

What is the Revolutionary Communist International proclaimed by the former International Marxist Tendency of Alan Woods?

Part One

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This is the first of a three-part series.

June 11 saw the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) declare itself as a new Revolutionary Communist International (RCI). At an international meeting, the RCI reported an attendance of 500 delegates from over 39 countries and a streaming audience from 120.

The political purpose of this initiative was made clear in the opening report by its leader Alan Woods. It is to continue, under vastly changed political circumstances, the decades-long efforts of the tendency initially led by Ted Grant to oppose the Fourth International—represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International—and to orient workers and youth to the Stalinist, trade union and social democratic bureaucracies under the cover of a torrent of radical-sounding rhetoric.

The RCI states correctly that the deepening global crisis of capitalism, “that every day confronts the masses with the horrors of war, imperialism and oppression” is producing a corresponding shift in “the consciousnesses of millions, preparing revolutionary explosions”.^[1]

With more and more people “looking for the most radical possible break with the status quo and turning away in disgust from parties such as Keir Starmer’s Labour Party,” the IMT launched an initiative, pioneered in the UK and Canada, to form “Revolutionary Communist Parties”—citing their claim to represent the “unbroken thread” to “the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.”

Their primary focus is on young people, students in particular, who have been radicalised by the deepening social crisis, amplified by the mass opposition to the Gaza genocide, and who are seeking an anti-capitalist and revolutionary alternative to the rightward-careening and widely hated former “left” parties.

The essential feature of the Grant/Woods tendency for decades was its implacable hostility to any break by workers from Stalinism and Labourism, and to the struggle for the independent revolutionary mobilisation of the working class—which it denounced as ultraleftism and proof of the divorce of “the sects” from the class.

In an opening report supposed to move the Manifesto of the Revolutionary Communist International, which he instead declared “speaks for itself” and “does not require any further elaboration,” Woods offered as explanation of this unprecedented shift the assertion that only now had capitalism exhausted its “historically progressive role” of “developing the means of production”.

“We are entitled to call for the struggle for communism now because that demand is not only possible—in the past it was not possible, the

material basis was absent—now the material basis is present. With the miracles of science and technology and medicine and everything else, we already have in our hands all the objective possibilities for creating communism.” The new International could “not at all” have been founded even “10 years ago, 20 years ago,” Woods continues.^[2]

This claim would not only mean that the seizure of power by Lenin’s Bolshevik Party in October 1917 was an adventure, as maintained by its Menshevik critics. It implies that every revolutionary struggle waged by the working class throughout the 20th century was essentially doomed to defeat by objective circumstances.

It has, in fact, long been the central insistence of the RCI/IMT and its forerunners that the domination of the working class by Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist tendencies, their betrayals and the grotesque distortions of states in which capitalism was overthrown were inevitable—and that this rendered the struggle to forge a revolutionary leadership by the Fourth International an ultra-left pipe dream.

Woods here confirms his tendency’s repudiation, decades earlier, of Trotsky’s analysis of the imperialist epoch, in the founding “Transitional Programme” of the Fourth International in 1938, as having reached the point of “The Death Agony of Capitalism”.

Trotsky wrote:

The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.

The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism....

All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet ‘ripened’ for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception. The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ‘ripened’; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.^[3]

He concluded, “The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.”

Political origins of the IMT/Revolutionary Communist International

A serious evaluation of the IMT's turn to a new "revolutionary" international is only possible, therefore, if a proper account is made of the history of the tendency.

As will be made clear, having rejected the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, and remaining for years outside of its ranks, Ted Grant and his then main collaborator Jock Haston rejected any possibility of socialist revolution in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Grant tendency insisted that the reformist and Stalinist parties, and especially the trade unions, enjoyed the unchallengeable allegiance of the working class.

This position was held onto for decades, determining their response to the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the mass anti-colonial movements, and the revolutionary offensive by the working class that shook world imperialism starting with the May-June 1968 general strike in France and encompassing the downfall of governments in Britain, Portugal, Greece and elsewhere, including the defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam.

Woods now essentially justifies all that has gone before—every adaptation to the counter-revolutionary bureaucracies by Grant and his tendency—by insisting that it was in fact never possible to overcome "the solid blocks of the Social Democracy and the Stalinists who became like reformists" because they had such a "solid base in the mass of the working class" during a smooth and undifferentiated capitalist "phase of upswing."^[4]

The *Manifesto of the Revolutionary Communist International*, published March 11, declares, "Dialectics teaches us that at a certain stage, historical development reaches a turning point. When it does so, we cannot cling to the past and to old methods of work but must enthusiastically embrace the future."^[5]

This is an oblique reference to the more than 70 years during which, under the leadership first of Grant and now Woods, what was most widely known publicly as the Militant Tendency in Britain and its international affiliates insisted that socialism would be achieved through the transformation of reformist parties such as Britain's Labour Party, Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist formations—with themselves acting as Marxist advisors in these "mass organisations."

Grant, originally from South Africa, together with Haston, led the Workers International League (WIL), one of several pre-Second World War British groups supportive of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Between 1937 and 1938, preparatory to the founding conference of the Fourth International, intense efforts were made to unify these groups into a British section.

On July 30-31, 1938, a national conference of Bolshevik-Leninists was held in London, where most of the groups signed a Peace and Unity Agreement forming the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL). The WIL refused, citing no political differences other than insisting on a common tactical orientation in Britain. In his *A History of British Trotskyism*, Grant recalled how he had shouted at the meeting, "Even if Comrade Trotsky himself had come here we would have acted no differently."

The WIL was invited to the founding conference of the Fourth International in September that year, where the RSL was recognised as its British section, to state its case. It responded with a letter rejecting any decision of the conference that failed to comply with its demands. Trotsky himself responded to the WIL's nationalist repudiation of the central task of constructing a new revolutionary international against the counter-revolutionary Stalinist Third International:

The present conference signifies a CONCLUSIVE delimitation between those who are really IN the Fourth International and fighting every day under its revolutionary banner, and those who are merely 'FOR' the Fourth International, i.e., the dubious elements who have sought to keep one foot in our camp and one foot in the camp of our enemies... Under the circumstances it is necessary to warn the comrades associated with the Lee group [the WIL] that they are being led on a path of unprincipled clique politics which can only land them in the mire. It is possible to maintain and develop a revolutionary political grouping of serious importance only on the basis of great principles. The Fourth International alone embodies and represents these principles. It is possible for a national group to maintain a consistently revolutionary course only if it is firmly connected in one organisation with co-thinkers throughout the world and maintains a constant political and theoretical collaboration with them. The Fourth International alone is such an organisation. All purely national groupings, all those who reject international organisation, control and discipline, are in their essence reactionary.^[6]

True to Grant's boast, the WIL maintained their national separation from the Fourth International until an internationalist opposition tendency emerged within its ranks, led by Gerry Healy. Healy responded to an open letter to "a young friend", written in 1943, by Lou Cooper of the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP) warning that the WIL's hostility towards the authority of the international movement "serves to miseducate its many new members in the proven method of Bolshevik organisation," meaning that they "will not know how to deal with future disagreements and divisions in the WIL itself."^[7]

In an internal bulletin, "Our Most Important Task", Healy decried the "for the record" approach towards fusion of the WIL, and advocated immediate unity with the RSL:

If we accept the history of international Trotskyism since 1933 (which is a history of Bolshevik regroupment in the Fourth International), then we must place the question of the International as the most important question before the group. All other questions of group development, such as the press, industrial work or organisational activity are bound up with whatever stand we take on the International. If we accept the political principles of Bolshevism then we must accept the organisational method. It is not sufficient to say that we accept the programme of the Fourth International and that we expound it better than the RSL if we do not also accept its organisational method, which means that we must be affiliated to the International, accepting its democratic centralist basis; just the same as it is not sufficient to claim to be a Trotskyist and to be more conversant with the policy of Trotskyism than the organised Trotskyists, unless one joins a Trotskyist party accepting its democratic centralist discipline.^[8]

Haston and Grant responded in their usual nationalist fashion by insisting that what was most important was "the present period of mass upsurge within the British labour movement" and the WIL's ability to intervene in it. The attitude towards unity within the Fourth International, they claimed, "is one of tactics and expediency, and not at all a question of Bolshevik principles as such."

Their position was rejected by the cadre of the WIL and in March 1944 the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) was formed. But it would not be long before Grant and Haston came out politically against the Fourth

International, this time based on an explicit repudiation of its revolutionary perspective.

Grant's repudiation of Trotskyism

As the Second World War came to an end, the Fourth International was entirely correct to anticipate and prepare for revolutionary upheavals like those that had erupted in the aftermath of the First World War. Europe lay in ruins, its economy was devastated, and its ruling elites were either directly implicated in fascist barbarism or had capitulated before Hitler's armies. The Red Army controlled large swathes of the continent, while in Italy and Greece there was civil war. The colonial system was shattered, and mass anti-imperialist movements swept India, China and Africa.

However, successful revolutions demanded the building of the Fourth International to supplant the counter-revolutionary Stalinist and Social Democratic bureaucracies. And the difficulties facing the Trotskyist movement were immense, above all its small size and influence due overwhelmingly to the political genocide of the Marxist vanguard by Stalinism.

This enabled the Stalinist bureaucracy, capitalising on the prestige acquired by the Soviet Union from its defeat of Nazi Germany, to head off and betray the revolutionary movements that developed as the Trotskyist movement had anticipated—in France, Italy, Germany, Greece and elsewhere. In Eastern Europe, to secure the military defence the Soviet Union, the Stalinists were compelled to establish a series of “buffer states” where, after several years, nationalised property was established, accompanied by the systematic disenfranchisement of the working class.

It was on this political foundation that US imperialism was able to utilise its economic and military superiority to underpin a restabilisation of capitalism on a global scale.

This produced a disoriented response from a tendency within the Fourth International, led by Felix Morrow and Albert Goldman in the US, which won the support of Haston, Grant and the majority of the leadership in the Revolutionary Communist Party in Britain. Initial and necessary discussions on a possibly extended tempo of revolutionary developments proved, on the part of significant leaders and tendencies, to be the initial manifestation of a growing scepticism towards the whole historical perspective of the Trotskyist movement.

Morrow and Goldman argued, even before the war's end, that given the prospect of an economic upturn in the US and the strengthened position of the Stalinist and social democratic parties in Europe, the Fourth International should confine itself to agitation around purely democratic demands.

The basis of the RCP leadership's support for Morrow was made explicit by Grant, who complained that Trotsky had predicted the emergence of a mass revolutionary movement against Stalinism and imperialism but capitalism had not been overthrown and the Soviet bureaucracy had extended its rule over Eastern Europe.

As Grant later explained in his “Programme of the International” written in May 1970, “In 1944 it was necessary to re-orientate the movement in order to understand that a lengthy period of capitalist democracy in the West and of Stalinist domination in Russia was on the order of the day. In the documents of the Revolutionary Communist Party, it was made clear that the next period in Western Europe was that of counter-revolution in a democratic form.”^[9]

Grant falsified the wartime perspective of the Fourth International as developed by Trotsky, which anticipated the emergence of a revolutionary crisis that would undermine the old parties and prepare the way for the creation of mass Trotskyist parties. Grant portrayed this as an objectivist

prediction of future events that excluded the necessary intervention of the Trotskyist movement to break the grip of Stalinism and reformism in the course of the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class against imperialism.

In April 1940, Trotsky had written:

Every historical prognosis is always conditional, and the more concrete the prognosis, the more conditional it is. A prognosis is not a promissory note which can be cashed on a given date. Prognosis outlines only the definite trends of the development. But along with these trends a different order of forces and tendencies operate, which at a certain moment begin to predominate. All those who seek exact predictions of concrete events should consult the astrologists. Marxist prognosis aids only in orientation.^[10]

A revolutionary perspective is a historical prognosis, grounded on an understanding of the character of the epoch as one of imperialist decay, leading to wars and revolutions. And the “final” downfall of capitalism is always conditional upon the construction of a revolutionary internationalist party.

What characterised the position of Morrow/Haston/Grant in 1944 was the citing of the objective problems confronting the revolutionary party at the war's end as a pretext for adaptation to the very political mechanisms through which capitalism was being restabilised.

Morrow and Goldman argued that the Fourth International's adherence to the programme of socialist revolution in Europe rendered it politically irrelevant in the conditions that existed at the end of World War II—with the working class having proved incapable of breaking from Stalinism and pursuing a revolutionary course. The necessary defeat of fascism, therefore, must proceed through a struggle for bourgeois democratic reforms, allied with Social Democracy and various democratically inclined bourgeois movements. He called for the liquidation of the European sections of the FI into the existing social democratic parties.

In support, Haston introduced a resolution in the RCP declaring that the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat and opposition to bourgeois state rule was merely a “general principle,” which could be modified according to the “flow of class forces.”

As is explained in the introduction to the Turkish edition of *The Heritage*:

The evaluation of the arguments over a “correct line” toward events in Europe was not merely a matter of abstract intellectual discourse. In a highly fluid and unstable situation, where the outcome of the post-war political crisis was in doubt, the Trotskyists were trying to give full expression to the revolutionary potential in the situation. They based their work on the objectively existing potential for the overthrow of capitalism, not on a priori assumptions that capitalist restabilization was inevitable. In the grave hours before Hitler's rise to power, Trotsky was asked if the situation was “hopeless.” That word, he answered, was not in the vocabulary of revolutionists. “Struggle,” Trotsky declared, “will decide.” The same answer had to be given to those who claimed, amid the disorder and chaos of post-war Europe, that the revolutionary cause was hopeless and the stabilization of capitalism inevitable. Had they conceded defeat in advance, as advocated by Morrow and Goldman, the Trotskyists would have become one of the factors working in favor of capitalist restabilization.^[11]

Grant subsequently built his entire perspective on the argument that that the postwar restabilisation of capitalism, made possible only by the suppression of revolutionary struggles by Stalinism, had disproved Trotsky's revolutionary prognosis. Instead, for a protracted historical period, independent revolutionary action by the proletariat was impossible thanks to the completion of the "democratic counter-revolution".

The other political pillar of the Grant tendency was its political adaptation to Stalinism, which Grant insisted had fulfilled a revolutionary mission, first in Eastern Europe and then later in China.

Whereas the Fourth International had refused to rush to a definition of the East European buffer states and insisted that Stalinism must be evaluated based on its counter-revolutionary role on the world arena, Grant insisted that nationalisations proved that the Stalinist bureaucracy had been forced to carry out measures that were essentially socialist in character.

Ernest Mandel, then a leading figure in the Trotskyist movement, polemicalised directly against Grant and Haston in October 1949's "The Metaphysics of Nationalized Property", insisting:

Up to now, we have justified our entire attitude toward Stalinism by judging its activity from the standpoint of the world revolution... We have never condemned Stalinism from an abstract moralistic point of view. We have based our entire judgment upon the incapacity of Stalinist methods to effect the world overthrow of capitalism. We have explained that the shameful methods employed by the Kremlin cannot promote but only serve to impede the cause of the world revolution.

We have explained the impossibility of overturning capitalism on a global scale "by any means whatsoever" when there is only one method to apply: that of the revolutionary mobilization of the proletarian masses through their organs of proletarian democracy. And we have appraised—and condemned—the structural assimilation of this or that province or small country into the USSR precisely from this point of view, by saying: what counts today is not the expropriation of the bourgeoisie on small bits of territory but the world destruction of the capitalist regime; and, so far as this world destruction is concerned, the lowering of the workers' consciousness, the demoralization and destruction produced on a world scale by the crimes of Stalinism are infinitely heavier in their consequences than these few isolated "successes."

...The comrades adhering to the theory of the proletarian character of the buffer countries are far from envisaging this eventuality, but it would be the logical conclusion of the road on which they have embarked and would oblige us to revise from top to bottom our historical appraisal of Stalinism. We would then have to examine the reasons why the proletariat has been incapable of destroying capitalism on such extensive territories where the bureaucracy has successfully achieved this task.

We would also have to specify, as certain comrades of the RCP have already done, that the historical mission of the proletariat will not be the destruction of capitalism but rather that of building socialism, a task which the bureaucracy by its very nature cannot solve. We would then have to repudiate the entire Trotskyist argument against Stalinism since 1924, a line of argument based on the inevitable destruction of the USSR by imperialism in the event of an extremely prolonged postponement of the world revolution.

Even today, certain comrades explain that "the destruction of Stalinism will come about by its extension."^[12]

Grant's theory of "Proletarian Bonapartism"

Grant defined the East European regimes as a form of "Proletarian Bonapartism", a designation that assigned a progressive historical mission to the Stalinist bureaucracy and provided his tendency with a general means of adapting to non-proletarian forces that were declared to be a substitute for the revolutionary actions of the working class.

He presented this as a development of Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union, calling back to his employing the historical analogies of Thermidor and Bonapartism associated with the French Revolution: Thermidor referencing the 1794 overthrow of the radical Jacobins under Robespierre and their supplanting by a more conservative faction that relied for support on propertied sections of the third estate; Bonapartism referencing the seizure of power by Napoleon in 1799, who was then made emperor.

Over several years, Trotsky employed these terms to illustrate how the bureaucracy had moved against the genuine Bolsheviks, seizing control of the party and state apparatus and imposing a dictatorship over the working class that led to the personal rule of Stalin—without changing the essential property relations of the Soviet Union.

Despite this rejection of theories of state capitalism and the completed destruction of the revolution, however, Trotsky's use of the term Soviet Bonapartism, or in one instance, "anti-Soviet Bonapartism", was carried out in the context of his analysis of the Stalinist bureaucracy as "an uncontrolled caste alien to socialism" as it was described in his classic work, *Revolution Betrayed*.

Summing up the political tasks flowing from this appraisal, in "The USSR and Problems of the Transitional Epoch," in 1938, Trotsky wrote:

The USSR thus embodies terrific contradictions. But it still remains a *degenerated workers' state*. Such is the social diagnosis. The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming *ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state*, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism [emphasis added]."^[13]

In contrast, Grant's "Proletarian Bonapartism" designation was extended so that it covered virtually anywhere which saw extensive state nationalisations, and declared to be an inevitable stage in historical development.

In "The Colonial Revolution and the Sino-Soviet Dispute," August 1964, Grant lists as examples of Proletarian Bonapartism Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, Burma, Syria, Angola, Mozambique, Aden, Benin, Ethiopia and as models, Cuba and China. He writes of how the extension of Proletarian Bonapartism to China and onto the world arena was the inevitable product of "The degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the strengthening of Stalinism for a whole historical epoch."^[14]

For Grant, socialist revolution, or any form of independent revolutionary struggle by the working class was never a real possibility and only the "sectarian groups" would not recognise this "fact".

He adds, "Had there been in existence strong Marxist parties and tendencies in the colonial areas of the world, the problem of power would have been posed somewhat differently. It would have been posed with an internationalist perspective. But even then a prolonged isolation could only have had the same effect as in Russia and China."

The capitulation to Labourism

In this new epoch of global Stalinist ascendancy, Grant also maintained that there was no realistic prospect of a revolutionary development in the imperialist centres such as Britain.

In 1949 he and Haston abandoned their initial opposition to entry work in the Labour Party, but on the basis that they no longer believed in the possibility of constructing revolutionary parties for decades to come. The Fourth International warned that the political positions they articulated expressed, “liquidationist tendencies... Nothing is to be done because reformism is transforming the working class; nothing is to be done because Stalinism is achieving victories for the working class. They have not much hope to build the Trotskyist organisation; they have no hope in the development of the Fourth International.”^[15]

In 1950, Haston drew the necessary conclusions from his political capitulation and resigned from the RCP, based on an explicit repudiation of the Fourth International and an embrace of the Labour Party. In a letter dated June 10, he declared, “From the thesis that Stalinism and Social Democracy had betrayed the working class, we drew the conclusion that a new International was necessary. We went further and declared that we—who constituted ourselves the Fourth International—were the established leadership of the world working class.”

Haston insisted that Labour was “introducing major reforms”, India had “achieved political freedom...under the leadership of the Indian bourgeoisie” and capitalism had been overthrown in Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe and China. He concluded, “It follows from the above that we have no right to claim political and organisational authority as the international leadership of the world proletariat.” The Fourth International should be replaced by “some form of international consultative centre”, embracing “all left wing currents.”

He went on to state:

I reject the thesis that the Labour Party cannot under any circumstances be the instrument of socialist emancipation and that only through the form of Soviets can a transformation of society take place in Britain. Although I have never excluded the possibility of the parliamentary overthrow of capitalism in the advanced countries, particularly in this country, I now believe that it is our task to advocate the use of parliament as the most economical vehicle for the complete transformation of British society... the task is to loyally adhere to the mass [Labour] party and seek to drive it forward on the road to the complete transformation of the system.^[16]

Grant refused to take a stand against Haston and was expelled. Subsequently, as leader of the Militant Tendency entryist group, he spent decades loyally adhering “to the mass party”—Labour—and seeking “to drive it forward on the road to the complete transformation of the system.”

To be continued.

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