

# THE REVOLUTION BETRAYED

Zoom study group on Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed*, Thursday 8pm to 9:30pm from 10 September through to 26 November.

Leon Trotsky wrote both the best history of the Russian Revolution of 1917, but also the pioneering analysis of the subsequent Stalinist counter-revolution which replaced the workers' regime by bureaucratic tyranny. In this study group we will discuss Trotsky's book *The Revolution Betrayed* chapter by chapter.

The book was written in 1935-6, during Trotsky's time in Norway. He arrived in Norway in June 1935, was put under close house arrest in August 1936 just after finishing the book, and negotiated an exit to Mexico in December 1936.

Trotsky wrote the book just after the Stalinist regime had stabilised (in its own way, and temporarily) from the convulsions of forced-march industrialisation and collectivisation in 1928-33, and just before the start of the Moscow Trials.

He first started drafting it as an introduction, requested by the publisher, for a new edition of *The History of the Russian Revolution*, then it grew into a book in its own right. "The work [proved] more difficult than I thought... I became more and more engrossed in the theme - with frenzy and desperation".

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/study-group-on-trotsky-s-revolution-betrayed-tickets-116908034077>

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUrcOCrpzljH9bnz6FBgTbvbnz04Co38Sey>

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81679399952?pwd=WW9lRzF1M1I4VVVsWTZVOfdyTS84dz09>

<https://www.facebook.com/events/3160703824013500/>

The printed book is available from Amazon and elsewhere at a reasonable price:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Revolution-Betrayed-Leon-Trotsky/dp/0486433986>

Kindle, pdf, and online versions are available free here:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/>

I don't know of an audio version. Sorry.

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## SCHEDULE

Starting at chapter II, and discussing the Introduction and Chapter I towards the end, is a deliberate plan. For each session, these study notes give a few discussion points and a number of extracts from the text as a frame for study and discussion.

• 10 September - II. – ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE ZIGZAGS OF THE LEADERSHIP

“Military Communism”, “The New Economic Policy” (NEP) and the Course Toward the Kulak  
A Sharp Turn: “The Five-Year Plan in Four Years” and “Complete Collectivization”

DP. Trotsky describes three major phases in the economic life of the USSR after the revolution.  
What were they, and what determined the shifts between phases?

DP. Trotsky is critical of all three phases. What alternative does he propose?

Extracts:

"Military communism was, in essence, the systematic regimentation of consumption in a besieged fortress" - p.21

"The utopian hopes of the epoch of military communism came in later for a cruel, and in many respects just, criticism. The theoretical mistake of the ruling party remains inexplicable, however, only if you leave out of account the fact that all calculations at that time were based on the hope of an early victory of the revolution in the West" - p.23

[Even with that early victory] "it would still have been necessary to renounce the direct state distribution of products in favor of the methods of commerce... Industry itself, in spite of its socialised character, had need of the methods of money payment worked out by capitalism" - p.23-5

"The scattered character of the peasant economy, inherited from the past, was aggravated by the results of the October Revolution" - p.25

"This policy of banking on the well-to-do farmer revealed unequivocally inside of two years, 1924-26, its political consequences. It brought... an increase of the power and self-confidence of the bureaucracy... and the complete suppression of party and Soviet democracy" - p.27

[In 1927-8] "the strengthened kulak... subjected the cities to a grain blockade... Self-satisfied quietism was replaced by a panic of haste" - p.35

"... A new plan, the fundamental elements of which were borrowed in toto from the platform of the shattered Left Opposition" - p.35

"The bureaucracy not only freed itself from the political control of the masses, upon whom this forced industrialization was laying an unbearable burden, but also from the automatic control exercised by the chervonetz" [gold-backed paper money issued from November 1922] - p.35

"The bureaucracy 'robbed the villages'... 'Complete collectivisation... plunged the national economy into a condition of ruin almost without precedent'... loss of [the] quantity of grain needed to keep the towns even at the customary hunger norm" - p.39-40

"The regime survived. But that is the merit of the regime itself, which had put down deep roots in the popular soil... [also] due to favourable external circumstances" - p.42

• 17 September - III. – SOCIALISM AND THE STATE

The Transitional Regime

Program and Reality

The Dual Character of the Workers' State

"Generalized Want" and the Gendarme

The "Complete Triumph of Socialism" and the "Reinforcement of the Dictatorship"

DP: What is Trotsky's criterion of socialism, against which he measures the USSR?

DP: Trotsky writes that bureaucratism will be a danger everywhere after a workers' revolution. Why then does he protest against it in the USSR? How can that danger be combatted?

DP: Trotsky argues that in an economy with shortages there will be queues, and then gendarmes on the queues, who embody the "bourgeois" aspect of the state. What does Trotsky mean by a "bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie"? Do you think this concept fits the history of the USSR?

Extracts:

"The material premise of communism should be so high a development of the economic powers of man that productive labor, having ceased to be a burden, will not require any goad, and the distribution of life's goods, existing in continual abundance, will not demand – as it does not now in any well-off family or 'decent' boarding-house – any control except that of education, habit and social opinion. Speaking frankly, I think it would be pretty dull-witted to consider such a really modest perspective 'utopian'" - p.45-6

"In its first steps the workers' state cannot yet [do that]... In order to increase the productive forces, it is necessary to resort to the customary norms of wage payment – that is, to the distribution of life's goods in proportion to the quantity and quality of individual labor" - p.46

"The present Soviet regime [is] not a socialist regime... Will the bureaucracy itself, in whose hands the power and wealth are concentrated, wish to grow more peacefully into socialism?" - p.47-9

"The present Soviet state... has grown into a hitherto unheard of apparatus of compulsion. The bureaucracy not only has not disappeared... but has turned into an uncontrolled force dominating the masses... a political machine that is independent of the masses" - p.51, 63

"The [workers'] state assumes directly and from the very beginning a dual character: socialistic, insofar as it defends social property in the means of production; bourgeois, insofar as the distribution of life's goods is carried out with a capitalistic measure" - p.54

"The tendencies of bureaucratism, which strangles the workers' movement in capitalist countries, would everywhere show themselves even after a proletarian revolution" - p.55

"Two years before the Communist Manifesto, young Marx wrote: 'A development of the productive forces is the absolutely necessary practical premise [of Communism], because without it want is generalized, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means that all the old crap must revive'" - p.56

[See also from a later chapter: "Personal property of the citizens in their articles of domestic economy, consumption, comfort and daily life... property of this kind, purged of the psychology of greed and envy which clings to it, will not only be preserved under communism but will receive an unheard of development. It is subject to doubt, to be sure, whether a man of high culture would want to burden himself with a rubbish of luxuries. But he would not renounce any one of the

conquests of comfort. The first task of communism is to guarantee the comforts of life to all" - p.260]

[In the USSR, however] "a further growth of bureaucratism, such that from being a "distortion", it has now become a system of administration" - p.59

## 24 September - IV. – THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PRODUCTIVITY OF LABOR

Money and Plan

"Socialist" Inflation

The Rehabilitation of the Ruble

The Stakhanov Movement

DP: Trotsky considers some sort of piecework payments inevitable in an economically hard-pressed country. What do you think? What distinction does Trotsky make between that inevitable element of piecework payment and the Stakhanovite system?

DP: Trotsky argues that at the level of the USSR as it was in the 1930s, state control of budget and the credit system was enough for planning, without administrative production targets or administratively-set prices. What do you think?

DP: Trotsky argues that inflation has been destructive in the USSR (see p.69) and argues for a gold-based currency. Why?

Extracts:

"We shall be able to speak of the actual triumph of socialism only at that historical moment when the state turns into a semi-state, and money begins to lose its magic power... The death-blow to money fetishism will be struck only upon that stage when the steady growth of social wealth has made us bipeds forget our miserly attitude toward every excess minute of labor, and our humiliating fear about the size of our ration. Having lost its ability to bring happiness or trample men in the dust, money will turn into mere bookkeeping receipts for the convenience of statisticians and for planning purposes" - p.65-6

"In the transitional economy, as also under capitalism, the sole authentic money is that based upon gold" - p.68

"The budget and credit mechanism is wholly adequate for a planned distribution of the national income... 'Directive' prices were less impressive in real life than in the books of scholars" - p.75

"The return... to piecework payment might seem a retreat to capitalist relations [but] in reality it is... a question... merely of abandoning crude illusions" - p.81

"In the Soviet Union... there is now taking place a ruthlessly severe fitting in of backward human material to the technique borrowed from capitalism... The classic methods of exploitation, such as piecework payment, are applied in such naked and crude forms as would not be permitted even by reformist trade unions in bourgeois countries... State ownership of the means of production does not turn manure into gold, and does not surround with a halo of sanctity the sweatshop system" - p.82-3

• 1 October - V. – THE SOVIET THERMIDOR

Why Stalin Triumphed  
The Degeneration of the Bolshevik Party  
The Social Roots of Thermidor

DP: Trotsky describes the policy of the bureaucracy as "a series of contradictory zigzags". Does he mean that the bureaucracy has no clear aim of its own, so is buffeted this way and that by stronger forces? Or is there a clear objective (though maybe ineptly pursued) behind the zigzags?

DP: Trotsky has already said that there is a danger of bureaucratism after a revolution, and now he says that some degree of reflux and reaction is inevitable after a revolution. How can that be combatted?

DP: Often the installation of a bureaucratic regime is put down to the role of the Bolshevik Party. Here Trotsky argues the opposite: "The bureaucracy conquered... the Bolshevik Party". What do you think?

Extracts:

"Every revolution up to this time has been followed by a reaction, or even a counterrevolution... The axiomatic assertions of the Soviet literature, to the effect that the laws of bourgeois revolutions are 'inapplicable' to a proletarian revolution, have no scientific content whatever" - p.89

"The demobilization of the Red Army of five million played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war... The young bureaucracy, which had arisen at first as an agent of the proletariat, began now to feel itself a court of arbitration between classes. Its independence increased..." - p.90

"The leaders of the bureaucracy promoted the proletarian defeats [internationally]; the defeats promoted the rise of the bureaucracy..." -{ p.90

[After 1928] "the new ruling caste soon revealed its own ideas, feelings, and, more important, its interests" - p.93

"The regime of the Bolshevik party... stood in complete contradiction to the regime of the present sections of the Communist International" - p.95

"The 'Leninist levy' dealt a death blow to the party of Lenin" - p.98

[In the mid 1920s] "The regime had become 'totalitarian' in character several years before this word arrived from Germany" - p.100

"The relations among men... have not only not yet risen to socialism, but in many respects are still lagging behind a cultured capitalism. In recent years enormous backward steps have been taken in this very important sphere... The bureaucracy succeeded in raising itself above society and getting its fate firmly into its own hands. Its own will to this would in any case be inadequate: the arising of a new ruling stratum must have deep social causes" - p.104-5

"The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order... [In the

USSR] there has developed an organ which has far outgrown its socially necessary function, and become an independent factor..." - p.113

• 8 October - VI. – THE GROWTH OF INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL ANTAGONISMS

Want, Luxury and Speculation  
The Differentiation of the Proletariat  
Social Contradictions in the Collective Village  
The Social Physiognomy of the Ruling Stratum

DP: What happened to real wages in the USSR in the 1930s? Trotsky says he's found it impossible to get accurate figures, but what do we know now?

DP: Trotsky writes: "Competition... will indubitably remain the most important motive force of culture under communism too. But... not these humiliating measures of a backward capitalism to which the Soviet government is resorting..." (p.128). What do you think? What differentiates the "measures of a backward capitalism" which Stalinism was using from more benign competition"?

DP: Trotsky writes: "In Soviet political literature you often meet with accusations of 'bureaucratism' as a bad custom of thought or method of work... But what you cannot meet anywhere is an investigation of the bureaucracy as a ruling stratum... Nevertheless it exists. And... it possesses the specific consciousness of a ruling 'class'" (p.135). What differentiates a bureaucracy as a ruling stratum from bureaucratism as a bad custom? Why does Trotsky put "class" in scare-quotes?

Extracts:

"Soviet society is already divided into a secure and privileged minority, and a majority getting along in want" - p.116

Trotsky further discusses differentiation within the working class, not just between the bureaucracy and the working class. "In scope of inequality in the payment of labour, the Soviet Union has not only caught up to, but far surpassed the capitalist countries" - p.125

"Differentiation... *within* the collective [farms, and]... differentiation *between* collectives" - p.134

"This half-million upper caste is supported by a heavy administrative pyramid... This whole stratum... five or six million... the labour and collectivised-peasant aristocracy [etc., another] five or six million... [total] 12%, or perhaps 15% of the population... In its conditions of life, the ruling stratum comprises all gradations, from the petty bourgeoisie of the backwoods to the big bourgeoisie of the capitals" - p.136-7

"The distribution of this earth's goods in the Soviet Union, we do not doubt, is incomparably more democratic than it was in tsarist Russia, and even than it is in the most democratic countries of the West" - p.143

• 15 October - VII. – FAMILY, YOUTH AND CULTURE

Thermidor in the Family  
The Struggle against the Youth  
Nationality and Culture

DP: How was the bureaucracy recruited?

DP: The Communist Manifesto talks of: "Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists". Here, however, Trotsky says: "You cannot 'abolish' the family; you have to replace it" (p.145).

DP: Trotsky expects a social explosion in the USSR from the younger generation which had grown up since 1917. Why didn't that happen?

DP: Trotsky was unable to get good information on the Ukrainian famine, the Holodomor of 1932-3. But later, in 1939, he would vigorously argue for support for Ukrainian independence from the USSR. Why isn't that idea here in this book?

Extracts:

"The forty million Soviet families remain in their overwhelming majority nests of medievalism, female slavery and hysteria, daily humiliation of children, feminine and childish superstition... The most compelling motive of the present cult of the family is undoubtedly the need of the bureaucracy for a stable hierarchy of relations, and for the disciplining of youth by means of 40,000,000 points of support for authority and power" - p.145, 153

"The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called 'family hearth'... [But] the social laundries, where they tear and steal linen more than they wash it. Back to the family hearth!" - p.144, 146

"The revolutionary power gave women the right to abortion, which... is one of her most important civil, political, and cultural rights... The [Stalinist] state... takes the road of prohibition... The philosophy of a priest endowed also with the powers of a gendarme" - p.149-50

"In the new Soviet generation well-being and prosperity are accessible only to that thin layer who manage to rise above the mass and one way or another accommodate themselves to the ruling stratum. The bureaucracy on its side is consciously developing and sorting out machine politicians and careerists" - p.163

"The bureaucracy is laying down a bridge for [the USSR nationalities with little prior capitalist development] to the elementary benefits of bourgeois, and in part even pre-bourgeois, culture. In relation to many spheres and peoples, the Soviet power is to a considerable extent carrying out the historic work fulfilled by Peter I and his colleagues... acquainting tens of millions of grown-up people with the alphabet and the newspaper, or with the simple laws of hygiene..." - p.171-2

Yet "bureaucratism inevitably takes the color of an autocratic Russification, leaving to the other nationalities the sole indubitable cultural right of celebrating the arbiter in their own language" - p.178

"The bureaucracy itself has become the carrier of the most extreme, and sometimes unbridled, bourgeois individualism... [and] at the same time [it] ruthlessly suppresses the progressive side of individualism in the realm of spiritual culture (critical views, the development of one's own opinion, the cultivation of personal dignity)" - p.176

• 22 October - VIII. – FOREIGN POLICY AND THE ARMY

From "World Revolution" to Status Quo

The League of Nations and the Communist International

The Red Army and Its Doctrines

The Abolition of the Militia and the Restoration of Officers' Ranks

The Soviet Union in a War

DP: Trotsky simultaneously argues that the armed forces have been much strengthened, and that they show the bureaucratic degeneration in its "most finished" form. How can we square that?

DP: Trotsky believes that defeat of the USSR is inevitable in a coming war, unless it becomes something other than a war. What else can it become? And what will be the outcome then?

Extracts:

"Beginning with the autumn of 1923, the history of the Communist International is a history of... purgations from above, expulsions, etc. At the present time, the Communist International is a completely submissive apparatus in the service of Soviet foreign policy, ready at any time for any zigzag whatever" - p.186-7

[In the revolutionary years] "the Soviet government concluded a series of treaties with bourgeois governments... [but] the fundamental line of the international policy of the Soviets rested on the fact that this or that commercial, diplomatic, or military bargain of the Soviet government with the imperialists, inevitable in the nature of the case, should in no case limit or weaken the struggle of the proletariat of the corresponding capitalist country" - p.188

"The Soviet official newspaper [says] The Soviet Union has today more friends in the world than ever before. (Izvestia, 17/9/35)" - p.196. But "the Soviet Union, in spite of all the services of its ruling stratum, remains in the eyes of the bourgeoisie of the whole world an irreconcilable enemy" - p.197

"The correlation between the living and mechanical forces of the Red Army may be considered, by and large, as on a level with the best armies of the West" - p.206

"It has not stood aside, however, from the processes of degeneration of the Soviet regime. On the contrary, these have found their most finished expression in the army... The political needs of the ruling stratum. In the army, these needs only receive their most finished expression" - p.210, 224

"Contrary to the retrospective representations of it, the intellectual life of Bolshevism at the very heaviest period of the civil war was boiling like a spring" - p.212



• 29 October - IX. – SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE SOCIAL UNION

State Capitalism?

Is the Bureaucracy a Ruling Class?

The Question of the Character of the Soviet Union Not Yet Decided by History

DP: What is the relation between state property and socialism?

DP: Trotsky depicts the USSR as torn between "developing the productive forces", "in contrast to a decaying capitalism", and "for the benefit of an upper stratum, carr[ying] to more and more extreme expressions bourgeois norms of distribution". How far does this contrast take us in explaining things?

DP: Trotsky recognises state capitalism as a theoretical possibility, and capitalist "state-ism" as an actual fact, but says that the USSR is neither. Why not? In other writings, both before and after, Trotsky also discusses the description of the USSR as "bureaucratic collectivist". Why not here? And why would he object to that description?

DP: Contrary to conventional wisdom, Trotsky does *not* use the term "degenerated workers' state" in this book. He does argue that the Stalinist USSR is still a "workers' state" of some sort. On what criteria? And then he says that "the question of the character of the Soviet Union [is] not yet decided by history", and gives a long definition based on the possible *future* developments (p.255). How would you summarise his conclusion? How does it look 84 years on?

Extracts:

"Individual peasants and craftsmen still comprised, in 1934, 22.5%... [and] now [in 1936] constitute about 10% of the population" - p.234-5

"The new constitution... says: '... the state property – that is, the possessions of the whole people'. This identification is the fundamental sophism of the official doctrine... State property becomes the property of "the whole people" only to the degree that social privilege and differentiation disappear, and therewith the necessity of the state. In other words: state property is converted into socialist property in proportion as it ceases to be state property. And the contrary is true: the higher the Soviet state rises above the people, and the more fiercely it opposes itself as the guardian of property to the people as its squanderer, the more obviously does it testify against the socialist character of this state property" - p.237

"From the point of view of property in the means of production, the differences between a marshal and a servant girl, the head of a trust and a day laborer... seem not to exist at all... To the day laborer, however, [they seem], not without reason, very essential" - p.238-9

"It is something more than a bureaucracy. It is in the full sense of the word the sole privileged and commanding stratum in the Soviet society... The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy..." - p.249

"The bureaucracy has not yet created social supports for its dominion in the form of special types of property. It is compelled to defend state property as the source of its power and its income".

"The character of the economy as a whole... depends on the character of the state power... The bureaucracy... continues to preserve state property only to the extent that it fears the proletariat" - p. 249, 250, 251

• 5 November - X. – THE SOVIET UNION IN THE MIRROR OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION

Work "According to Ability" and Personal Property  
The Soviets and Democracy  
Democracy and the Party

and XI. – WHITHER THE SOVIET UNION?

Bonapartism as a Regime of Crisis  
The Struggle of the Bureaucracy with "the Class Enemy"  
The Inevitability of a New Revolution

DP: Trotsky says the Left Opposition had a policy of reforming the USSR, but now recognises that a new workers' revolution is necessary there. Why?

DP: Trotsky describes that new workers' revolution as a "political revolution" (p.288ff) in distinction from a social revolution. What does that mean?

DP: How stable or unstable does Trotsky describe the USSR as being?

Extracts:

"Of Soviets there remains only the name. But the bureaucracy is still there. The equality of the rights of workers and peasants means, in reality, an equal lack of rights before the bureaucracy" - p.264

"Stalin advanced a new consideration: 'Lists of nominees will be presented not only by the Communist Party, but also by all kinds of non-party social organizations. And we have hundreds of them ... Each one of the little strata [of Soviet society] can have its special interests and reflect [express?] them through the existing innumerable social organizations'. This sophism is no better than the others. The Soviet 'social' organizations – trade union, co-operative, cultural, etc. do not in the least represent the interests of different 'little strata', for they all have one and the same hierarchical structure" - p.268-9

"'What remains of the October Revolution', asks Victor Serge, 'if every worker who permits himself to make a demand, or express a critical judgment, is subject to imprisonment? Oh, after that you can establish as many secret ballots as you please!'" - p.270

"From the point of view of socialist forms of society, the policy of the bureaucracy is striking in its contradictions and inconsistencies. But the same policy appears very consistent from the standpoint of strengthening the power of the new commanding stratum" - p.273

"The progressive role of the Soviet bureaucracy coincides with the period devoted to introducing into the Soviet Union the most important elements of capitalist technique" - p.275

"The Stalin regime, rising above a politically atomized society, resting upon a police and officers' corps, and allowing of no control whatever, is obviously a variation of Bonapartism... Stalinism and fascism, in spite of a deep difference in social foundations, are symmetrical phenomena. In many of their features they show a deadly similarity" - p.278

"From the first days of the Soviet regime the counterweight to bureaucratism was the party" - p.279

"The workers fear lest, in throwing out the bureaucracy, they will open the way for a capitalist restoration. The mutual relations between state and class are much more complicated than they are represented by the vulgar 'democrats'. Without a planned economy the Soviet Union would be

thrown back for decades. In that sense the bureaucracy continues to fulfill a necessary function. But it fulfills it in such a way as to prepare an explosion of the whole system which may completely sweep out the results of the revolution. The workers are realists. Without deceiving themselves with regard to the ruling caste at least with regard to its lower tiers which stand near to them – they see in it the watchman for the time being of a certain part of their own conquests" - p.285-6

- 12 November - APPENDIX: "SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY"

The "Friends" of the Soviet Union

DP: Why was Stalin more popular with mainstream Western liberals and soft-left people than Lenin?

DP: Some of the admirers of Stalin conceded that there were important faults in the USSR. But, they said, some degree of bureaucratic degeneration was inevitable. So?

Extracts:

"... the theory of building socialism in one country was not a mere Stalinist invention'. Completely true! It expressed unmistakably the mood of the bureaucracy. When speaking of the victory of socialism, they meant their own victory" - p.292

"Friendship for the Soviet bureaucracy is not friendship for the proletarian revolution, but, on the contrary, insurance against it" - p.302

"As late as 1923, the Webbs saw no great difference between Bolshevism and Tzarism... Now, however, they have fully reorganized the 'democracy' of the Stalin regime" - p.304

- 19 November - INTRODUCTION AND I. – WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED

The Principal Indices of Industrial Growth  
Comparative Estimates of These Achievements  
Production per Capita of the Population

DP: In the light of what we know now (or even of chapters 2-11 of the book), is the assessment of economic achievements in chapter 1 accurate?

DP: In Trotsky's assessment, is USSR society closer to socialism than West European capitalism, or further from it?

Extracts:

Russia "has... to solve those problems of technique and productivity which were long ago solved by capitalism in the advanced countries... Capitalism is still far ahead in the matter of technique, organisation and labour skill" - p.6, p.10

"Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of Das Kapital, but in an industrial arena comprising a sixth part of the earth's surface – not in the language of dialectics, but in the language of steel, cement and electricity" - p.8

"The lack of primers, paper, and pencils paralyzes the work of the schools" - p.18

- 26 November - REVIEWING TROTSKY IN THE LIGHT OF THE SUBSEQUENT 51 YEARS OF THE USSR

<https://www.workersliberty.org/node/25540>

- What went wrong in the USSR?
- Does nationalised property define a workers' state? Did Trotsky argue that it did?
- How can we best understand the USSR in hindsight?

# Study Guide to

## *The Fate of the Russian Revolution:*

### Lost Texts of Critical Marxism Volume 1

This Study Guide aims to help you work through the main ideas in the book (it does not attempt to cover everything) in ten instalments, listing key ideas and key questions for discussion under each one.

There are two main themes to the book. (1) What was the nature of the Stalinist USSR? Was it a degenerated workers' state or was it an unexpected new system of class exploitation? (2) What were the implications for would-be Trotskyist politics of maintaining the unchanged form of words, "the USSR is a degenerated workers' state", while the reality of the USSR developed from beleaguered revolutionary pariah state into world superpower?

The first question is important enough, given that every serious socialist today has to confront the argument that the collapse of the USSR shows that socialism – or, some would say, any alternative to capitalism – is an unworkable failure. Exploring the second suggests that many everyday arguments on the revolutionary left today – about what a revolutionary party should be, how revolutionaries should relate to the mass labour movement, the importance of democratic questions (for example consistent democracy in national and communal conflicts), about habitually "writing yes where the bourgeoisie writes a no" – are, in unexpected ways, linked with each other and with the basic theoretical question for 20th century socialism, the nature of Stalinism. It should thus help us better understand (and, let's hope, develop) our politics as a whole, not just a bundle of unconnected "positions".

These connections are obscured for us in Britain today by the fact that the main representative of the "orthodox Trotskyist" culture is the SWP, which has long rejected the idea that the Stalinist USSR was a "workers' state". The short explanation for this paradox is that the SWP is inconsistent and eclectic: its ideas are a mish-mash of borrowings from many sources, but the root political culture they are grafted on to is the "orthodox Trotskyist" one of the 1940s, from which the SWP tendency originated.

To understand the debates presented in the book you need some knowledge of the basic perspectives of Marxism, at least to the extent of having carefully read and discussed the *Communist Manifesto* or *Principles of Communism* (the latter is included in *How Solidarity Can Change The World*, WL46-47).

Basic companion reading: *Revolution Betrayed* by Trotsky, the collection of Trotsky's 1939-40 articles entitled *In Defence of Marxism*, and *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* by James P Cannon. These present the "other side of the argument" to the texts in our book; they also contain much material of enormous value in addition to the points we might consider them in error on. To make this Study Guide more self-contained, it includes two key chapters from *Revolution Betrayed* and a key article from *In Defence of Marxism*, but the excerpts are no substitute for the whole.

On millenarianism, one of the central concepts in the book, you will find Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* an illuminating, and probably fascinating, read. To take the argument about defining the Stalinist social system further, read *Workers' Liberty* nos. 12-13 (pp.25-33), no. 14 (pp.42-44); no. 16; and the debate in *Workers' Liberty* nos. 43, 44, 45 and continuing. You might also find two novels helpful: *The Mandarins* by Simone de Beauvoir, and *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. They present the intellectual choices of the formative years of the Cold War vividly, de Beauvoir in a very fine piece of writing by an author critically sympathetic to Stalinism, and Rand in a wild diatribe by a last-ditch defender of capitalism.

## Key Dates

### 1917

**February** (March by the western calendar): workers' demonstrations in Russia overthrow the Tsar (king). Prince Lvov leads Provisional Government; Petrograd workers set up a "Soviet" (workers' council).

**March:** First All-Russian Conference of Soviets. Moderate socialists dominate.

**April:** Lenin returns to Russia, publishes April Theses proposing "All Power to the Soviets", wins Bolshevik party over to this idea.

**July:** Big street demonstrations in Petrograd against Provisional Government.. Bolsheviks restrain the movement, believing that if the workers take power in Petrograd they will quickly be crushed because the rest of the country is still much more conservative. Kerensky replaces Prince Lvov as prime minister.

**August:** General Kornilov leads attempted right-wing coup against Provisional

Government. Bolsheviks lead successful resistance.

**September:** Bolsheviks gain majority in Petrograd and Moscow Soviets.

**October 25** (November 7 by western calendar): Key points in Petrograd occupied by revolutionaries; Winter Palace stormed. Congress of Soviets opens, with a Bolshevik majority, and takes power.

**November:** Counter-revolutionaries begin civil war. In late 1917 and early 1918 British, French and other foreign forces begin intervention to help the counter-revolutionaries.

### 1918

**March:** As German troops advance, Bolsheviks sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, ceding vast areas in return for peace.

**summer:** civil war stepped up. The 'peasant socialist' SR party openly supports counter-revolution; the Mensheviks (an avowedly Marxist party who consider the revolution premature) dither. Both are banned.

**November:** Revolution in Germany: Emperor overthrown, workers' councils set up. Mensheviks swing round to critical support for Soviet government and are re-legalised.

### 1919:

**January:** revolutionaries crushed in Berlin; Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht murdered by troops working with the Social Democratic government. Most intense period of the civil war in Russia. But there are revolutionary uprisings in Europe.

**April:** Soviet Republic in Bavaria (southern Germany).

**March-August:** Soviet Republic in Hungary. Workers put pressure on Western governments to abandon anti-Bolshevik intervention. By the end of the year the Red Army is in a strong position.

### 1920

**March:** Poland invades Russia.

**late in year:** Poles defeated ~~and civil war ends.~~

**September:** Mass factory occupations in Italy.

### 1921

**early:** Collapse of industry in Soviet Union: overall it is producing less than one-fifth of its 1913 output. From spring, millions starve to death. Under the 'communism', with economic allocation by military command, the Soviets have withered. With the removal of the immediate threat from imperialists, workers and peasants are less patient.

**February:** mass economic strikes in Petrograd. Georgia, previously under a Menshevik with the Soviet government, is forcibly annexed under Stalin's direction (and against Trotsky's protest). Menshevik party banned again in Russia.

**March:** rebellion by sailors at the naval base of Kronstadt, near Petrograd. Bolshevik Party congress brings in New Economic Policy to ease 'war communism' by controlled reintroduction of free market. A debate on trade unions ends in victory for Lenin, who argues for trade-union independent from this "workers' state with bureaucratic deformations". Party puts a ban (intended to be temporary) on factions. Uprising by German CP ends in fiasco. *peasant uprisings (last phase of civil war)*.

**June-July:** At the 3rd Congress of the Communist International, the Bolshevik leaders call for an orientation to "the conquest of the masses in the west, as the necessary preliminary to "the conquest of power".

### 1922

**March:** Stalin becomes general secretary.

**May:** Lenin suffers a stroke. He is out of action almost all the time from now until his death in January 1924.

**Late 1922 to early 1923:** "Lenin's last struggle". He tries to form a bloc with Trotsky to fight Stalin and the growing bureaucratism, but the party and state machine falls into the hands of the "troika" of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin.

### 1923

**October:** First Trotsky opposition manifesto, the "Platform of the 46", argues for more democracy and more industrialisation. In Germany, the CP, following the advice of Zinoviev and Stalin, muffs a revolutionary opportunity and is heavily defeated.

**December:** Trotsky publishes "The New Course", calling for more democracy.

### 1924

**February-May:** "Lenin levy". Core of Bolshevik party swamped in a mass of 240,000 new recruits, many of them careerists, easily manipulated by the growing bureaucratic machine.

**Summer:** 5th Congress of Comintern, under Zinoviev's leadership, promotes a blustering ultra-left course. Trotsky polemicises against this. Western CPs "Bolshevised" — given more efficient organisation, but also bureaucratic regimes and bans on factions.

**Autumn:** Trotsky publishes "Lessons of October", drawing the lessons of the defeat in Germany. Bureaucrats respond with an international slander campaign against him.

**December:** Stalin comes out for "Socialism in One Country", previously considered an absurdity by all Marxists.

### 1925

Growing tensions between Zinoviev and Kamenev, on one side, and Stalin, on the other. Stalin shifts towards an alliance with the right wing led by Bukharin, who advocate a longer-term

policy based on the richer peasants. The split between Zinoviev-Kamenev and Stalin comes out into the open in December 1925.

### 1926

**Early in year:** Joint Opposition (Trotsky-Zinoviev-Kamenev) formed. Intense political battle from summer 1926 to end of 1927, over democracy, industrialisation and planning, and international issues. Comintern is shifting towards seeking powerful bourgeois and bureaucratic friends, rather than relying on workers' struggle; this leads to missed opportunities in the British General Strike, and bloody defeat in China.

### 1927

**December:** Defeat of the Opposition. Trotsky and Zinoviev expelled from the party. Zinovievites immediately capitulate; Trotskyists sent into exile in remote parts of the USSR.

### 1928

**January:** "Strike of the kulaks"; richer peasants refuse to supply the cities. Stalin resorts to force to get supplies, and begins to turn against Bukharin and the right wing. Pyatakov and a few other Trotskyists capitulate.

### 1929

**January:** Trotsky deported from USSR.

**July:** Preobrazhensky, Radek and some other Trotskyists capitulate.

**Late 1929-early 1930:** Stalin's wavering policy lurches into a full-scale drive against the peasantry. By February 1930 over 50% of peasants are in collective farms. Then there is another lurch backwards, but after that Stalin's change of policy becomes stable. By 1936 90% of peasants are in collective farms. Together with this goes a vast mobilisation of resources for forced-march industrialisation. Results: Number of livestock drops by about two-thirds, as panicked peasants slaughter their beasts. There is severe famine in 1932. Social inequality and bureaucratic privilege increase. Industrial labour forces doubles between 1927-8 and 1936. All independent trade union activity crushed. Savage labour laws punish 'economic sabotage' by death and absenteeism or leaving your job by jail. Real wages fall by over 50% between 1928 and 1935. Between 1927-8 and 1937, output of electricity increases by a factor of 7; of steel by a factor of 31/2; of coal by a factor of 31/2. Output of industrial consumer goods stagnates. Consumption per head of meat, lard and butter fall by over 50% between 1928 and 1932.

### 1932

**late:** All communication cut off between Trotsky and his co-thinkers in the USSR.

### 1933

**January:** The Comintern's "third period" policy, pursued since 1928-9—of breakaway 'red' unions, no united front, etc.—finally leaves the way open for Hitler to take power. Within a few months all the organisations of the German working class, the most powerful in the world, are crushed. Trotsky abandons the perspective of fighting for reform of the Communist Parties and calls for a new International. Soon afterwards he calls for revolution rather than reform in the USSR.

### 1934

Over the year, the Comintern shifts from the "third period" policy to one of "popular fronts" with bourgeois forces against fascism.

**December:** The assassination of Kirov (the local supremo in Leningrad) becomes the signal for the start of the Great Purges. Not only oppositionists, but also the great majority of the delegates to the solidly Stalinist "party" congress of 1934, are purged, jailed, or executed. By 1940-2 ten million people are in labour camps.

### 1935

**May:** USSR signs military pact with France.

### 1936

**July:** Fascist revolt against Popular Front government in Spain opens the Civil War. The Republican side is sabotaged by bourgeois-Stalinist repression of workers' and peasants' struggles, and by Stalinist terror against leftists. Fascist victory in March 1939.

**August (to 1938):** Moscow Trials: almost all the surviving Bolshevik leaders are brought before show trials and sentenced to death.

### 1938

**March:** Hitler seizes Austria.

**October:** Hitler seizes the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia.

### 1939

**March:** Hitler seizes the rest of Czechoslovakia.

**August 23:** Hitler-Stalin pact, including agreement on:

**September 1:** simultaneous German and USSR invasions of Poland, which lead to World War 2.

**November:** USSR invades Finland; finally signs peace in March 1940 on the basis of Finland ceding a lot of territory.

### 1940

**June:** USSR invades Baltic states.

**July:** Stalinist agent murders Trotsky.

### 1941

**June:** German troops invade USSR, advance to Leningrad (September) and Moscow (October).

### 1942

**November:** USSR counter-offensive begins at Stalingrad.

### 1943

**January:** Germans defeated at Stalingrad. Tide of war turns against Germany.

**July:** American troops land in Italy.

**November:** Tito establishes a Stalinist government which over the following months wins full power in Yugoslavia.

### 1944

**January:** Siege of Leningrad broken.

**June:** D-Day: British and American troops land in France.

**July:** USSR army advances into Poland.

**August-October:** People of Warsaw rise up against Nazis; are defeated while Russian army stands by just outside the city.

### 1945

**early:** USSR conquers most of Eastern Europe.

**February:** Yalta conference between US, Britain and USSR.

**May:** Germany surrenders.

**July-August:** Potsdam conference finalises deal worked out at Yalta: partition of Germany, shifting both eastern and western borders of Poland far to the west, deporting 15 million Germans from Eastern Europe, effectively ceding Eastern Europe to Stalin.

**August:** Atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan surrenders.

**1947**

"Cold war" between USSR and West begins. Stalinists in Eastern Europe move to take full control using the 'salami tactic'.

**1948**

**February:** "Prague coup"—elimination of non-Stalinists from government in Czechoslovakia backed by big Stalinist-organised workers' demonstrations.

**March:** Second Congress of Fourth International.

**April:** Stalin imposes blockade to stop traffic from west to Berlin.

**May:** Britain withdraws from Palestine, new state of Israel declared, war between Israel and Arab forces led by British officers.

**July:** Open break between Stalin and Tito.

**August:** McCarthyite witch-hunt in USA begins to gather force.

**1949**

**January:** Stalinist forces led by Mao Zedong enter the Chinese capital, Beijing.

**May:** Mao's forces take Shanghai.

**1950**

**June:** Korean war starts.

## Glossary

**Bolshevik-Leninist:** the term used to describe itself by the Trotskyist movement in Trotsky's lifetime.

**Bonapartist:** dictatorial, after Napoleon Bonaparte, who ruled France from 1799 to 1812, and his nephew Napoleon III, Emperor of France from 1852 to 1870.

**Brest-Litovsk:** treaty signed between Russia's revolutionary government and Germany, gaining peace for Russia at the expense of ceding vast areas to German conquest. The Left SRs, and many Bolsheviks, opposed the signing of the treaty.

**Constituent Assembly:** was convened in January 1918, and dissolved the next day, without any mass protest.

**Czar:** The Emperor, or King, of the Russian Empire. The Czar was overthrown by the February 1917, in favour of the bourgeois Provisional Government, which was then in its turn overthrown by the workers in October 1917.

**Kaiser:** The Emperor of Germany.

**Mensheviks:** The more moderate of the two Marxist parties in the Russian Empire. Unlike the Bolsheviks, they argued that the workers must first support the bourgeoisie in making a "bourgeois revolution", and that socialism would be a far-off second stage.

**Paris Commune:** After Prussia (the biggest of the then divided German states) invaded France in 1870, the French government collapsed; the workers took over Paris and ran it for ten weeks until they were crushed.

**Soviets:** 'Soviet' is simply the Russian word for 'council'. The 'Soviets' in 1917 (and in the earlier Russian Revolution of 1905) were uniquely democratic. They were made up of delegates accountable to the workers in their workplace and recallable at any time; they represented the most direct and responsive form of workers' democracy, not distorted by any privileged and unelected bureaucracy.

**SRs:** Social-Revolutionaries, a socialist party which based itself not on the working class but on "the people" in general. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 they were completely split into "Right SRs", allied to the Mensheviks, and "Left SRs", allied to the Bolsheviks.

**Third World War:** In the late 1940s, almost everyone, across the political spectrum, thought that a Third World War was likely between the USA and the USSR.

**Transitional programme:** a programme of working-class action drafted by Trotsky and adopted by the Trotskyist movement in 1938, which developed the idea (coined by the Communist International in 1921) of a system of "transitional demands" which, by developing the logic of working-class struggle, could provide a bridge between immediate "minimum" demands and the "maximum" programme of socialism.

SRs  
SRs



## **1. The 1917 Revolution**

**Read:** chapter 1, pp.11-24 of Introduction.

### **Key ideas:**

A. October 1917 was a genuine workers' and democratic revolution.

B. The alternative to the workers' revolution was not gentle bourgeois progress, but violent reaction. The Provisional Government had proved incapable of dealing with the main democratic issues, let alone the social issues.

C. The revolutionaries' perspective was not to build an ideal society in backward Russia, but to establish a bridgehead for workers' revolution that would spread across Europe.

### **Key questions:**

A. In what way was the revolution democratic, more democratic than the Provisional Government or indeed than any parliamentary regime?

B. If the revolutionary regime was democratic, why did it dissolve the Constituent Assembly? Why did it go on to ban opposition parties and publications? Should those measures be a model for future revolutions?

C. We now know that the Russian workers' republic was left isolated, driven to maintain itself as best it could in impossible conditions, with terrible results. Does this mean that the revolutionaries' perspective was always false?

## **2. "Socialism In One Country"**

**Read:** introduction, 1.III and 1.XIII; also *Revolution Betrayed* chapter 12, included as an appendix to this Study Guide.

### **Key ideas:**

A. Socialism – working-class socialism, anyway, the "free association of producers" as Marx called it – presupposes a higher level of technology and culture than capitalism. Since capitalism's technology and culture is international, and any one country cut off from the rest would fall a long way backwards, socialism must be international. The workers can win power in a single country, but they can develop their victory into a functioning socialist society only by extending the revolution to other countries.

B. Stalin proclaimed "socialism in one country" (and that country the USSR) as the programme of the bureaucracy in 1924. That implied that workers in countries outside the USSR should be mainly admirers and defenders of the socialism being built in the USSR, rather than fighters for their own revolution.

C. It also implied debasing the ideal of socialism so that the USSR (even glossed-up) could be seen as an example of it.

### **Key questions:**

A. Why does socialism presuppose advanced technology and culture? Why can't you organise socialism – defined as economic planning and economic equality – in a backward economy?

B. If a workers' revolution in one country cannot build socialism, then what can it build? Plainly it can build something "socialistic" in the broad, general sense. Why then is the argument about "socialism in one country" more than a matter of insisting on exact definitions of words?

C. What did the Left Opposition advocate as policy for economic and social development in the USSR until workers' revolution elsewhere came to its aid?

## **3. The Stalinist counter-revolution**

**Read:** chapter 2, and introduction pp.24-45.

### **Key ideas:**

A. The Russian workers' revolution was isolated because of the lack of Bolshevik parties outside Russia.

B. Then backwardness took its toll, as the Bolsheviks had expected but not in the way they expected. The exigencies and economic disarray of civil war had already generated an authoritarian state and dispersed the industrial working class. A bureaucracy rose out of the Bolshevik party and merged with elements of the old Tsarist state machine. It became more cohesive, more self-confident, more weighty.

C. In 1928-30 it turned decisively on the workers, smashing the Bolshevik party and the trade unions.

### **Key questions:**

A. Did the activist discipline of Lenin's Bolshevik party generate the bureaucratic state? Was Stalin just the continuator of Lenin?

B. How can what happened be called a counter-revolution when there was no violent overthrow of the government?

C. Why couldn't Trotsky simply use the prestige he had as leader of the Red Army in the civil war to forestall the bureaucratic counter-revolution?

## **4. Trotsky's arguments for considering the Stalinist USSR to be still a workers' state, although degenerated**

**Read:** chapter 2, p.225-9 (a summary by

Shachtman in 1938 of Trotsky's argument), chapter 9 of *Revolution Betrayed* (included with this Study Guide), and introduction pp.46-81. The whole of *Revolution Betrayed* and *In Defence of Marxism*, and Cannon's "speech on the Russian question" in *Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, are relevant here.

### Key ideas:

A. "Dissolving being into becoming". Trotsky views the USSR as in extreme crisis – a radically unstable momentary combination of incompatibles. Thus, to his mind, the USSR cannot be analysed on the assumption that a current "snapshot" represents even a temporarily ongoing, integrated "whole", but only by seeing it as a moment of flux between its past and its future. Trotsky takes this approach because the USSR is something new and unexpected, and also because there are facts to make the idea of the system being on the verge of breakdown plausible (economic convulsions in the early 1930s, enormous purges in the middle and later 1930s). Trotsky's "snapshot" picture of the USSR is that of a "system of Bonapartist gangsterism", or a "bureaucratic economy", but he takes this "snapshot" as representing only a fleeting, effervescent manifestation of a process whose fundamentals are different.

B. *Nationalised property*. The USSR originated in a workers' revolution. That workers' revolution expropriated capitalist property and nationalised the commanding heights of the economy. The world bourgeoisie (and the dispossessed Russian capitalists) desire a return to private ownership. That has not happened yet. The USSR, in the 1930s, shows great industrial growth contrasting with a huge slump in the West. Trotsky attributes this to the inherent merits of nationalised property. The nationalised property thus defines a more progressive economic form. In world-historic terms, that is linked with the working class. In short: past = workers' revolution; future = capitalist restoration or working-class regeneration, freeing the full potential of the nationalised property; present = nationalised property gravely corrupted by autocracy, but not yet abolished.

C. "The gatekeeper of the social conquests". In 1921 the Bolshevik Old Guard held power fundamentally as a hierarchy of state officials ruling over a dispersed and exhausted working class and a discontented peasantry. It was a "gatekeeper", "watchman", or "locum" for the working-class conquests of 1917-21, holding on until revolution in other countries (and also, in part, economic revival in the USSR) brought better times. After 1921 the hierarchy of state officials grew enormously in social weight, and in social distance from and opposition to the working class – Trotsky analyses this all concretely, to the point of declaring that the state bureaucracy has all the vices of a ruling class – but Trotsky still sees an element of continuity, inasmuch as the state hierarchy still acts as "gatekeeper" of the nationalised property.

### Key questions:

It was a commonplace of classical Marxism that nation-

alised property alone did not define a workers' state. (Why not?) Trotsky knew that. In Trotsky's mind, three special features of the nationalised property in the USSR nevertheless made it the defining basis of a workers' state. What is the argument on each one, and what light does the empirical test of the half-century after Trotsky's death cast on it?

A. Origins

B. Flux – radical incompatibility between economic base and political regime

C. Progressive development of forces of production.

## **5. The Stalinist USSR as new exploitative class system: why was 1939-40 a decisive turning point for theory?**

Read: chapters 3, 4, 5, 14; introduction pp.82-114. Also, *In Defence of Marxism; Struggle for a Proletarian Party*.

### Key ideas:

A. In 1939-40 the presumed positive relation between the working class and the nationalised property (supposed residue of workers' revolution and basis of future progress after working-class regeneration) is put to the test: direct conflict between the extension of the Stalinist nationalised-property system and the living working class, specifically in Finland.

B. The idea that the nationalised property can be considered as an "economic base" of the USSR separable from and in opposition to the Stalinist autocracy is also put to empirical test. Despite attempts by Trotsky to perceive a separation between a "revolutionary impulse" given by attempts to extend the nationalised property, and a subsequent counter-revolutionary role of the autocracy, the evidence – as Trotsky eventually comes to admit – is of the counter-revolutionary and "revolutionary" activities being simultaneous and inseparable. The nationalised property is the autocracy's.

C. In 1939-40 the argument among the Trotskyists is not, despite later myth, about the summary theoretical formula to apply to the USSR. All the main disputants agree, at least for the sake of argument, that the USSR is a degenerated workers' state. The dispute is about concrete political responses. Adequate working-class political responses in 1939-40, however, push Trotsky's much-revised theoretical system to the point of open self-destruction and a fundamental shift towards the idea that the Stalinist USSR is a new system of class exploitation, and indeed has been one for several years.

### Key questions:

A. In 1939-40 two strands in Trotsky's thought develop to the point of open self-contradiction. What are the "two

Trotsky's"?

- B. Which class owns the means of production in the USSR?
- C. Are the social relations in the Stalinist USSR defined by nationalised property?

## **6. The new Russian Empire: the verdict of the 1940s on the dispute of 1939-40**

Read: chapters 6, 10, 11, 12; Introduction pp. 115 to end.

### **Key ideas:**

- A. The element of Russian imperialist expansion, which maybe in 1939-40 could still arguably be dismissed as marginal and secondary, became big and plain in the 1940s (thus the two-superpower world of 1945-89).
- B. In trying to see these events through the spectacles of "workers' state" theory, the "orthodox" Trotskyists disabled themselves politically.
- C. They also transformed the content of the "workers' state" theory, within the same old verbiage, into something very different from Trotsky's ideas.

### **Key questions:**

What do you make of these arguments?

A. "Yes, Trotsky in 1939-40 predicted the imminent collapse of the USSR. But that was a matter of activist revolutionary perspectives, like Marx's expectation of a workers' revolution coming soon in 1848. Yes, the revolutionaries were defeated, and the USSR proved more stable. But that does not prove Trotsky's theory wrong. Anyway, Trotsky was proved right in the longer term. The bureaucracy restored capitalism. The fact that Trotsky was wrong about the number of years it would take proves nothing".

B. "The minority in the Trotskyists' dispute in 1939-40 were an unprincipled and incoherent combination, who had no definite theory. They thus fell victim to the pressure of middle-class opinion hostile to the USSR, as represented most forcefully in their ranks by James Burnham. This is proved by Burnham's subsequent rapid move to the right, and Shachtman's similar though slower move".

C. "Lenin explained that those who look for a 'pure' socialist revolution, with the workers and the bosses each neatly lined up on their own side, will never see one. The 'Shachtmanites' turned themselves into people who were all in favour of revolution - except when and where it actually happened...."

## **7. The revolutionary party**

Read: chapter 7, introduction section 3.XII.

### **Key ideas:**

A. The job of a revolutionary party - that is, of activists who combine and organise long-term, in both stormy times and quiet - in the working-class movement is to develop, sustain and advocate a coherent set of ideas. Everything organisational is subordinate to that political and ideological role.

B. "The significance of the programme is the significance of the party; the significance of the party is the significance of the programme". The revolutionary programme is never "finished" any more than the party or the workers' movement are "finished".

C. As James P Cannon remarked much later, summarising an idea expounded by Shachtman in these texts, "polemics are the mark of a revolutionary party". A revolutionary organisation cannot carry out its main job of promoting and developing ideas if it just presents its conclusions ready-made, without debate, or propped only by straw-man "debates" against the most crass bourgeois opponents.

### **Key questions:**

A. Why did the "orthodox Trotskyists" drift away from this notion of the party? And towards what different notion, or range of notions?

B. All this emphasis on education and polemic - isn't it over-intellectual and elitist? Isn't it better just to have a catch-all activist organisation which gets on with activity without bothering too much about theoretical quibbles?

C. What is democratic centralism?

## **8. Democracy**

Read: chapters 8 and 13, introduction sections 3.VI and 3.XII.

### **Key ideas:**

A. The working class can own the means of production only collectively and therefore democratically. Therefore democracy is integral to socialism. The working class can arouse itself, educate itself, and organise itself only collectively and democratically, and only through taking up immediate political questions, many of them to do with democratic rights. Thus democracy is also integral to the struggle for socialism. A socialist party, and especially a small socialist party, cannot rally workers to itself by counterposing socialist revolution to the immediate democratic concerns of those workers.

B. The difficulties of civil war, and of "holding on" in the years immediately after the civil war, pushed the Bolsheviks into making virtue out of necessity and downgrading democratic concerns. Those beginnings were expanded into a whole system of contempt for democratic concerns ("rotten liberalism",

"middle-class", "anti-Soviet") by the Stalinists, who passed off bureaucratic manipulation as militant working-class resoluteness and realism.

C. Especially in the 1940s, this downgrading of democracy also infected the "orthodox Trotskyists". Why? Because their adherence to the "workers' state" formula committed them to the idea that socialist revolution (in "deformed" variants) could be extended indefinitely without democracy; and their adherence to the picture of a world in universal "death agony", where however the advance of the Russian Army would bring proof that "the strangled and desecrated October Revolution was still alive", committed them to an apocalyptic perspective of an ever-imminent all-out confrontation between capitalism in final decline and workers driven to revolution by the highest pitch of desperation, leaving no room for mere democratic questions.

### Key questions:

A. How does the attention to democratic concerns which we advocate here (and in our arguments about Ireland, Israel-Palestine, etc.) differ from the old Menshevik and Stalinist stages theory ("democratic revolution" first, then workers' socialist revolution at a later stage)?

B. If the US-led bloc in the Cold War was more democratic than the USSR-led bloc – which, despite McCarthyism, open race discrimination in the Southern USA, and many horrific US-backed military dictatorships in the Third World, it was – why wasn't Shachtman right to rally (critically) to US imperialism in his old age?

C. In the SWP-IS's pamphlet on the 1967 Israeli-Arab war – one of their most widely circulated and influential publications of the time – Tony Cliff makes this comment on Gamal Abdul Nasser, then leader of a quasi-Stalinist regime (one party, all trade unions and "mass organisations" run by the state, etc.) in state-capitalist Egypt. "Of course, Marxists agree with Nasser on many points, for a start his opposition to bourgeois democracy. However..." What's wrong here? And how do you think the SWP-IS could write such things?

## 9. Millenarianism

Read: chapters 8 and 9, intro. 3.V, 3.X, 3.XII, and pp.110-114.

### Key ideas:

A. The term "millenarianism" comes from Christian movements in the Middle Ages which looked for social revolution through the Second Coming of Christ (after which, according to the Bible, Christ would rule on Earth for a thousand years – the "millennium"). More generally, it refers to radical movements which look for social revolution through the intervention of superhuman forces. For the neo-Trotskyists after the 1940s, that superhuman force was "the process of world revolution" or "the

laws of history".

B. The neo-Trotskyists were driven to millenarianism by the view that the extension of Stalinist nationalised property signified deformed socialist revolution. If they denied that the Stalinists were working-class revolutionaries – and they did, otherwise they would not have remained Trotskyists of any sort – then they could maintain that view only by the idea of a superhuman force, somehow connected to nationalised property, which maintained and made workers' states without requiring any action by the workers.

C. Millenarianism first emerged during World War 2 in the notion that the Russian Army was, despite a reactionary leadership which the Trotskyists knew about and wrote about, still somehow deep down "Trotsky's Red Army". Its advance would give a great boost to socialist revolution in Europe, despite Stalin. Then the neo-Trotskyists retreated from millenarianism for a while, and tried to reassess. After 1948, when they concluded that the Stalinist systems in Eastern Europe were "workers' states", they returned to millenarianism full-blast.

### Key questions:

to look at the connections between the drift to millenarianism and...

A. The problems we have discussed on democracy and the party.

B. The frequent reliance of neo-Trotskyist propaganda on the idea that an immense economic crisis is about to happen, or is already happening, and will produce, or is already producing, great political convulsions.

C. The idea that our answer to divisions in the working class created by national conflicts – in Ireland and in Israel-Palestine, for example – should be to look to "the logic of permanent revolution" to resolve them.

## 10. Summary and conclusions

Read: Introduction sections on the Communist Manifesto and on Trotsky and the Future of Socialism, and the Communist Manifesto.

### Key ideas:

summarised point by point in 3.XII.

### Key questions:

A. How do we answer the argument that the experience of the USSR fatally discredits socialist revolution?

B. What do we mean by saying we are Trotskyists? In what way are we different from other Trotskyists?

C. How does what we do now as a small propaganda group contribute to a socialist future?