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On Reading Trotsky's Book "The Third International After Lenin"

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An interesting critique of the insufficiency of Trotsky's response to Stalinism, written by a figure on the left of the Socialist Party of America. First published in *American Socialist Monthly*, August 1936. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kantorovich/1936/review-trotsky.htm>.

The book was written at the time of the Sixth Congress of the Communist International, that is, 1928, before the Third Period madness, before the capitulation of the German Communist Party, and of course before the full liquidation of Communism at the Seventh Congress. Yet, one who has read Trotsky's criticism of the programme of the CI could foresee the further development of Stalinist Communism all through the Third Period to the Seventh Congress.

Trotsky does not indulge in prophecies (p. 137) but his analysis of the mistakes of the CI clearly indicates its further development.

The downfall of the CI is the result of the theory of "socialism in one country." It is contrary to all Communist theory and tactics. Once this theory is accepted, it leads necessarily towards "a collaborationist policy towards the foreign bourgeoisie with the object of averting intervention." Since this theory is accepted not only by the leaders of the USSR, who could at least plead national emergency as cause or excuse for their betrayal of internationalism, but also by the Communist International, its only excuse can be the "defence of the Soviet Union," using the word "defence" in the simple traditional way in which it is used in every capitalist state. Where does it lead? In 1928 Trotsky prophesied that in view of this theory: "The task of the parties in the CI assumes therefore an auxiliary character. Their mission is to protect the USSR from intervention and not to fight for the conquest of power" (p. 61).

He clearly foresaw the fate that was in store for the CI as an organisation. Once this theory is accepted:

Then the international is partly a subsidiary and partly a decorative institution, the congress of which can be convoked every four years, once every ten years or perhaps not at all... The International according to this scheme must play the role of a pacifist instrument. Its main role, the role of an instrument of world revolution, is then inevitably relegated to the background (p. 62).

In 1928 it was easy to raise the cry that Trotsky was slandering the CI and the Communist movement generally. In 1936 no one but a blind man can deny that Trotsky's predictions came true to the letter. The CI has become nothing more than a subsidiary of the foreign office of the Soviet government, a pacifist instrument. Its congresses are convoked once in four years and once in seven years, and God knows

when the Eighth Congress will be held, if ever.¹ The Communist parties have even gone further in their degeneration than Trotsky predicted. It is not only that they have relegated the idea of world revolution to the background; they have given it up completely. Along with the world revolution went the class struggle.

His criticism of the mistakes and vacillations of the CI is brilliant and well substantiated. The implications, however, that if not for these mistakes, the failures of the proletarian revolution would have been victories, is not convincing. He places altogether too much reliance on leadership. There seems to be something divine about true, real leaders; all defeats of the European working class were mainly due to the lack of leadership. Yet some of the worst defeats suffered by the Communist movement happened at the time when the CI was headed by Lenin and Trotsky, and the opposition in the CP USSR was defeated, though at its head was no less a leader than Trotsky himself!

No one will of course deny the true role of leadership. We all know the price many a party has paid for incorrect leadership. Yet, leaders do not create parties and certainly make no revolutions, though correct leadership is of course necessary in order to utilise and take advantage of favourable situations. According to Trotsky, leadership is of first importance, everything else secondary. "Would we have seized power in October had not Lenin arrived in Russia in time?" Trotsky asks and answers: "There is much to indicate that we might not have been able to seize power" (p. 85). Let us however ask the same question differently: Would the proletarian revolution have triumphed in Germany if it had had Lenin as its leader? From all we know about the German situation at the time of the revolution, the answer must be in the negative. No, Lenin would have been defeated just as Liebknecht and Luxemburg were. Why did Liebknecht and Luxemburg fail? Not because they were bad leaders, but because the German masses did not follow them. The German masses followed the Social Democratic Party, which was bent on liquidating revolution instead of deepening it, and Lenin could have done under these circumstances no more than Liebknecht did. Or, let us apply the same question to England. Suppose Lenin would have been in England during the time of the general strike – could he have turned it into a social revolution? One must have an exceedingly rich imagination to believe this. One may say, it is the fault of the German SPD, of the British Labour Party, etc. Admitted. But taking the situations as they were, could a Lenin have changed it? The answer is evident, he could not.

"To lead is to foresee," Trotsky declares. Applied to the two greatest leaders, Lenin as well as Trotsky, there can be no doubt that both are guilty of often, too often, "foreseeing" wrongly; often, too often, mistaking their own subjective wishes for objective foreseeing. They both foresaw a world revolution which has not come; wars, intervention and crises that failed to materialise. They even foresaw inevitable disaster for the Soviet Union if the world revolution did not come soon enough, a "foreseeing" that fortunately was wrong, knowing well enough that the victory of the proletariat was not possible without a well organised, well prepared revolutionary party. Trotsky "foresaw," as he admits, that such parties would be created, and in the fire of revolution and civil war mature rapidly and be able to lead the proletariat in its great "final battle" against capitalism. That was of course pure wishful thinking. Revolutionary parties of this calibre do not spring up and mature rapidly within a few months or a year. They grow up slowly and gather strength from their own

¹ In *Soviet Communism* by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, one reads: "The supreme authority rests... with the world congress, meeting every two to four or seven years," thus giving the impression that it is part of the CI programme to meet every two to four or seven years. Which is of course not true (Volume 1, p. 409). The book is full of just such "authoritative" information.

experiences and wisdom; from their own failures. Yet, Trotsky based his entire strategy at one time on this false belief. In 1928 Trotsky foresaw that “the Communist International will not survive five years more of similar mistakes, but if the Comintern crumbles, neither will the USSR long endure” (pp. 255-56). It seems to us in 1936 that he “foresaw” wrongly, again. In 1928 Trotsky foresaw that the workers would “begin to pass *en masse* from Social Democracy to the Communist Party” and he assures us that “the arrival of such a moment is inevitable” (p. 262). But in 1936, it seems again that he made a mistake. Instead of the workers passing *en masse* from the Socialist to the Communist parties, the followers of Trotsky are joining *en masse* the existing Socialist parties.

And yet, in spite of the many mistakes that Trotsky has made, in spite of his serious mistakes in estimating objective situations and therefore drawing wrong conclusions (something of which not only Lenin, but also Marx and Engels were equally guilty), Trotsky is a great leader. But the presence of a Trotsky or a Lenin, or many Trotskys and Lenins is no guarantee for a successful revolution, just as their absence does not necessarily mean failure. It is this exaggeration of the role of the leader that is really the basis of the worst features of Stalinism. The entire disgusting system of the “beloved leaders” from Stalin to Browder, which has reduced the Communist parties to mechanical automatons that are capable of nothing else than becoming enthusiastic when ordered, is the practical application of this theory.

Brilliantly and convincingly, Trotsky shows that Stalinism is nothing but a perversion of Leninism. In fact, it is its opposite. The victory of Stalinism is the defeat of Leninism. Leninism has been abandoned by the Russian Communist Party and following it, by the entire Stalinist International. In vain will the reader, however, look to Trotsky for an explanation of how it happened. Leninism has been abandoned. True. But was it because Stalin is a bad man? A traitor? Trotsky himself spurns such a “simple” explanation. What then conditioned the defeat of Leninism? Trotsky really has no answer to it. He can’t have an answer. He is a Leninist, and the sad truth, which Trotsky will not admit, is that Leninism failed because the subsequent developments of the Russian, as well as the world revolution, have shown it to be wrong.

The basic idea of Lenin (and of Trotsky) on the Russian revolution was that Russia was not only not ripe for socialism, it was not even ripe for a socialist revolution. But he firmly believed that Europe was ripe for the revolution. The Russian revolution was to be only the signal for the world revolution:

It was clear to us [Lenin declared in 1921] that without aid from the international world revolution, a victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible. Even prior to the revolution as well as after it, we thought that the revolution will also occur, either immediately or at least *very soon* in other backward countries, and in the more highly developed countries; *otherwise we would perish.*

Lenin never tired of repeating his formula – either a world revolution or we perish. His conviction was based not only on his belief that socialism in one country, and a most backward country at that, was not possible, but also on his belief that if the world revolution did not destroy the capitalist states of other countries, these states would never tolerate the existence of Soviet Russia for any length of time. “We do not live merely in a state,” Lenin reasoned, “but in a system of states and the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with imperialist states *for any length of time* is inconceivable.” And on another occasion Lenin assures us that “as long as capitalism and

socialism remain side by side, we cannot live peacefully – the one or the other will be victor in the end. An obituary will be sung either over the death of world capitalism or the death of the Soviet Republic" (quoted by Trotsky). It was either a world revolution or war against Soviet Russia, one of the two had to happen. The tactics and strategy of the Soviet government as well as of the Comintern were based on this belief.

Years passed. The prospect of a world revolution grew dimmer and dimmer. The revolutionary movement suffered defeat after defeat. It became clear that it would take a long time before the world revolution would come. But neither did the prophesied war of intervention come. The Communist press, it is true, every day uncovered plots for such intervention. But still the war of intervention did not come off. The imperialist states had plenty of troubles of their own. Instead of making war on Soviet Russia, they saw it as a good customer; they wanted to do business with it.

Meanwhile Russia had to live. It could not go on living simply in the hope of world revolution or fear of capitalist intervention. The Russian people wanted rest and peace, even if they could not as yet have enough bread. The Soviet government had to turn more and more to domestic problems. Life itself forced on it the gigantic constructive plans of which it is now so proud. But for its constructive work it needed the help of exactly those imperialist states, whose very existence side by side with the Soviet government, according to Lenin, was impossible. The Soviet government had to enter into new relations with the capitalist states, business relations, friendly relations. The old tactic of pure hostility, of inciting revolution had to be scrapped, if normal business relations were to be established. Old Leninism was in the way and it also had to be scrapped. Soviet Russia had to find a place for itself among capitalist nations, it had to find allies for itself among them. It succeeded, but had to pay the price. That price was Leninism and revolutionary internationalism, generally. The victory of Stalinism was the defeat of world revolution. But this defeat was not the result of Stalinism; it was its cause.

The tragedy of the Communist International is that when Soviet Russia was compelled, in the interests of its national state, to abandon revolutionary communism, it could not disassociate itself from Stalinism, and continue its own independent life as a revolutionary international. It became nothing more than a cog in the Stalinist machine and an instrument of bourgeois pacifism and people's front class-collaborationism, instead of an instrument for world revolution. But then, the Comintern, as well as the Communist national sections everywhere, were always nothing but subsidiaries of the Soviet government. They could not according to their tradition be anything else.