

Speeches commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Trotsky's assassination

Trotsky's struggle against Stalin and the tragic fate of the Soviet Union

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At two meetings commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, speakers illuminated the contemporary significance of Trotsky's work. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the World Socialist Web Site hosted the meetings in Berlin and London in September. WSWs Editorial Board member Vladimir Volkov gave the following speech on September 23 in Berlin. Tomorrow we will post the speech by Chris Talbot, a regular contributor to the WSWs from Britain, concluding our coverage of the meetings.

Trotsky once said that ideas are stronger than even the most powerful general secretary. The tragic event we have gathered here to commemorate might seem to refute this claim. But if we examine the significance of historical events since Trotsky's assassination 60 years ago, we will see that his statement has been fully justified.

Between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s the Soviet Union suddenly fell to pieces as a world super power. The enormous country that emerged victorious from the Second World War and put the first man into space disintegrated without any particular interference from either the domestic or international scene. Ten years later, hardly a trace remains of its former great-power status. In an incredibly short time it has fallen into catastrophic economic and social decline, while simultaneously a comprehensive redistribution of former state property has taken place. As a result, a small criminal class of nouveaux riches has come into being, while the overwhelming majority of the population has sunk into poverty—a calamity that seems utterly absurd in light of the prodigious technological achievements of modern civilisation.

The whole of the former Soviet Union has descended into endless ethnic and religious conflicts. Disasters like those experienced in August with the loss of the nuclear submarine the Kursk in the Barents Sea and the fire at the Moscow Ostankino television tower are not only signs of the grave sickness of the entire post-Soviet society, they are evidence of the advancing collapse of the social, economic and technological infrastructure of the country.

How was this possible? What cruel fate brought about the end of the Soviet Union?

To answer these questions we will have to return to the conflict that occurred in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s and involved two contrasting perspectives for the future development of the USSR: Stalin's hypothesis of building socialism in one country and Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution. If we examine this debate and its consequences from today's vantage point, it soon becomes clear that it provides us with the key to an understanding of our own contemporary problems.

Ten years ago it was widely believed throughout the world that, with the collapse of the USSR, socialism too had finally gone bankrupt. In reality,

it was not socialism that foundered but its antithesis—Stalinism. What came to an end was the attempt to build an isolated, self-sufficient, national economy.

A massive historical experiment was carried out in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin and his political heirs. Although this entailed significant achievements—largely the result of the genuine enthusiasm of ordinary workers and entailed great sacrifices, whose importance it would be folly to minimise—the experiment suffered a terrible defeat in the long run.

Does this mean that the 1917 Revolution was also meaningless: that it was doomed to failure?

Absolutely not! The international perspectives underlying the 1917 Revolution had nothing in common with the politics of national autonomy sanctioned by the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s. The possibility that the revolution might degenerate into reactionary nationalism was, in fact, predicted long before it happened.

All of this leads us to an appreciation of the intellectual and political contribution of Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of 1917 and the foremost opponent of Stalinism in the international workers movement. In light of the experience of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, we can refer to three of Trotsky's forecasts that have stood the test of history.

The first of these predictions concerns the question of the future tasks and driving forces of the Russian Revolution. Trotsky scrutinised the social and economic contradictions inherent within the tsarist empire and its position in the economy of the world and, around 1907, came to the conclusion that the completion of the democratic tasks in Russia—the dissolution of the monarchy and the implementation of agricultural reform—was only possible if the proletariat, supported by the peasantry and under the leadership of a revolutionary party, were to seize power. That is exactly what happened in 1917.

However, the historically backward condition of Russia did not allow for the building of socialism without the support of the European proletariat. Trotsky predicted that if the revolution remained isolated it would inevitably degenerate if such support came too late. Consequently, Trotsky and his followers well understood the dangers already apparent in the advancing bureaucratisation of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state as the revolutionary wave began to recede in Europe in the 1920s and Soviet Russia remained isolated in its backwardness.

We come finally to the third prediction. Trotsky analysed the various stages and significance of this bureaucratic decay leading to a revival of many of the phenomena from tsarist times and, later, to the physical annihilation of a whole generation of Bolsheviks. He warned that if the working class failed to topple it in a political revolution, the bureaucracy

would, sooner or later, destroy the USSR and transform itself into a new class based on the acquisition of private property.

At every stage of his analysis, Trotsky based his thinking on an international appraisal of the epoch and the position occupied by Russia in the world economic system. He formulated this understanding in his introduction to the German edition of *The Permanent Revolution* in 1930 as follows:

“Marxism takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labour and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries. The imperialist war (of 1914-1918) was one of the expressions of this fact. In respect of the technique of production socialist society must represent a stage higher than capitalism. To aim at building a *nationally isolated* socialist society means, in spite of all passing successes, to pull the productive forces backward even as compared with capitalism. To attempt, regardless of the geographical, cultural and historical conditions of the country development, which constitutes a part of the world unity, to realize a shut-off proportionality of all branches of economy within a national framework, means to pursue a reactionary utopia” (*The Permanent Revolution*, New Park Publications, 1975, p. 22).

As previously mentioned, it is impossible to deny the economic and cultural advances achieved by the USSR. Nevertheless, it must be maintained that this accomplishment was not the result of a national upturn as such, but as an accompanying consequence of the October Revolution and its fundamentally international character. Even when the revolution degenerated along nationalist lines, it continued to achieve wonders. But these pale in significance compared to the progress that could have been made if the revolution had been able to develop its full potential internationally.

In the course of its entire history, the law concerning the dependence of the national economy on the world economy was to have a determining influence on the Soviet Union—despite its state monopoly of foreign trade. The more the Soviet economy developed, the more it became dependent on the world economy. In the long run, the impossibility of walling itself off from the world economy became one of the most important causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

With the introduction of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, Trotsky's predictions made decades earlier were fulfilled with astounding accuracy. Some of the passages from his works read as though they were detailed descriptions of developments taking place today. In his extraordinary book *The Revolution Betrayed*, for example, he considers the degeneration of the USSR in the following way:

“A collapse of the Soviet regime would lead inevitably to the collapse of the planned economy, and thus to the abolition of state property. The bond of compulsion between the trusts and the factories within them would fall away. The more successful enterprises would succeed in coming out on the road of independence. They might convert themselves into stock companies, or they might find some other transitional forms of property—one, for example, in which the workers should participate in the profits. The collective farms would disintegrate at the same time, and far more easily. The fall of the present bureaucratic dictatorship, if it were not replaced by a new socialist power, would thus mean a return to capitalist relations with a catastrophic decline of the economy and culture” (*The Revolution Betrayed*, Labor Publications, 1991, pp. 212-13).

In another passage he explains that the new bourgeois regime would find “no small number of willing ready servants among the present bureaucrats, administrators, technicians, directors, party secretaries and privileged upper circles in general.... The chief task of the new power would be to restore private property in the means of production. First of all, it would be necessary to create conditions for the development of

strong farmers from the weak collective farms, and for converting the strong collectives into producers' cooperatives of the bourgeois type, into agricultural stock companies. In the sphere of industry, denationalisation would begin with the light industries and those producing food. The planning principle would be converted for the transitional period into a series of compromises between state power and individual ‘corporations’—potential proprietors, that is, among the Soviet captains of industry, the émigré former proprietors and foreign capitalists” (*ibid.*, pp. 214-15).

This is now at a much more advanced stage. Trotsky could not have known precisely how the process of capitalist restoration would continue. Yet the characteristic of all genuinely scientific knowledge is that it allows new events to be analysed on the basis of fundamental conceptions that have been tested against history and that represent the subjective abstraction of objective human experience.

The central question Trotsky investigated concerning the fate of the Soviet Union was the changing relation between the national and the world economies. Every stage of his analysis was directed by consideration of future developments: It would prove impossible to establish socialism in one country. But it is equally impossible that capitalism—incapable of solving the problems of the economic development of Russia already at the beginning of the twentieth century—would be in a position to accomplish this task in the present period, when the profit system is in a condition of even greater decline.

Throughout the years of perestroika the Soviet Union found itself in a dilemma, where neither the continuation of the old line of autarkic development nor the integration of the Soviet economy into the structures of the capitalist world market offered any escape route from the crisis. The only progressive resolution of the dilemma would have entailed jettisoning the policy of autarky—not in accordance with the demands of capitalism but through a fundamental remodelling of the whole Soviet economy on the basis of planned and democratic management in the interests of all members of society. The program of the October Revolution constituted precisely this course, and Trotsky fought for it as a revolutionary and a Marxist throughout his life.

The attempts—first by Gorbachev, then by Yeltsin and now by Putin—to bring Russia back into the fold of bourgeois civilisation were doomed to failure from the outset because they did not represent any viable alternative. An objectively logical basis for events underlies the terrible decline experienced by the republics of the former Soviet Union in the past 10 years. The logic behind the catastrophe can be understood when one recognises the truth and significance of Trotsky's analysis.

The cause of Russia's current problems is the same as it was during the existence of the Soviet Union: its relationship to the world economy. Capitalism long ago lost its ability to bring development to backward regions of the world. For a while, it seemed as though the “Asian tigers” contradicted this thesis. Since the financial crisis of 1997, however, only a few commentators have dared to repeat the previously popular, though superficial, argument about an “Asian economic miracle”.

The tendency of globalisation today leads to an increasing concentration of capital in the coffers of the great transnational corporations. In literally every corner of the planet these corporations are involved in feverish competitive struggles between themselves for raw materials, labour power and markets. The predominance of the world economy over the various national economies has reached such a degree that it no longer allows even the most developed capitalist states to maintain the methods of national economic regulation and the social welfare systems of the post-war period. The dismantling of these systems world-wide is being accompanied by growing poverty and social inequality. Under these conditions, countries like Russia, whose antiquated economies are lumbered with enormous structural disadvantages, are in no position to hope for a blossoming of the economy.

The deepening crisis throughout the world makes a revival of the ideas and perspectives developed by Leon Trotsky both necessary and decisive. Such a revival requires Trotsky's political and intellectual rehabilitation in the eyes of millions of ordinary people everywhere in the world—his rehabilitation not only as an outstanding revolutionary and representative of Marxism, but also as one of the most relevant thinkers of our times.



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