

# Seminal documents of the Soviet Trotskyist movement from the early 1930s published for the first time

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16 September 2024

*Tetradi verkhne-ural'skogo politicheskogo izoliatora 1932-1933*, ed. by Alexei Gusev, A. Reznik, A. Fokin, V. Shabalin, Moscow: Trovant 2022. 479 pages. Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to this volume. Translations from the Russian by this writer.

In 2022, documents by the Soviet Left Opposition that were found in 2018 in a prison in Chelyabinsk were finally published in Russian in a small circulation of 100 copies. The volume, whose title translates as *Notebooks of the Verkhne-Uralsk Political Isolator, 1932-1933*, is one of the most important publications of political documents in decades.

Published for the first time 90 years after they were written, the documents are an irrefutable vindication of the century-long struggle by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism and for historical truth. In their analysis and perspective, they also powerfully demonstrate the historical continuity of Trotskyism that is today embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The volume consists of three parts. The first and most important part comprises the bulk of the manuscript of “The Crisis of the Revolution and the Tasks of the Proletariat,” a major programmatic document of 1932 by the orthodox Trotskyist majority in the prison. The second part includes minutes of debates held among the imprisoned oppositionists, as well as statements and articles that were published in their prison journals. The third and shortest part includes lists of books that the prisoners ordered from the administration.

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive assessment of the documents within the scope of this review. In a comment on the discovery of these documents in 2018, the *World Socialist Web Site* quoted at length from the document about the threat of fascism in Germany. This review will focus on explaining their historical significance and discuss the most important of them, the 150-page long document, “The Crisis of the Revolution and the Tasks of the Proletariat.”

## The historical context: The Trotskyist movement in prison and exile

In order to understand the content and significance of these documents, it is necessary to briefly review the historical context in which they were written. The years 1932-1933 marked one of the most difficult periods in the history of the Trotskyist movement and the international working class. They witnessed the final demise of the Communist International which had been founded in 1919 as the world party of socialist revolution and its transformation into a tool of the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. In January 1933, Hitler was able to come to power in Germany after the Comintern had sabotaged the struggle by 6 million

socialist and communist workers against the threat of fascism, by working to prevent them from forming a united front. Leon Trotsky responded to this historic defeat by issuing the call to build the Fourth International.

In the Soviet Union, the Stalinization of the Communist International and the Soviet Communist Party found its sharpest expression in the ever more violent repression of the Trotskyists who, up until 1933, had fought for a fundamental reform of the party. After the expulsion of the Opposition from the Communist Party in the wake of the 1927 defeat of the Chinese revolution, most active Oppositionists were imprisoned and exiled. While direct killings were still rare, the *Bulletin* recognized as early as 1929 that the goal of the bureaucracy was nothing less than the “physical annihilation of the Bolshevik-Leninists.”<sup>[1]</sup>

This was not hyperbole. The places of exile were chosen with the intent to create conditions where Oppositionists would suffer severe illness and eventually die. Leon Trotsky and his wife, and many of his closest political allies, including Christian Rakovsky, were sent to remote places in the Soviet Union which were known to be stricken by cholera and malaria epidemics, and fell severely ill. Many Oppositionists suffered from tuberculosis and were denied medical treatment. Several of them died as a result, among them Trotsky’s youngest daughter, Nina, who died in 1929.

In 1930-1931, more and more Oppositionists were sent to so called “political isolators.” The one in Chelyabinsk, Verkhne-Uralsk, where the documents were found, was the largest. By 1931, over 200 Trotskyists were imprisoned there. Ante Ciliga, a Yugoslav Communist who was imprisoned as an Oppositionist in those years, recalled that despite severe restrictions on communication, the Trotskyists managed to obtain pamphlets and letters from Trotsky and Rakovsky and even communicate with the Opposition abroad. The political life in the prison, Ciliga noted, made it a “university in the social and political sciences,” “the only independent university in the USSR.”<sup>[2]</sup> During walks, debates and political meetings were held, at least some of which were recorded in written form. In addition, several journals were issued by different political tendencies within the Opposition. Written and copied by hand, often difficult to decipher, the documents survived hidden behind the walls of the prison.

The Opposition was preoccupied with working through the most fundamental political, historical and theoretical questions confronting the international workers’ movement under conditions of intense political crisis. After the defeats of the British General Strike in 1926 and the Chinese revolution in 1927, the world was now in the grips of the Great Depression, and the Nazi movement was on the rise in Germany. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist bureaucracy had initiated the Five-Year Plan in 1928, embarking on a program of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization of peasant households which led to civil war-like

conditions in the Soviet countryside by 1931-1932.

In his introduction to the volume, Russian historian Alexei Gusev, who teaches at Moscow State University, the country's most elite institution, mentions virtually none of this context, rendering the documents all but incomprehensible. Instead, he cites isolated historical facts in a manner aimed at minimizing the political significance and program of the Trotskyist movement in those years. This is not a coincidence. Like several of the other editors, Gusev is affiliated with the Pabloite tendency that has rejected the program and continuity of Trotskyism since the post-war period. This anti-Trotskyist political outlook has clearly informed the way that the editors chose to present the documents.

Thus, Gusev writes that, in 1929-1930, the "majority" of its membership and 10 out of 13 leaders of the Opposition who had signed the Platform of the Opposition in 1927 had capitulated. First, it must be stated there is no documentary evidence that confirms that the "majority" of the Opposition capitulated. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that in 1928-1930, in particular, the Opposition experienced significant growth, above all among young workers, thousands of whom were sent into exile and in prison almost as soon as they began their opposition activities.<sup>[3]</sup>

Second, while it is true that 1928-1929 saw the capitulation of a large portion of the old *leadership* of the Opposition, Trotsky's political intervention and struggle for clarification meant that, by 1930-1931, the Opposition had emerged as a politically consolidated *international* tendency, with a firm leadership at its head. The most important document of this struggle was Trotsky's 1928 *Critique of the Draft Program of the Sixth Congress of the Communist International*. In it, Trotsky drew the lessons of the previous five years of the struggle against Stalinism and developed the hitherto most comprehensive critique of the international and domestic implications of the reactionary nationalist program of "socialism in one country." It famously opened with the words:

In our epoch, which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of *world* economy and *world* politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country. This also holds entirely for the party that wields the state power within the boundaries of the USSR. ... The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. .... In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not *vice versa*. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.<sup>[4]</sup>

In North America and China, supporters of the Opposition now proceeded to form organized tendencies. In the Soviet Union, the document served as the basis for the political consolidation of the Opposition in the face of the capitulations of many of its old leaders, including Evgeny Preobrazhensky, Ivar Smilga, and eventually Alexander Beloborodov. Trotsky, indignant though he was about the capitulations, understood them as part of an objective process of political differentiation.

In a comment on the capitulation by Preobrazhensky, Radek and Smilga in 1929, Trotsky stressed that, even before they abandoned the Opposition, they rejected the perspective of permanent revolution and the independent role of the proletarian party in the Chinese revolution of 1925-1927—an event that Gusev does not even mention in his introduction.

As Trotsky noted, all three of them had earlier defended the subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the bourgeois nationalist Guomindang during the Chinese revolution: "It is a striking fact: all those in the ranks of the opposition which defended the subordination of the Communist Party to the Guomindang have turned out to be capitulators."

Anticipating the arguments of Pabloites like Gusev, who interpret the capitulations as a sign of the weakness of the opposition, Trotsky continued,

The capitulation of the oppositionists who support the troika are now of course a trump card in the hands of the apparatus. The apparatchiks, gossips and street gawkers are talking about the "disintegration of the Trotskyist opposition." Yaroslavsky writes about the "twilight of Trotskyism."<sup>[5]</sup>

Trotsky rejected these claims about the demise of the Opposition with contempt and history has confirmed his assessment. The International Left Opposition went on to form the Fourth International in 1938, a fact that Gusev fails to mention. The documents now published provide irrefutable evidence that the Soviet Trotskyist movement was able to continue its political struggle at the highest theoretical level even under the most difficult conditions. The fact that Gusev, in introducing these historic documents, is reviving this old Stalinist narrative about the supposed demise of the Opposition can only be interpreted as an attempt to neutralize the political impact of these documents. But to any honest reader, the documents will speak for themselves.

#### **"The Crisis of the Revolution and the Tasks of the Proletariat," 1932**

The most important document in the volume is "The Crisis of the Revolution and the Tasks of the Proletariat," which was completed by July 1932. It was written as a major programmatic statement by the Soviet Trotskyist movement, aimed at orienting the work of the Opposition in the coming period, and drawing a balance sheet of the first decade of struggle. It elaborated on the main theses of a shorter document, from 1930, also titled "The Crisis of the Revolution," which was known to Trotsky and published in parts in the *Bulletin of the Opposition*.

The manuscript consists of 11 parts. It begins with a discussion of the "strategic line of the proletarian revolution" and a defense of the perspective of permanent revolution, continues with an analysis of the development of "class relations in the USSR," the international situation and the betrayals of the Communist International, the Soviet economy under the First Five-Year Plan and the situation confronting the Soviet working class and peasantry. The concluding parts developed the analysis of Soviet Bonapartism that had been initiated by Trotsky in 1930, discussed the state of the party, and the tactics and programmatic proposals of the Bolshevik-Leninists. Only 9 of the 11 parts have been found and published; the appendix is missing as well. Even so, we are talking about a book-length document of over 150 tightly printed pages, that must rank among the most important in the history of the socialist movement.

To give a sense of the theoretical level and political orientation of this work, it is appropriate to provide a few longer quotes from its key sections. The document opens with the assertion that the October revolution had been based on Lenin's adoption of the theory of permanent revolution.

In the October revolution, the democratic revolution became directly intertwined with the first stage of the socialist revolution. The program of the Bolshevik Party, elaborated by Lenin at the 8th Congress [in March 1919], regards the October revolution as the first stage of the world revolution, from which it is inseparable. In this provision of our program the basic principle of permanent revolution is expressed. ... Lenin tirelessly repeated that “our salvation from all these difficulties lies in the all-European revolution” and that “we are far from completing even the transitional period from capitalism to socialism. We never seduce ourselves with the hope that we can finish it without the help of the international proletariat” (Lenin). These Leninist provisions, which form the basis of the theory of permanent revolution, define the strategic line of Marxism-Bolshevism. It is opposed by the theory of socialism in one country, which gives sanctification to the completed revolution, detaches it from the international revolution and is the strategic basis of National Socialism (p. 24).

An entire chapter is devoted to analyzing the roots of the “national socialism” of the Stalin faction in the history of the Bolshevik Party and the development of the revolution. This “new variety of national socialism in Russia,” the authors explain, was based ideologically in the right wing of the Bolshevik Party, which

... resolutely opposed the seizure of power by the proletariat and limited our revolution to bourgeois democratic issues. In 1917, during the period of February-March, all the present-day epigones without exception, and, after Lenin’s arrival, Kamenev, Rykov, then Zinoviev and other right Bolsheviks, waged a relentless struggle against Lenin, finally slipping to the position of the left wing of radical petty-bourgeois democracy, which made Lenin even raise the question: “Is there a place for right-wing Bolshevism in our party?” (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 11, p. 29).

The document recognizes “Stalinist centrism” and its “national socialism” as “the ideological successor of right-wing Bolshevism.” By contrast, it continues,

... the Len[inist] opposition is the only representative of the positions of the proletariat. Under difficult conditions it continues to defend the strategic line of Marxism-Bolshevism against National-Socialism and assesses every step of our revolution from the standpoint of the development of the world revolution, basing on it, and only on it, its main historical perspective (p. 37).

This analysis is in line not only with Trotsky’s major works on the history of the Bolshevik Party and the revolution—including *Lessons of October*, his autobiography, his history of the Russian Revolution and his Stalin biography. It also resonates with the analysis of the different tendencies within the Bolshevik Party developed by the International Committee in the aftermath of 1991. In a lecture from 2001, “Toward a Reconsideration of Trotsky’s Place in the 20th Century,” the chairman of the WWS editorial board and the Socialist Equality Party in the US, David North, explained that Trotsky’s perspective of permanent revolution marked “a critical theoretical breakthrough.” In contrast to the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, Trotsky proposed “to understand

revolution in the modern epoch as essentially a world-historic process of social transition from class society, which is rooted politically in nation-states, to a classless society developing on the basis of a globally-integrated economy and internationally unified mankind.” However, within the Bolshevik Party, countervailing “nationalist and petty bourgeois democratic” tendencies developed as a reflection of the “intermingling of national-democratic and socialist tendencies” in the revolution.<sup>[6]</sup>

These tendencies underlay the opposition of the Bolshevik right to the 1917 seizure of power, which Trotsky analyzed extensively his 1924 *Lessons of October*.

In the period before 1917, Lenin had opposed the theory of permanent revolution. While he opposed collaboration with the liberal bourgeoisie, he still conceived of the revolution as essentially bourgeois-democratic and saw no way for the working class to seize power alone in as economically backward a country as Russia. However, based on his analysis of imperialism during World War I, by April 1917, Lenin adopted Trotsky’s understanding of the dynamic of the revolutionary process in his April Theses. This shift by Lenin formed the basis for his determined struggle against this nationally oriented, petty-bourgeois-democratic wing of the party leadership. A central part of this struggle and the reorientation of the Bolshevik party was the admission of Trotsky and his supporters from the so called Interdistrict Committee (*mezhrayontsy*) to the Bolshevik Party in the summer of 1917, and the immediate elevation of Trotsky to the leadership of the Bolsheviks.

During the seizure of power and the civil war, the political alliance between Lenin and Trotsky ensured the survival and expansion of the revolution to large portions of the former Russian Empire. But in the absence of an international extension of the revolution, the nationalist tendencies within the Bolshevik Party were strengthened considerably in the early 1920s, especially after Lenin’s death in early 1924. They would become the political lever for the bureaucracy’s usurpation of state power and its nationalist reaction against the October revolution.

The Soviet Trotskyists carefully analyzed the implications of this process for the development of the Communist International. The document explains the betrayals of the international revolution in China, India and England, as the consequence of the abandonment of the strategy of world revolution of Lenin and Trotsky.

The world-historical significance of the 3rd International lies in the fact that it began to realize the dictatorship of the proletariat, a slogan which, in Lenin’s words, “summed up the century-long development of socialism and the workers’ movement.” In the struggle for this basic slogan, the Communist International under Lenin’s leadership based its strategy on Marx’s theory of permanent revolution, which sees the proletarian revolution in individual countries as links in the developing world revolution, and the latter as a single process arising from the conditions of development of the entire world economy. The theory of socialism in one country created by its epigones in 1924-25 ignores and denies these two main positions of Marxism (p. 155).

Several chapters discuss in detail the development of the Soviet economy under the First Five-Year Plan. Particularly striking about the document is the high degree of political consciousness by the Opposition of what it represented. The section on the tactics of the Opposition opens with an outline of its historical origins and development:

The Leninist opposition is above all an international tendency.

Its emergence and development are rooted in the profound changes in the whole international situation in the wake of the defeat of the first wave of the European revolution in [19]21-23. The so-called stabilization of capitalism brought with it a strengthening of the position of social reformism, the decline of the world communist movement and a strengthening of center-right elements in its ranks. The left Leninist wing of the Comintern suffered a series of defeats, until finally it was formally excluded from the ranks of the Comintern [in late 1927]. The defeat of the left wing of Communism marked the conclusion of a shift in world relations. However, this defeat did not lead to the liquidation of the opposition movement. The contradictions of the world economy have steadily undermined the “stabilization” [of capitalism], leading to partial upsurges of the proletarian class struggle, on the wave of which the left wing was again strengthened and received new sources of life. The modern epoch holds the greatest revolutionary possibilities (p. 120).

Based on this internationalist orientation, the orthodox Trotskyist majority offered an objective analysis of the different political currents that had developed within the Left Opposition in the preceding period. One of these currents is designated as “left centrist.” It was represented first by Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, who formed a bloc with the Trotskyist Opposition from 1926 through early 1928, and later by Evgeny Preobrazhensky, Ivar Smilga and Karl Radek, who capitulated in 1929.

Underlying their capitulation to Stalinism, the Opposition asserts, was an adaptation to the national orientation of the bureaucracy. They failed to “recognize the theory of socialism in one country as the strategic basis of centrism, which is closely connected with its international and internal policy.” Instead, the left centrists viewed “all their differences with the Stalinist bureaucracy as relating only to the methods by which this economic policy of Stalinism is carried out and to questions of the regime—[They are] ignoring the fact that both the methods of policy and questions of the regime are not self-sufficient, but are entirely connected with the strategic line of Stalinism, that they derive from it, and form an inseparable component of Stalinist policy itself” (p. 155).

The second minority tendency was that of the Democratic Centralists. Formed during the civil war as an ultra-left opposition to the party leadership under Lenin and Trotsky, the Democratic Centralists early on developed a critique of the bureaucratization of the Soviet state. However, they did so, in contrast to Lenin and Trotsky, from a petty-bourgeois radical and national standpoint, anticipating state capitalist conceptions of the Soviet Union that were taken up by broader layers of the radical intelligentsia in the 1930s. In 1923, the Democratic Centralists entered a bloc with the Trotskyists to form the Left Opposition. However, fundamental political differences always remained. The document summarizes the positions of the Democratic Centralists concisely but sharply:

The attempt to escape from the contradictions of the transitional period *within a national framework*, to build an *ideal* isolated national workers’ state; to eliminate bureaucratism definitively by means of methods which, by their function, would constitute an absolute guarantee against the rebirth of the vanguard and would ensure a *crisis-free* development within a national framework, is a petty-bourgeois utopia, which has long since been outdated in the course of the workers’ movement and which represents only the *ultra-left anarcho-syndicalist underside of Stalinist national socialism* (p. 158, italics in the original).

Both of these tendencies, the left centrists and the Democratic Centralists, continued to exert influence in the Opposition through the 1930s. Some of this is reflected in the documents—including minutes of debates, letters and article fragments—that are compiled in the second part of this volume. Unfortunately, the documentation of these discussions and differences is of a fragmentary character, often with only one side of the debate documented.

The Pabloite editors of the volume have done virtually nothing to contextualize or explain these differences. This is despite the fact that they were discussed extensively in the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, for they reflected social pressures and political conceptions that, by the early 1930s, had taken hold not only in the Soviet but the International Left Opposition. In many articles and statements, Trotsky addressed state capitalist conceptions of the Soviet Union—characteristic of the Democratic Centralists—and various forms of centrist conceptions that emerged in the ranks of the International Left Opposition.

Instead, in his introduction, Alexei Gusev stresses these differences and divisions within the Opposition in a purely national context while failing to note the obvious: That the majority, which signed the 1932 document, stuck to the political and historical principles laid out by Leon Trotsky in all major documents of the Opposition of the first decade of its existence. These distortions are in line with the long-standing efforts by Gusev and other Pabloite writers on the Opposition like Alexander Reznik, and Simon Pirani, who broke from the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1985-1986 on a nationalist basis.

In their books on the Opposition over the past two decades, Gusev, Reznik and Pirani have sought to downplay the significance of Trotsky and the perspective of permanent revolution, by unduly elevating the significance of the Democratic Centralists. The essential implication of this argument is the denial of the continuity of the Trotskyist movement—a position that has been central to the political outlook of the Pabloites ever since their break with the Fourth International in 1953.

But the documents prove that this is false to the core. They show that the Soviet Opposition continued to be led by Marxists who, even under the most difficult conditions, upheld and developed the principles of revolutionary internationalism and the strategy of permanent revolution.

Not only the documents themselves but also the biographies of those who authored them powerfully speak to the continuity of Bolshevism and Trotskyism which was expressed in the struggle of the Opposition against Stalinism. They were authored by a set of extraordinary revolutionaries whose outstanding contributions to the fight for socialism were eradicated for an entire historical period because of the crimes of Stalinism.

One of the most important contributions to the historical record of this volume is that it makes it possible for workers and young people inside and outside the former Soviet Union to get an inkling of their immense political and theoretical stature, and to take inspiration from their political struggle. To their credit, the editors added brief biographies of dozens of imprisoned Trotskyists to their volume.

Strikingly, the vast majority of them were representatives of the younger generation of the Opposition. Born for the most part around the turn of the century, they experienced the October revolution as youth and joined the Bolsheviks in its aftermath. They were steeled and tested, above all, in the fires of the civil war and the struggle against Stalinism in the 1920s, in the course of which they assimilated the traditions, perspective and methods of struggle of Leon Trotsky and the Old Bolshevik leaders of the Opposition.

We shall name four of them here:

**Fyodor Dingelshedt.** Born in 1890 in St. Petersburg, he was a member of the Bolshevik Party since 1910 and emerged as an important leader of the party’s work among students and industrial workers during the First World War. A mid-level Bolshevik agitator in 1917, he participated in both revolutions of that year and later the civil war. He attended the

Institute of Red Professors, an elite party training institution in Moscow, and authored several books and pamphlets, including a study of *The Agrarian Question in India* (1928). Beginning in the late 1920s, he suffered for over a decade in exile, prisons and camps. His wife, a Democratic Centralist, and his son, were both shot on March 30, 1938 after participating in the Vorkuta hunger strike. Dingelshtedt is believed to have died in a camp in the early 1940s.

**Elizar Solntsev.** He was born in 1897 in Vinnitsya, now southern Ukraine, to a Jewish middle-class family. He joined the Bolshevik Party in the early stages of the civil war, in 1919, in a period when the political stature of Leon Trotsky as a party leader was second only to that of Lenin. He then studied at the Institute of Red Professors. Like the majority of the Institute's student body, Solntsev voted in 1923 for the Left Opposition. Trotsky considered him one of his "closest associates."<sup>[7]</sup> While in New York as an official of the Soviet trading organization, Amtorg, in 1927-1928, he laid the groundwork for the American Left Opposition which was eventually formed by James P. Cannon in the fall of 1928. He was arrested soon after his return to the USSR and would spend the rest of his life in prison and exile. Weakened and disease-stricken after several hunger strikes, he died in late 1935.

**Grigory Yakovin.** Like Solntsev, Yakovin was born in what is now Ukraine, in 1899. He joined the Bolsheviks during the civil war and studied at the Institute of Red Professors where he specialized in history. In his testimony before the Dewey Commission, Trotsky described him as a "brilliant scholar, who was an exceptionally brilliant man."<sup>[8]</sup> In 1927, Yakovin helped write the Platform of the United Left Opposition. He was a member of the central underground leadership of the Opposition after its expulsion from the party at the 15th Party Congress in December 1927. Following his arrest in 1928, he spent the last decade of his life in various prisons and camps. He was murdered on March 1, 1938 in a summary execution of Trotskyists who had led a hunger strike in the labor camp of Vorkuta.

**Georgy Stopalov.** Born in 1900 in Ukraine, Stopalov was part of the same generation as Solntsev and Yakovin and also graduated from the Institute of Red Professors. He worked for the Opposition in Baku in the Caucasus before he was arrested in 1929 and sent from prison to prison and camp to camp. He and his wife, Viktoria Lemberskaia, also a Trotskyist, were both shot in 1937 in the Kolyma camp in Magadan, within four weeks of each other.

The political, intellectual and theoretical culture that these individuals embodied—and many more that cannot be named here—their moral integrity and keen sense of their own place in history make them among the most impressive figures of the 20th century and the October revolution. No one summarized the chief characteristics of the Bolshevik revolutionary type that they represented better than Leon Trotsky.

In a moving tribute to his long-standing comrade and friend, Kote Tsintsadze, an Old Georgian Bolshevik who died from tuberculosis in exile in 1930, Trotsky wrote,

Tsintsadze's death removed from the stage one of the most attractive figures of the old Bolshevism. This fighter, who more than once put his own breast to the fire and knew how to punish his enemies, was a man of exceptional gentleness in personal relations. Good-natured mockery, a little bit of sly humor were combined in this hardened terrorist with a tenderness that can be called almost feminine. The severe illness, which did not release him from its claws even for an hour, could not break his moral firmness, nor could it darken his always cheerful mood and gentle attention to people.

Kote was not a theorist. But his clear thought, his revolutionary instinct and his vast political experience—the living experience of

three revolutions—armed him better, more seriously and more reliably than formally perceived doctrine arms the less staunch. As in Lear, in the words of Shakespeare, every inch is a king, so in Tsintsadze every inch was a revolutionary. Maybe his character was most vividly manifested during the last 8 years of continuous struggle against the impending and strengthening domination of the idea-less bureaucracy.

... Tsintsadze was a living denial and condemnation of any and all kinds of political careerism, i.e. the ability to sacrifice principles, ideas, objectives of the whole in the name of personal goals. This does not mean denying the legitimacy of revolutionary ambition. No, political ambition is an important motivation of struggle. But the revolutionary begins where personal ambition is fully and completely put at the service of the great idea, freely subordinated to it and merged with it. To flirt with ideas, to fence with revolutionary formulas, to change one's position for reasons of personal career—this is what Tsintsadze ruthlessly condemned with his life and his death. Kote's ambition was an ambition of unwavering revolutionary loyalty. This is what the proletarian youth must learn from him.<sup>[9]</sup>

With the unsentimental clear-sightedness that was so characteristic of the Soviet Trotskyists, Tsintsadze himself recognized very well what fate history had in store for him and his comrades. However, he also understood the objective significance of their struggle for future generations. In a letter to Trotsky from June 1928, he wrote,

So many of our comrades and of those close to us await the thankless fate of having to part with life somewhere in prison or exile, but ultimately all of this will be an enrichment of revolutionary history, from which new generations will learn. The proletarian youth, once it will have familiarized itself with the struggle of the Bolshevik opposition against the opportunist wing of the party, will understand on whose side the truth lies.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Conclusion

Early on, Leon Trotsky realized that at stake in the struggle against Stalinism were not simply matters of tactics or individual policies, but the entire continuity of Marxism. He therefore emphasized that the principal basis for this struggle had to be a defense of historical truth about the October revolution and the documentary record of the political struggle within the revolutionary movement. In his *Stalin School of Falsification*, Trotsky stressed that

... it remains an incontestable historical fact that the preparation of the bloody judicial frame-ups [of the Moscow Trials] had its inception in the "minor" historical distortions and "innocent" falsification of citations. ... The most prominent place in the struggle against "Trotskyism" was accorded to *historical questions*...<sup>[11]</sup>

No slander and no lie was too big for the Stalinist bureaucracy to employ against the Trotskyist movement. It systematically confiscated and destroyed documents, books and pamphlets that were authored by the

Opposition and leaders of the revolution and civil war, and locked away others for decades. The ultimate historical function of this ferocious campaign of falsification was the destruction of the historical and, thereby, the class consciousness of the working class.

As a result, up until now, documentary evidence about the Soviet Opposition and its political struggle in the 1930s was extremely scarce. To the extent that it was available, it was largely limited to correspondence in Trotsky's archives and anecdotal recollections in memoirs by survivors of the Stalinist terror.

The Stalinist reaction against October culminated in the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union by the bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism. The International Committee of the Fourth International responded to the destruction of the Soviet Union and the crisis of political consciousness it laid bare by calling for a "campaign to uncover the historical truth" about the crimes of Stalinism. This campaign included a lecture tour and the publication of the works by Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin on the struggle of the Left Opposition. It also involved the detailed refutation of the post-Soviet school of historical falsification by Western academics, who, after 1991, revived the Stalinist slanders of Leon Trotsky in order to preempt a turn by a new generation of workers and youth toward his legacy. This struggle is documented in volumes such as *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* and *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* by David North, the chairperson of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the international editorial board of the WSWs.

In 1992, North explained the historical significance of this campaign,

[W]e see this as a task that benefits not only the working class in the narrow sense, but all of progressive humanity. Exposing the crimes of Stalinism is an essential part of overcoming the damage they caused to the development of social and political thought. ... Having defended the principles and traditions of Marxism during the many decades when Stalinism appeared to be an invincible force, the Trotskyist movement must leave no stone unturned to establish the historical truth, and on this basis lay down the necessary foundations for the renaissance of Marxism in the international working class.

The publication of these documents vindicates this decades-long struggle by the Trotskyist movement and provides it with a new historical and political impetus. They prove yet again that historical truth and the documentary record are more powerful and long-lasting than even the most repressive state apparatus.

Whatever the limitations of this edition, the publication of these documents portends a broader political shift. A protracted historical period, in which the magnitude of the crimes of Stalinism made it extremely difficult, and in some cases impossible, to establish the factual and political record of the revolutionary tendency that defended Marxism against the nationalist reaction against October within the Soviet Union has come to a close. We are confident that they will inspire great interest among workers, intellectuals and youth throughout the world and help initiate a renewal of a serious study of the history of the revolutionary Trotskyist movement.

[1] The *Bulletin of the Opposition* warned of the "physical annihilation of the Bolshevik leadership" in July 1929. URL: <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-01.shtml>

[2] Ante Ciliga, "From Inside Stalin's Prisons: The Political Life of the Opposition" (1938) URL: <https://trotskyistarchive.org/ciliga/1938/xx/lo1.htm>

[3] In a letter from the USSR, an anonymous Oppositionist noted that between 1,000 and 2,000 proletarian youth, who had joined the opposition

in the preceding year and a half to two years, had been sent into prison and exile. *Biulleten' oppositsii*, No. 24 (September 1931). URL: <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-24.shtml>. More recently, the Russian historian Dmitry Barinov has shown that the Opposition remained extremely active especially in its work in the working class, in 1928-1930. *Trotskyi, Zinoviev, Universitet. Levoe dvizhenie v vyshchei shkole Petrograda/Leningrada (1918-1932 gg.)*, (Sankt-Peterburg: Nauka, 2024), 200-229.

<https://trotskyistarchive.org/trotsky/1928/3d/tio1.htm>

[5] Lev Trotsky, "Bor'ba bol'shevikov-lenintsev (oppositsii) v SSSR. Protiv kapitulianstva. Zhalkii dokument," *Biulleten' oppositsii*, Nos. 3-4 (September 1929) URL: <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-03.shtml>

[6] David North, "Toward a Reconsideration of Trotsky's Place in the 20th Century," *In Defense of Leon Trotsky* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2014), [www.wsws.org/en/special/library/in-defense-of-leon-trotsky/01.html](https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/in-defense-of-leon-trotsky/01.html)

[7] Trotsky named Solntsev alongside Mikhail Glazman, Butov and Yakov Blumkin and noted that the news of his death "deeply affected" him. Leon Trotsky to Victor Serge, April 24, 1936, *The Serge-Trotsky Papers*. Edited and Introduced by D. J. Cotterill, (London: Pluto Press, 1994), p. 41.

[8] Trotsky made this remark when he spoke about Yakovin, Solntsev and Dingelshedt as three of his closest associates in the Soviet Union before <http://deweycommission.org/michels/trotsky/1937/dewey/session04.htm>

[9] Lev Trotsky, "Pamiati druga. Nad svezhei mogiloi Kote Tsintsadze," <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-1936.htm> URL:

[10] Kote Tsintsadze, Letter to Leon Trotsky, June 28, 1928, *Biulleten' oppositsii*, No. 19 URL: <https://iskra-research.org/FI/BO/BO-19.shtml>

[11] Leon Trotsky, "Foreword to the American edition," *The Stalin School of Falsification* (1937) URL: <https://trotskyistarchive.org/trotsky/1937/sf/sf02.htm>

[12] David North, "After the Demise of the USSR: The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," Report to the 12th Plenum of the International Committee of the Fourth International, March 1992. URL: <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/fi-19-1/18.html>. For more on the response of the International Committee to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, click here.



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