was also convinced by now that the Mensheviks were hopelessly anti-revolutionary, based on their support for the war and their actions in the Provisional Government.

Soon he learned that Lenin shared these positions, and had won the Bolsheviks to this perspective.

Now that they were in political agreement, Lenin invited Trotsky and his supporters to join the Bolsheviks. It took a few months of joint collaboration before the regroupment was completed. Meanwhile, Trotsky publicly aligned himself with the Bolsheviks and attended meetings of the Bolshevik Central Committee in an advisory capacity.

## **Preparing for insurrection**

To the public, Trotsky seemed to be the foremost leader of the uprising. Lenin worked primarily within the party and was in hiding during part of this period to avoid assassination by the reactionaries. Trotsky was the movement's most popular and powerful orator. And he was one of the main figures in the Petrograd Soviet.

Month by month and week by week, the opportunity

for insurrection ripened. Gradually, the liberal bourgeois leadership and the moderate socialists were exposed. Large numbers of soldiers and sailors were won over to the promise of revolutionary change. Peasant war ignited the countryside. The workers swung more and more to the left after betrayals by the liberals. Steadily, the Bolshevik representation in the soviets grew until they became the majority.

Yet as the time approached for open revolt, the conservative wing of the Bolsheviks faltered. Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev adamantly opposed an uprising, believing it was bound to fail. When they were outvoted on the Central Committee, they announced their disagreement publicly in an anti-Bolshevik newspaper!

Undaunted, the plans to overthrow the bourgeois regime went forward. Lenin was underground, and the organizing work fell to Trotsky. He was now the head of the Petrograd Soviet and the chair of the Revolutionary Military Committee, the planning committee for the uprising. Trotsky watched for the right moment and made careful preparations. Every move, such as arming the workers and keeping the most politically advanced troops in the city, was done entirely in the open in the name of defense against the czarists. The government was caught completely off guard.

On November 7, 1917, Trotsky coordinated the insurrection from an office at the Soviet headquarters:

The members of the Revolutionary Committee went out into the various districts and I was left alone. . . in the tiny corner room on the third floor, so like the captain's bridge on that deciding night of the revolution.

The [telephone] rings incessantly about important things and trifles. Each ring heightens the alertness of the

silence. One can readily picture the deserted streets of Petrograd, dimly lit, and whipped by the autumn winds from the sea; the bourgeois and officials cowering in their beds, trying to guess what is going on in those dangerous and mysterious streets; the workers' quarters quiet with the tense sleep of a war-camp. . . The life of the capital, thrusting its head from one epoch into another on this autumn night, is concentrated about a group of telephones.

It seems that everything has been foreseen; the leaders are in their places; the contacts are assured; nothing seems to have been forgotten. Once more, let us go over it in our minds. This night decides. . . There can be no doubt about victory; it is as assured as the victory of any uprising can be. And yet, these hours are still tense and full of alarm, for the coming night decides. . .

Armed detachments from the districts march along the streets. . . and take possession of one institution after another. Nearly everywhere these detachments are met by friends. . . All the more important points in the city are given over into our hands almost without resistance, without fighting, without casualties.

All is well. It could not have gone better. Now I may leave the telephone. I sit down on the couch. The nervous tension lessens. A dull sensation of fatigue comes over me. . . I try to remember when I last had food, but I can't. At all events, it was not yesterday.<sup>8</sup>

## The Bolsheviks in power

Nobody got a break on the day after the revolution. The Bolsheviks had to immediately take on government responsibilities to keep the country going. They had

to carry the movement into the countryside and consolidate it throughout the vast, poorly connected nation. Without delay, they had to implement their slogan for “Peace, Land, and Bread”—to pull Russia out of the war, divide the land among the peasants, and revive agriculture and industry in order to feed the people.

One of the most important tasks in these first days was the issuing of proclamations from the national Soviet of People’s Commissars. Position statements went out on every topic of economic, political, administrative and cultural life. This required developing a concrete platform on every issue, an enormous job of research and thought. Trotsky and Lenin were deeply involved in formulating these policies. The decrees were mainly of educational value to show the world what the Russian uprising stood for and provide a guide for future revolutions in case of defeat.

The day after the insurrection, the national Soviet unanimously adopted Lenin’s decree calling for an immediate end to the imperialist war and stating Russia’s unilateral readiness to open peace negotiations.

As the new Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Trotsky published the Czar’s secret treaties, laying bare the mercenary war aims of Russia and its imperialist allies. He also had the incredibly difficult task of conducting peace negotiations with Germany, the only combatant willing to discuss an armistice. He did a heroic job in trying to reach a peaceful settlement with a predatory opponent that had little incentive to stop its military offensive. In return for ceasing aggression, Germany demanded control over numerous small nations bordering Russia.

The newborn workers state had absolutely no leverage in pressing for a just peace without surrendering territory to German domination. Starving Russian troops had already deserted the frontlines. The few remaining

soldiers were unwilling to fight even a defensive war against foreign invasion.

Lenin felt virtually any offer had to be accepted as the price of preserving the socialist revolution. He was opposed by the majority in the Soviet and among the Bolsheviks, who unrealistically called for continuing the war as a matter of principle to protect the autonomy of the small nations. The bitter dispute threatened to split the party at a disastrous moment.

Trotsky put forward a compromise policy of “No Peace, No War” that was agreed to by both sides. This strategy meant Russia would unilaterally stop waging war but it would not sign a treaty that agreed to Germany’s seizure of other nations. It was hoped this approach would radicalize the German masses and expose the plunderous aims of German imperialism. If Germany broke the cease-fire, it would be clear to the world that Russia had been forced at gunpoint to submit to a peace that violated the principles of Bolshevism.

The “No Peace, No War” strategy was a gamble and, in a sense, it failed. Germany invaded. Russia was forced to sign a treaty that was even worse than the one it had repudiated earlier. But it was clear to all that the survival of the Soviet workers state had compelled Russia to accept the terms. In the end, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, named for the town where the negotiations took place, stood for only a year. In 1918, the treaty became moot when the German empire crumbled under military defeat and revolution.

Even before the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations were finished, Trotsky was appointed Commissar of War. His new assignment was to conduct the military defense of the new Soviet Republic against six counterrevolutionary czarist armies and invading forces of Germany, France, Britain, the U.S., and Japan. The war was fought on 14

fronts extending more than 5,000 miles.

Trotsky described the civil war and the situation he faced in 1918:

All the aftermath of [WWI] was then just beginning to make itself felt. At times, it seemed as if everything were slipping and crumbling, as if there were nothing to hold to, nothing to lean upon. One wondered if a country so despairing, so economically exhausted, so devastated, had enough sap left in it to support a new regime and preserve its independence. There was no food. There was no army. The railways were completely disorganized. The machinery of state was just beginning to take shape. Conspiracies were being hatched everywhere.

Each [army] unit lived its own distinct life, sharing in common only a willingness to retreat... The soil itself seemed to be infected with panic. The fresh Red detachments, arriving in vigorous mood, were immediately engulfed by the inertia of retreat. A rumor began to spread among the local peasantry that the Soviets were doomed. Priests and tradesmen lifted their heads. The revolutionary elements in the villages went into hiding. Everything was crumbling; there was nothing to hold to. The situation seemed hopeless.<sup>9</sup>

Trotsky created an army where there was none. He instilled courage where there was none. For two-and-a-half years, he lived on a special train that took him from one front to the next, enforcing discipline, bringing necessary supplies, directing battles and personally taking part in the fighting when necessary.

His train was staffed by the most tested and loyal Bolsheviks—impressively dressed in leather jackets. As Trotsky observed: “The appearance of a leather-coated

detachment in a dangerous place invariably had an overwhelming effect.”<sup>10</sup> The train “linked the front with the base, solved urgent problems on the spot, educated, appealed, supplied, rewarded, and punished. . . The strongest cement in the new army was the ideas of the October Revolution, and the train supplied the front with this cement.”<sup>11</sup>

Soon, the renown of Trotsky’s train achieved mythical proportions. Its appearance revived the spirits of the exhausted Red Army troops. Rumors of its approach struck fear in the hearts of the White counterrevolutionary armies.

At many points, the fate of the workers state was in question. But Trotsky always swung the balance with his political exhortations and military genius. After 30 months of fighting, the counterrevolution and invasions were smashed. From the demoralized fragments of the former imperial troops, Trotsky had created the Red Army: five million disciplined, steeled soldiers, educated in the spirit of Bolshevism.

Trotsky was accomplishing the nearly impossible, but still lacked the full backing of all elements within the Communist Party. Lenin was a consistent supporter, pointedly issuing a blank authorization to show his intrinsic trust in Trotsky’s ability and judgment. Even so, Trotsky had to put up numerous fights: over military strategies and tactics; over the use of trained officers from the old army; over his insistence that so-called “proletarian” guerrilla skirmishes were not effective in a war of this scope. Some people were also angry when Trotsky opposed the “democratic right” of each army commander and officer to determine tactics and when he demanded that discipline be followed and orders carried out.

Stalin also created many problems for Trotsky at this

time. He nurtured the grievances of those who had been called into line by Trotsky, and he even stood behind one commander who consistently refused to follow Trotsky's orders as head of the Red Army.

In 1919, while the civil war against the czarists was at its height, the founding conference of the Communist (Third) International was held. International revolt was on the upswing. There had been an uprising in Germany and political upheaval in Hungary and Bavaria. Asia and India were rebelling against their colonial rulers.

The Third International was formed by Lenin and Trotsky to support and guide these and other revolutions and to pass on the experience of the Russian Communists. The International was a living endorsement of Permanent Revolution's tenet that only international socialism could guarantee the safety and ensure the progress of the Russian workers state.

## Hard times

By the close of the civil war two years later, all the international upheavals that held such promise of support for Russia had been defeated and suppressed. Instead of aid from a socialist Europe, the Bolsheviks could expect only years of enforced isolation.

The situation was desperate. Seven years of imperialist war, civil war, and foreign intervention had ravaged the country's economic and human resources. The working class was decimated. Agriculture was totally disrupted. Reserves of coal and iron were completely used up. There were barely any railways left in operation. Then nature struck: drought, blizzards, sand storms, and, literally, a plague of locusts. Five million peasants starved to death.

These were the dire conditions that laid the basis for the subsequent bureaucratization of the Soviet state.

The revolution had created a state that was run by and for the workers—in other words, what is known by Marxists as the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The role of the workers dictatorship is to suppress and expropriate the hostile classes, and then to train the liberated majority to administer and rule on their own behalf. Marxists believe that a workers state is the first step toward socialism and ultimately to a classless society in which systems of cooperation function without any need for a state to enforce them. But this progressive scenario presupposes material and cultural resources that were totally lacking in exhausted, ruined Russia.

Instead of the state beginning to wither away and a new proletarian administration taking root—as Marx, Engels, and Lenin had foreseen—a bureaucracy arose that came to be all-powerful in determining who would eat and what policies would run the country.

Russia's devastating economic conditions reinforced fear and conservative tendencies. With famine raging outside, government functionaries became mainly interested in keeping their government positions. Conservatism was expressed in an overwhelming desire for stability; a wish to set a course that seemed safe and stick to it, regardless of the material and political changes that demanded a new approach.

From the beginning, Trotsky was a thorn in the side of the petty bureaucrats. He was a harsh critic who never stopped pushing for improvements and proposing new orientations—often before Lenin arrived at the same position.

An early example occurred in 1919, when Trotsky proposed an end to the policy of War Communism—the enforced nationalization of industry and requisitioning of goods that had been necessary to feed the cities and keep the country alive during the civil war. By 1919, Trotsky

understood that workers and peasants had been pushed to the limits of sacrifice. To revive the shattered economy, he proposed the introduction of limited capitalist trade, using economic self-interest to spark industrial and agricultural production.

A year later, Lenin endorsed the New Economic Policy (NEP), which proceeded exactly along the lines proposed by Trotsky. He and Trotsky always saw the NEP as a necessary, but forced, retreat on the economic program of the revolution.

In 1921, Trotsky urged that planning be introduced into the NEP to correct imbalances between agriculture and light and heavy industry, to set production goals, and to oversee the allocation of resources. These measures would curb and control the market economy and keep it from coming into conflict with the socialized economy. Initially, Lenin thought planning was contradictory to the goals of the NEP, but in 1922, he endorsed Trotsky's ideas.

The growing bureaucracy rightly saw Trotsky as a dangerous antagonist. The functionaries played up any differences of opinion between Lenin and Trotsky in order to discredit Trotsky. But on all key issues, Trotsky and Lenin found agreement, even if it took a little while to get there.

### **The rise of the bureaucracy**

After the civil war, Lenin's health deteriorated. In May 1922, he was hit by a stroke that immobilized him and took away his power of speech. His illness shook the whole country to the core. What would happen if Lenin died? Incredibly, he recovered most of his faculties within a few months.

In December of that year however, Lenin's weakened condition led him to officially quit attending meetings of

the Politburo, the small guiding body of the Communist Party Central Committee. With Lenin absent, a secret faction of Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev developed inside the Politburo. Their aim was to block the proposals of Trotsky, the only other member of the Politburo.

For many years, Zinoviev and Kamenev had represented the conservative wing of the Bolsheviks. As for Stalin, Trotsky described him as "the personification of mediocrity" within the party. Stalin was an arch-bureaucrat, a pragmatist and not much of a thinker. His main criteria in decision-making were not what was needed to support the struggle, but what would strengthen his own position and what would undercut Trotsky.

It was clear that Lenin would be unable to oversee the long-term workings of the party. The question arose of who would take his place when he died. The three-person bloc in the Politburo was determined that the next leader of the party and the Soviet Union should *not* be Trotsky.

Lenin himself was increasingly concerned with trying to safeguard the party's political leadership. He formed an alliance with Trotsky to stop the growth of the bureaucracy and especially to expose Stalin's growing abuse of power.

As head of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate, Stalin had turned his staff into a private police force within the government. The Inspectorate was originally created to watch over government efficiency and provide political leadership, but now it became an obstacle to efficiency. Loyalty to Stalin had become the first job requirement.

Another example of Stalin's ruthlessness and disregard of political principal was his treatment of national minorities—even though he himself was a Georgian. In 1922, Stalin made a mockery of the Bolshevik principle of the right of self-determination of oppressed nations by

brutally suppressing independent political expression in his own homeland of Georgia.

Lenin and Trotsky were in agreement on the need to stop these and other bureaucratic abominations, and they prepared a united fight. But until Lenin recovered enough to jointly launch the anti-bureaucracy campaign, Trotsky hesitated to begin the fight and open himself up to charges that he was vying for Lenin's place.

Trotsky, too, was chronically ill during these months, suffering from gout, colitis, and constant high fevers. His doctors urged him to leave Moscow during the frozen winter months and go to the warmer climate of southern Russia. On the train south, the news came. On January 21, 1924, Lenin died.

Lenin's death devastated Trotsky, the party, and the whole country. All had hoped against hope that Lenin would completely recover and be able to resume his place at the forefront of the revolution. He was beloved for his brilliant leadership and his personal integrity, honesty and humanity. He was the creator of the party, the steely will of the rebellion, the leader who had guided the country through all the difficult years surrounding the social and political transformation of Russia.

While the country mourned, the triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev prepared to do battle against Trotsky and against Leninism. Stalin lied to Trotsky about the date of Lenin's funeral, telling him to continue his trip, claiming it would be impossible for him to return in time for the funeral. Trotsky's absence gave rise to rumors that there had been a split between him and Lenin at the end.

Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, brought her husband's final political testament to the party Secretariat and demanded that it be read at the forthcoming party congress, as he had wished. The Secretariat, headed

by Stalin, rejected her request. Krupskaya appealed to the Central Committee, which refused by an overwhelming majority to present the testament to the party.

Why were they so afraid? Because Lenin's testament detailed his concern over the leadership of the party. He described the strengths and weaknesses of the major figures on the Central Committee, specifically focusing on Trotsky and Stalin as the most likely successors:

Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary, has concentrated an enormous power in his hands; and I am not sure that he always knows how to use that power with sufficient caution. On the other hand, Comrade Trotsky. . . is distinguished not only by his exceptional abilities—personally, he is, to be sure, the most able man in the present Central Committee—but also by his too far-reaching self-confidence and a disposition to be too much attracted by the purely administrative side of affairs.<sup>12</sup>

Lenin had also added a postscript, after he learned about Stalin's betrayals and had formed his bloc with Trotsky:

Stalin is too rude, and this fault, entirely supportable in relations among us Communists, becomes insupportable in the office of General Secretary. Therefore, I propose to the comrades to find a way to remove Stalin from that position and appoint to it another man who in all respects differs from Stalin only in superiority—namely more patient, more loyal, more polite and more attentive to comrades, less capricious, etc.<sup>13</sup>

Lenin's testament was suppressed and its very existence was denied in the Soviet Union until the Khrushchev revelations of 1956, which publicly repudi-

ated Stalin's lies and exposed his brutal crimes against the soviet people.

After Lenin's death, Stalin went on the offensive against Trotsky. He magnified all the differences that had ever existed between Trotsky and Lenin, and particularly played up Trotsky's early mistake in supporting the Mensheviks.

In attacking Trotsky, Stalin also assaulted Leninism (while invoking Lenin as a holy saint). Stalin especially leveled his guns against the theory of Permanent Revolution. International insurgency posed a threat to the stability of the bureaucracy, although it was a lifeline for the revolution.

Stalin invented the notion that socialism could be built in one country—the Soviet Union—in isolation from the rest of the world. He promoted "détente" with imperialism in order to be left in peace. He resurrected the Menshevik notion of "two-stage" revolt as a way to keep colonial liberation struggles contained within bourgeois-democratic limits.

In advanced capitalist countries, he shackled the Communist Parties, promising domestic stability to liberal governments in exchange for diplomatic advantages for the Soviet Union. These policies led directly to the sellout of the 1926 British general strike and to the massacre of the 1925-27 Chinese Revolution.

The Chinese betrayal was especially horrifying. Stalin ordered the young Chinese Communist Party to surrender its independence to the bourgeois Kuomintang Party. No sooner had this happened, than the Kuomintang's leader, Chiang Kai-shek, slaughtered the Communists and throttled the Chinese uprising. Ten thousand workers and radicals were murdered in this rout.

Conciliation with capitalism abroad was mirrored on the home front in the policy of encouraging peasants to

get rich through the New Economic Policy. Whereas Trotsky and his co-thinkers insisted that the Soviet Union must speedily industrialize to prevent being overwhelmed by the West, the rightwing Bolsheviks were anxious to appease the rich farmers and declared they would build socialism at a "tortoise's pace." Stalin, who as usual had no policy of his own, abetted the rightwing against Trotsky.

## The Left Opposition

The disastrous events in China and the dangerous growth of the rich peasants in the Soviet Union sparked the formation of the Left Opposition in 1925. Virtually all of the Bolsheviks who had played a significant role in the October Revolution were initial members of the Opposition, including Nadezhda Krupskaya. Zinoviev and Kamenev temporarily rallied to the Opposition and, although they soon capitulated to Stalin, their exposé of his machinations and lies was invaluable.

Yet, as Trotsky later explained, it was not possible for the Opposition to overcome Stalin. The years of poverty and the international defeats contrived by Stalin created great demoralization among the workers. Their resulting conservatism reinforced support for Stalin's policy of "socialism in one country."

The Left Opposition was defeated by Stalin in 1927-28 through a massive campaign that included denunciations, frame-ups, recantations, expulsions, deportations, and imprisonment. Just when the Opposition was vanquished, the rich peasants rose up and almost overthrew the Soviet government. Ironically, Stalin was forced to hurriedly adopt the Opposition's policies of industrialization and collectivization of agriculture (without giving them any credit, of course). These measures were implemented during the 1930s, with the brutality that was the

hallmark of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Such methods would have been absolutely unnecessary if the strategies of Trotsky and the Left Opposition had been instituted early on.

The task of fighting the bureaucracy and rallying the Left Opposition in the years following Lenin's death did not stop Trotsky from making rich contributions to the new culture developing in the Soviet republic. In 1924, he wrote the classic of Marxist literary criticism, *Literature and Revolution*. In this work, he analyzes the literary trends emerging in the new society, offering invaluable direction and advice, praising what was good, and explaining the inadequacies and faults. He had no patience for so-called "proletarian" art (boy meets tractor), pointing out that the revolution's final goal was the elimination of *all* classes, not the enshrining of the proletariat. He denounced the bureaucrats' effrontery in attempting to dictate in the field of art. He ends with a passionate and beautiful projection of the unknown heights that art—and humanity—will achieve in the communist future.

In contrast to Trotsky's vision, the reign of Stalin and the witch hunt against Trotsky and his followers was ugly and disgusting.

No Marxist principle or historical fact was too important for Stalin not to distort or deny it if it served his purposes. In the world's first workers state, the workers were silenced by mass terror. Only blind obedience was allowed. Internal democracy was wiped out in every Communist Party in the world, and the world communist movement became a rubber stamp for the corrupt policies of the Kremlin.

Trotsky was publicly denounced and vilified as an enemy of the revolution and Lenin. He was thrown out of the Third International, barred from all party offices and responsibilities, and expelled from the party. He was

exiled to Asian Russia, deported to Turkey, deprived of Soviet citizenship, and denied entry into every country in the world. His followers were slaughtered. Political genocide was committed against the whole generation that made the revolution. Trotsky's sons were murdered. His daughters were driven to early deaths. His grandchildren in Russia disappeared.

His closest friends and comrades were tortured into denouncing him. He was eliminated from historical photos and then from the history of the revolution altogether. The founder of the Red Army, architect of the insurrection, leader of the soviets of 1905 and 1917 was painted as the incarnation of counterrevolution and fascism. This was the man whose role was so closely identified with Lenin that shortly after the revolution, one isolated, backwater town renamed itself Lenin-trotsky, thinking they were the same person!

Yet, during the 20 years he endured the onslaught of Stalinism, Trotsky never once stooped to self-pity, cynicism, or despair. He was amazingly objective about the historical forces that had determined his fate. He grieved deeply for those who were crushed by Stalin. As the last representative of the generation that made the Russian Revolution, he saw as his mission the preservation of the insurgent spirit of Marxism and Leninism.

Trotsky used every opportunity, and every slight chance of an opportunity, to appeal to the forces of world socialism, to expose the Stalinist abomination and to point the way toward the victory of the international working class.

### **Growth of the Trotskyist movement**

In 1928, from exile in Asian Russia, Trotsky sent a momentous document to the Sixth World Congress of the Third International. In a critique of Stalin's program for

the International, Trotsky refuted the concept of socialism in one country. He also appealed to the International to reverse the expulsion of the Left Opposition from the Russian party.

Somehow the document got through the bureaucratic web and landed in the Translating Room at the Congress, where it was dutifully translated and distributed to members of the Program Committee. James P. Cannon, a delegate from the U.S., received a copy and ignored the rest of the Congress while he read and studied it. All his questions about the expulsion of the Left Opposition were answered: truth was on the side of Trotsky! Cannon smuggled a copy back to the U.S. and immediately began to organize for Trotskyism.<sup>14</sup> For a year, the U.S. Trotskyists didn't even know if Trotsky were alive or dead. But they knew his ideas were worth the sacrifices they made to defend them.

Trotsky was deported from the USSR to a small island in Turkey in 1929. Though isolated in a remote location, he was able to correspond more easily with the groupings of the Left Opposition that now existed all over the world: in Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, China, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Ceylon, the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. From this point on, Trotsky was ceaselessly involved in meetings with visiting radicals, discussions, and mountains of correspondence with the international movement. He strove to clarify the program of the Opposition and to educate and train its cadre.

During the four-and-a-half years Trotsky spent in Turkey, he wrote *The Stalin School of Falsification*, *The Third International After Lenin*, *Permanent Revolution*, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, *My Life*, and *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Articles, pamphlets and letters written in that period were later collected in the books

*The Spanish Revolution* and *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*.

In these works, the ideological foundations of Trotskyism were established: 1) adherence to the revolutionary traditions of Marx and Lenin; 2) Permanent Revolution as the strategy for backward countries in the age of imperialism; 3) the necessity for international socialism; and 4) proletarian democracy—the right of a party minority to express its opinion while observing solidarity in action.

One of Trotsky's major efforts in the 1930s was the attempt to rally the Left to stop the development of fascism in Germany. Beginning three years before Hitler's rise to power, Trotsky was the first to warn against the horrifying danger of fascism and to define it as capitalism's last-ditch effort to destroy the workers' movement. Over and over, up until the final crushing of the Left and the unions, Trotsky called on the Social Democrats and Communists to fight this menace by "marching separately, but striking together." If they didn't form a united front, organize armed self-defense, and prepare for civil war, they would be smashed by the fascists.

His warnings were almost totally ignored. The Social Democrats were strongly anti-Communist. The Communists, unwilling to participate in any movement they couldn't control, denounced the socialists as "social fascists" and said they were as big a threat as the real fascists. Both sides denounced Trotsky as an alarmist trying to stir up trouble for his own ends. Hitler rolled to power without ever facing a serious fight with the Communists. The leadership of the Third International declared that the German Communist Party's strategy had been flawless. Not a single party in the Comintern raised any criticisms of Stalin's disastrous policy.

The Third International's capitulation to fascism decisively showed it no longer served the purposes of international revolution. "An organization which has not been wakened up by the thunderbolt of fascism is dead and cannot be revived," said Trotsky.<sup>15</sup>

In 1937, Trotsky published *The Revolution Betrayed*, a sweeping analysis and denunciation of the bureaucratic degeneration of the workers state under Stalin. He examined Soviet economic and foreign policy, the position of the working class and the peasantry, the role of the bureaucracy, the reactionary enshrining of the nuclear family and women's oppression, the oppression of national minorities, and more.

The combination of all these factors brought him to the conclusion that the bureaucracy could not be reformed. Only a political revolution, an overthrow of the bureaucratic government, could restore the Soviet Union to the road to socialism. Despite this conclusion, Trotsky stressed that the USSR must still be defended against imperialist attack. As a workers state, its economic foundations rested on nationalized property and were far more advanced than capitalism. The problem was the bureaucracy, not the Soviet system.

## Formation of the Fourth International

From the time Trotsky declared the Third International dead, it took four years of ceaseless work to achieve the founding of the Fourth International. In his journal, Trotsky described why he saw building the International as the most important work of his life.

Had I not been present in 1917 in Petrograd, the October Revolution would still have taken place—on the condition that Lenin was present and in command. ...The same could by and large be said of the Civil War.

...But now my work is "indispensable" in the full sense of the word... The collapse of the two Internationals has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve. The vicissitudes of my personal fate have confronted me with this problem and armed me with important experience in dealing with it. There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third International... I need at least about five more years of uninterrupted work to ensure the succession.<sup>16</sup>

As prospects for building the Fourth International developed, Trotsky renewed his efforts to get out of Turkey and into more direct contact with international Trotskyist groupings.

He first gained asylum in France and later in Norway. But he ended up more isolated in these Western "democracies" than in Turkey, because he was constantly hounded by Stalinists and fascists. In addition, the liberal and labor governments in these countries attempted to prevent him from engaging in *any* political organizing, writing or speaking.

Trotsky's American and Mexican supporters, including radical artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, finally persuaded Mexico to grant him asylum in 1937. Since Mexico was in the midst of its own revolution, Trotsky was allowed complete freedom of activity—as long as he stayed out of Mexican affairs.

In 1938, the Fourth International was officially formed. As its program, it adopted the analysis laid out by Trotsky in *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*. Known as the Transitional Program, this document outlines the state of world capital-

ism and the crisis of leadership of the workingclass movement. It delineates the strategies and tactics for achieving socialism in our epoch.

Trotsky raises the necessity of orienting to the most oppressed workers, specifically women and youth:

Opportunist organizations by their very nature concentrate their chief attention on the top layers of the working class and therefore ignore both the youth and the woman worker. The decay of capitalism, however, deals its heaviest blows to the woman as a wage earner and as a housewife. The sections of the Fourth International should seek bases of support among the most exploited layers of the working class, consequently among the women workers. Here they will find inexhaustible stores of devotion, selflessness, and readiness to sacrifice.<sup>17</sup>

The beginning years of the Fourth International were stormy, full of splits and faction fights which refined and clarified its role and program. But this was a time of great satisfaction for Trotsky as he energetically constructed a world organization for the liberation of humanity.

The Stalinists escalated their attacks on Trotsky, furious that the movement they had tried to kill had been reborn. Threats against Trotsky by Mexican Stalinists posed a constant danger to his life. His house in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City, was turned into a small fortress with a watchtower at the main entrance, barred doors, sandbagged walls, guarded round-the-clock by police in the street and up to ten armed supporters inside.

### **Relations with U.S. Trotskyists**

The American Trotskyist party, called the Socialist Workers Party (from which later emerged the Freedom

Socialist Party), sent comrades to Mexico to act as Trotsky's guards and secretaries.

Trotsky had long been fascinated by the problems of the American revolution. Since his days in Turkey, he was in constant correspondence with the U.S. Trotskyists and guided them through the mergers and splits that resulted in the formation of the Socialist Workers Party. Now, in Mexico, he was able to work directly with the U.S. section.

Socialist Workers Party leaders met with Trotsky in Coyoacan and had invaluable discussions on such issues as the labor party, trade union tactics and strategy, the fight against fascism in the U.S., and the Black movement.

The question concerning the African American struggle was whether Blacks constituted an actual or potential nation or whether they were instead a specially oppressed sector of the U.S. working class. Trotsky urged the American comrades to reject race privilege and closely study the African American movement to determine the correct strategy. Again he urged them to orient to the most oppressed workers. Only in this way could the party retain its Bolshevik character.

The trade union bureaucrats, like the bureaucrats of false Communism, live in the atmosphere of aristocratic prejudices of the upper strata of the workers. It will be a tragedy if the Oppositionists are infected even in the slightest degree with these qualities. We must not only reject and condemn these prejudices; we must burn them out of our consciousness to the last trace. We must find the road to the most deprived, to the darkest strata of the proletariat, beginning with the Negro, whom capitalist society has converted into a pariah and who must learn to see in us his revolutionary brothers. And this depends wholly upon our energy and devotion to the work.<sup>18</sup>

Trotsky's consistent call to orient toward the most oppressed and exploited workers—people of color, women, youth, and national minorities—still forms the dividing line between revolutionary socialism and accommodation to capitalism. Trotskyist feminism, as put forward by the Freedom Socialist Party, represents the only tendency today which consistently follows Trotsky's orientation and calls for the *leadership* of the most oppressed, who experience the worst capitalism has to offer and have no stake in preserving it.

At the beginning of World War II, Trotsky took a leading role in a fight which emerged in the Socialist Workers Party over the defense of the Soviet Union, Marxist philosophy, and the nature of the party. The minority faction, led by longtime party leaders James Burnham, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern, rejected dialectical materialism in favor of "common sense." They claimed that the Soviet Union was no longer a workers state and thus did not need to be defended against the imperialists.

In collaboration with the party majority, led by James P. Cannon, Trotsky mounted a successful battle to defend the party's ideology and political integrity in a time of great pressure to concede to nationalism and conservatism. Trotsky's written contributions to this struggle are contained in the book *In Defense of Marxism*.

## Life and death in Coyoacan

Trotsky was always interested in learning about people and cultures, so he was glad to have the chance to work with the Mexican and U.S. comrades at Coyoacan.

Joseph Hansen, one of the guards from the U.S., told the following story:

A young schoolteacher showed up one time. He . . . knew a little about Trotskyism. . . [and] decided he

wanted to talk with Trotsky. It turned out that he was a farm boy and rather at loose ends. . . Trotsky took me aside after a few days. "Wouldn't he make a good guard?"

I was surprised. I had discovered that actually he was a pacifist.

"Couldn't you persuade him to become a guard?"

I demurred. He was from somewhere in the Middle West but that was hardly a guarantee as to his reliability.

"He is a real American peasant."

It became clear why Trotsky wanted us to bring him in. He had never had the opportunity to study the American peasant at close range. Here was a live one within reach!

It turned out that the peasant was a crack shot with a rifle. The only trouble was that he didn't want to kill anything, above all a human being. In this special instance, however, he agreed that if we were attacked he would shoot to kill.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the constant state of siege, life was not all grim at Coyoacan.

The only way Trotsky could relax was through hard, physical exertion. In Russia and Turkey, he had hunted and fished as often as possible. Since this was more difficult in Mexico, he invented the sport of collecting cacti on the mountainside.

Hansen tells of a trip to Guadalajara on a primitive road.

Hundreds of miles of mud holes—Trotsky out of the car mile after mile up to his knees in mud, splattered from head to foot with mud, red brick mud even in his white bushy hair, pushing the automobile, losing his white cap, organizing campesinos, ropes, drivers when we were completely bogged down, at every point at the

front in the struggle with the mud... Trotsky really enjoyed that trip. It was as full of action as if we had been a contingent of the Red Army en route for battle. "Just like the good old days," Trotsky said enthusiastically, face flushed. "The road is just like a Russian road."<sup>20</sup>

These rigorous activities ended when Trotsky's health began to deteriorate and Stalinist attacks made it too dangerous to leave the compound. Trotsky took to raising rabbits and chickens, which he tended scrupulously and fed by "strictly scientific" formulas.

In the spring of 1940, a shadowy figure began to unobtrusively make his way onto the scene. He was known as Frank Jacson, the boyfriend of one of the American secretaries, Sylvia Agelof. In fact, he was a trained assassin of the GPU, the Soviet secret police.

Jacson gradually made friends with the guards and learned the household routine and the layout of the house.

In the middle of the night of May 24th, a group of Stalinists, led by Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, attacked the compound with machine guns and bombs. One guard was killed, but amazingly the rest of the household sustained only minor injuries.

Trotsky continued to work at his usual relentless pace and submitted to the increased fortification of the house with humor and resignation.

Jacson continued to bide his time.

Later, all recalled August 20, 1940 as a day that began with remarkable calm and serenity. Trotsky awoke feeling unusually well. He spent a couple of hours tending the chickens and rabbits and then approached his intellectual work with zest.

Shortly after five in the afternoon, Trotsky was back outside feeding the rabbits. Natalya Sedova looked out the window and saw that Jacson was standing beside

him. He had written an article and wanted Trotsky's suggestions.

They went to Trotsky's study and Trotsky began reading the article. As he studied it, Jacson removed an ice-axe from under his coat and smashed it into Trotsky's skull.

With superhuman response, Trotsky fought his assassin, preventing Jacson from taking another blow. Trotsky staggered to the door as his guards came running. His injury was massive but he still had time to give his last message to the movement: "I am close to death from the blow of a political assassin... Please say to our friends. . . I am sure of the victory of the Fourth International. Go forward."<sup>21</sup>

The day after Trotsky's death, a massive crowd marched in the funeral cortege behind his coffin. For five days he lay in state as 300,000 people, many from the poorest sections of the community, filed by. He is buried at the house in Coyoacan, which is now both a museum and the home of Trotsky's grandson, Esteban Seva Volkov.

## Trotsky's legacy

Leon Trotsky's life and ideas were utterly inseparable. The revolution was his motivating passion. Whether he was locked in a czarist prison or addressing a mass meeting in the midst of civil uprising, or sending encouragement from exile, Trotsky never lost faith in the future.

And despite the outrages and tragedies of his personal history, the meaning of his life lies in the hope and inspiration it offers to those who insist on truth and freedom at any cost.

Not only Trotsky could rise to this destiny. The pages of his biography are filled with the names and deeds of countless women and men who are little remembered, but who each played a role in shaping history. We honor

them, too, in honoring Trotsky.

But our most important tribute lies in the work we do to bring humanity closer to the epoch of world socialism.

This is the message that Trotsky left us in the political testament he wrote in February of the year he was killed:

For 43 years of my conscious life I have remained a revolutionist; for 42 of them I have fought under the banner of Marxism. If I had to begin all over again I would of course try to avoid this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged. I shall die a proletarian revolutionist, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and, consequently, an irreconcilable atheist. My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent, indeed it is firmer today, than it was in the days of my youth.

[Natalya] has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence and enjoy it to the full.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

1. Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pg. 142.
2. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed, Trotsky: 1879-1921, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pg. 110-111.
3. *The Prophet Armed*, pg. 111.
4. *The Prophet Armed*, pg. 111-112.
5. *My Life*, pg. 178-179.
6. *My Life*, pg. 270, 278.
7. *My Life*, pg. 274.
8. *My Life*, pg. 323-325.
9. *My Life*, pg. 395, 396.
10. *My Life*, pg. 420.
11. *My Life*, pg. 411.
12. *Leon Trotsky on the Suppressed Testament of Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pg. 5-6.
13. *Trotsky on the Suppressed Testament of Lenin*, pg. 7.
14. James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pg. 49. Trotsky's criticism of the Comintern draft program is published in the book, *The Third International After Lenin*. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).
15. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast, Trotsky: 1929-1940, Volume III* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), pg. 201.
16. *My Life*, pg. vii.
17. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), pg. 110.
18. Tom Boot, "Revolutionary Integration: Yesterday and Today," *Freedom Socialist*, Special Supplement Spring 1983, pg. 4 (quoting *The Militant*, May 1929).
19. Joseph Hanson, "Introduction: With Trotsky in Coyoacan," in Trotsky's *My Life*, pg. xv-xvi.
20. Joseph Hansen, James P. Cannon, Natalya Sedova, et al., *Leon Trotsky: The Man and His Work* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), pg. 28.
21. *The Prophet Outcast*, pg. 507.
22. Francis Wyndham and David King, *Trotsky: A Documentary* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), pg. 196.