

WITH HINDSIGHT: What was the USSR? **by D.R.O'Connor Lysaght**

Why Hindsight.

The stark choice is becoming clearer to everyone. The working peoples of the world must take state power. Otherwise they will be beaten back by their exploiters into semi, or even full chattel slavery, conditions followed quite probably by the complete extinction of humanity.

Objectively, the possibilities for a seizure of power are good. Despite capitalist chaos, the productiveness of the world economy has grown, and, with it, the relative weight of the employed workers. The weakness here is in the form of this growth. The relatively sophisticated organised workers of the imperial metropolises are being betrayed systematically by those they expect to lead them. Their living standards are depressed even beyond the point of declassing. Nor are their numbers replaced by the workers in the new industries, who await the Larkins that they hoped to come from the old organisations.

As a result, the long crisis of working class leadership is as acute as it has ever been. On the left, radicalisation tends to be expressed in amorphous agitational bodies on the one hand and, on the other, by almost equally heterogenous parties tied to the parliamentarism of the old working class organisations without those bodies' class roots. On the right, big money is grubstaking movements to divert and divide the workers by promoting the grubbiest forms of culturalism, that is rival forms of racism and of religious fundamentalism. In Europe, frustrated Muslim youth are told that their reward will be in the afterlife if they blow up cafes (and, more quickly, themselves), while non-Muslims are told that they will get jobs and cheaper bread by banning minarets.

In these circumstances, there is an acute need to build the

scientific left, but which of the claimants to that title is to be built? In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's implosion, there seemed a possibility that a process of natural selection might enable a recognised genuine Communist movement to appear. However, and showing the regressive effect of the Soviet collapse, the left remains perhaps slightly larger but still divided against itself, with its various components seeming often to be more opposed to each other than they are to the common class enemy.

No doubt attempts are being made to make an honest reappraisal of the process by which the left came to this pass. This is where hindsight becomes necessary. Revolutionary socialists are by definition pioneers and are open to disasters that beset pioneers. Once in power, the Bolsheviks made mistakes; without successful revolutions elsewhere, the state bureaucracy was bound to usurp power, nonetheless, that event might have been delayed longer or even prevented by successful revolution elsewhere. Today some guidelines can be set. It can be agreed generally that stalinism, the ideas that a workers' republic can be built out of a bourgeois democracy and that such a republic can build a socialist society within its borders, has been a major factor in the left's intellectual and physical disintegration. Further agreement may be reached by friendly exchanges of analyses. Of course, joint actions are necessary and can help such understanding, but without those exchanges, such actions will expose new disagreements, for example, on the role of the union bureaucracy, the popular front, and claims of national self-determination.

As a contribution to the process of such exchanges, the Phoenix Press' two volume collection, *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, is welcome. The data it provides sheds light on the first major split within the Trotskyist movement and one which set a precedent for subsequent organisational divisions. Along with the two previously published *In Defence*

of Marxism and The Struggle for a Proletarian Party, it raises issues that would affect the subsequent histories of the two protagonists in the faction fight. It presents, too, these issues from the point of view of one side in the struggle. For both these reasons, it is as useful to examine the material as it was to present it in the light of subsequent events.

Dialectics and All That.

It is difficult to see how any discussion of the 1940 split cannot begin with the question of the dialectic. Although it took up relatively little space in the discussion, it was the centre of the methodological disagreement between the groupings. Trotsky and his followers insisted that their opponents' proposed change of line represented an undialectical analysis. Shachtman and Burnham veered between asserting that new developments had provided the basis for a new dialectical analysis of the soviet state (Shachtman) and that the dialectic was irrelevant or even an handicap to understanding that state's nature (Burnham).

The dialectic turned off Burnham as it did many others. For some, the very word is a barrier to the investigation of the actuality. There are those, too, who apply a non-dialectical approach to the process, isolating its individual aspects (quantity into quality, negation of negation) from the whole picture. On the other hand, as with Burnham (and the adolescent Trotsky), the objection is to the fact of the whole picture, as a denial of free human will. This last ignores Engels' disclaimer:

'A system of natural and historical knowledge, embracing everything, and final for all time, is a contradiction to the fundamental laws of dialectic reasoning. This law, indeed, by no means excludes, but, on the contrary, includes the idea that the systematic knowledge of the external universe can

make great strides from age to age.’¹

Previously, he had summarised the genuine holistic view:

‘In this system.....for the first time the whole world, natural, historical, intellectual is represented as a process, i.e as in continual motion, change, transformation, development; and the attempt is made to trace out the internal connection that makes a continuous whole of all this movement and development. From this point of view the history of mankind no longer appeared as a wild whirl of senseless deeds of violence, all equally condemnable at the judgement seat of mature philosophic reason and which are best forgotten as quickly as possible, but as the process of evolution of man himself.’²

Engels defined this process as involving two key factors, the creation of new quality out of old quantities and the creation from an original quality of an opposite one (‘The negation of the negation’). In 1940, Trotsky expanded the list to include ‘conflict of content and form, interruption of continuity, change of possibility into inevitability.’³

Of course, all these can be, and are challenged. However, numerous, some quantities are unable to produce the intended type of new quality. A negation is likely to be produced by a quantity outside the original composition. Content may be

¹ Frederick Engels, ‘Anti-Duehring’ in Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 25, Moscow 1987. P.25.

² Ibid, P.24.

³ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, London 1966, P.66.

betrayed by form for reasons outside itself (as defeat in the international class war created Stalinism as the betrayal of the soviets). Though continuity is always threatened by interruption, it remains strong enough in most specific cases to appear as if perpetual. Finally, the change of possibility into inevitability can occur only at a certain moment; the general belief shared by Trotsky along with other socialists in the inevitability of socialism may yet be debunked, as Rosa Luxemburg warned, by an equally inevitable barbarism (and probable human extinction).

These objections are to be answered by the fact that they apply to analyses of specific issues. The dialectic is holist and any analysis has to incorporate as broad a range of factors as is possible. It has to recognise, too, that the first cause of any historical process is the relationship of people to production, but that is the material side of dialectical materialism.

It is not surprising that many recognise this, decide that further

understanding is not worth the trouble and decide to analyse using only the partial method applying to specific issues or else, like Burnham, dismiss the dialectic altogether, preferring common sense pragmatic analysis of each issue at a time. This is the more easily done because such logic does work at a certain level.

Nonetheless there are twofold problems with this approach. It does not allow for qualitative change. Accordingly, in a crisis its weakness becomes apparent. Secondly, partial dialectics and pragmatism are illusions; the overall dialectic operates regardless of belief in it. Actions have consequences; basing action on individual analyses will tend to influence subsequent analyses and action, if only at an unconscious level. Again, Burnham is a very relevant example of this; his resolutely anti-dialectical analyses led him to invent an international managerial revolution before ending in the ranks of American neo-conservatism.

Moreover, understanding how to use the dialectic is less difficult than it appears. Once the current trajectory of events has been established, it is easy to relate subsequent developments to it. Moreover, membership of a Marxist party means that analysis is conducted by a group of people who can share and cross-fertilise their findings.

This does not mean that it will be plain sailing. Dialectical materialism is not an infallible crystal ball, although it is a lot less fallible than any occult aid to prophecy. As Trotsky put it:

‘To determine at the right moment the critical point where quantity changes into quality is one of the most important and difficult tasks in the sphere of knowledge including sociology.’⁴

‘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

⁴ Ibid, PP. 64-65.

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.’⁵

The problem lies in making the quantitative analysis. To be accurate, it is necessary to include all the factors. Yet, it may be difficult, if not impossible to include all of them. Moreover, where they have been collected, it is necessary to evaluate their relative importance. Trotsky compared dialectical analysis to cooking from a recipe. What he did not mention was that dialectically the recipes are constantly changing, not always decisively but sometimes.

The result of error in these computations can be to destroy altogether the validity of a prognosis. More frequently, it causes the prognosis’ time scale to be skewed. As Felix

⁵ Ibid, PP.218-219.

Morrow, one of Shachtman's most brilliant, if underestimated opponents put it:

'Trotsky tried to teach us to understand that it is necessary to make a prognosis but equally necessary to understand that it is impossible to guess the tempos in advance for a prolonged period and hence one must introduce the necessary correctives into it in the course of experience.'⁶

Both the dialectic and the problems of working it can be seen in the debate on the nature of the Soviet Union.

What Was the Soviet Union?

Trotsky's position on the definition of the Soviet Union was finalised in 1933. In that year, the capitulation to Hitler by the Comintern's second largest national affiliate, the Communist Party of Germany showed him both that the Comintern was incorrigible and that the USSR, under its leading party could not be reformed.

On 1 October, Trotsky published a pamphlet *The Soviet Union and the Fourth International*, later republished as 'The Class Nature of the Soviet State'. Although a polemic against the pioneer state capitalist analysis

⁶ Sean Matgamna (ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution, Volume 2: The Two Trotskyisms Confront Stalinism*. London 2015, P.559.

of his ex-comrade, Hugo Urbahns, this work gives a concise summary of the position that he would hold until his death and which would be passed to his International.

‘Nine-tenths of the strength of the Stalinist apparatus lies not in itself but in the social changes wrought by the victorious revolution.....It shows us how and why the Stalinist apparatus could completely squander its meaning as the international revolutionary factor and yet preserve a part of its progressive meaning as the gatekeeper of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution.’⁷

‘So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.’⁸

‘.....A real socialist society would arise on the bases of nationalised industry and collectivised rural economy. Lenin conceived that the attainment of this goal would require the require the successive labours of two or three generations

⁷ Leon Trotsky, *Writings, 1933-34*, New York 1972. P.102.

⁸ *Ibid*, P.104.

and, moreover, in indissoluble connection with the development of the international revolution.’⁹

‘A class is defined not by its participation in the distribution of the national income alone but by its independent role in the general structure of the economy and by its independent roots in the economic foundation of society.....The bureaucracy.....has no independent position in the process of production and distribution. It has no independent property roots....Its power is of a reflected character. The bureaucracy is indissolubly bound up with a ruling economic class, feeding itself upon the social roots of the latter, maintaining itself and falling together with it.’¹⁰

‘The present Soviet regime is not socialist but transitional.’¹¹

‘The privileges of the bureaucracy by themselves do not change the bases of the Soviet society, because the bureaucracy derives its privileges not from any special property relations peculiar to it as a “class”, but from those property relations that have been created by the October

⁹ Ibid, P.111.

¹⁰ Ibid, PP.112-113.

¹¹ Ibid, P.113.

Revolution and that are fundamentally adequate for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

‘Insofar as the bureaucracy robs the people....., we have to deal not with *class exploitation* in the scientific sense of the word, but with social parasitism, although on a very large scale.’¹²

‘The further unhindered development of bureaucratism must lead inevitably to the cessation of economic and cultural growth, to a terrible social crisis and to the downward plunge of the entire society. But this would imply not only the collapse of the proletarian dictatorship but also the end of bureaucratic domination. In place of the workers’ state would come not “social bureaucratic” but capitalist relations.....

‘If, in the USSR today, the Marxist party were in power..... in no case would it have to undertake an *overturn in the property relations, i.e., a new social revolution.*’¹³

‘The final development of the bureaucratic regime can lead to the inception of a new ruling class not organisationally,

¹² Ibid, P.114.

¹³ Ibid. P.115.

through degeneration, but through counter revolution.’¹⁴

For Trotsky, this fate will be avoided only by revolution in Russia and throughout the world led by the parties affiliated to a new, fourth, International.

In these pages, Trotsky laid out his final analysis of the Soviet Union. He would elaborate it subsequently, as in *The Revolution Betrayed*. He would never change its basic points. These were that the maintenance of the nationalised economy meant the maintenance of the proletarian nature of the state’s power, that the said power was the bridgehead inspiring the working peoples of the world to advance to achieve the socialist society, that the Stalinite bureaucracy was less than a class, but rather a parasitic growth from the proletariat exercising state power and that its usurpation would end either in a bourgeois counter-revolution that would restore capitalist property relations or in a successful rising of the workers who would reassert their control of the state.

¹⁴ Ibid, PP115-116.

Of course, his prognosis of the future would be proven to have inaccuracies for reasons that will be explained. At the time, it was his description of the contemporary situation that would come under attack.

The first critic came not from America but from a French comrade Yvan Craipeau. In 1937, he argued that the bureaucracy was an exploiting class, that, accordingly, the Soviet Union was a bourgeois state and that in its involvement in any coming war, such as was appearing increasingly likely, it should not be supported.

Trotsky replied to this in November in a bulletin 'Once Again: The USSR and its Defense'¹⁵ (A previous letter had merely touched the surface of the problem.). He pointed out that Craipeau 'does not mention a single time the decisive factor of Marxist sociology, the development of the productive forces.'¹⁶ Though he insisted, again, that, 'without a

¹⁵ Trotsky, *Writings 1937-38*, New York 2002, PP.37-49.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, P.39

victorious civil war, the bureaucracy cannot give birth to a new ruling class', he qualified that by admitting the possibility 'of a new possessing class springing from the bureaucracy.'¹⁷ Beside this, he warned that Craipeau's view that the USSR is effectively capitalist and not to be defended over-simplified the real problems that would arise from actual war.

While Trotsky was answering Craipeau, James Burnham and Joseph Carter were preparing the appetisers for their meal at the beginning of the coming war. Their document on the Soviet Union restricted itself to denying that it was a workers' state and insisting that the bureaucracy was not just handicapping the nationalised economy but had already ended the possibility of its development. As yet, they did not advocate a defeatist position for the USSR in any prospective war. Accordingly, though using the same arguments that he had used against Craipeau, Trotsky presented them more mildly.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid, P.41.

¹⁸ Trotsky , 'Not a Workers' State and not a Bourgeois State?' and 'Defeatism Vs. Defensism' in Ibid., PP. 67-80 and 98-100.

There was one more development before the second World War began. In April 1939, Trotsky wrote his article 'The Ukrainian Question' in which he called for 'a united, free, and independent workers' and peasants' Soviet Ukraine'.¹⁹ This is of interest for several reasons. It refers to the capitalist states, Poland, Hungary and Rumania, that occupied western and south western Ukraine as 'imperialist', a term correct but confusing. On the one hand, the states concerned were not imperial metropolises of finance capital, but they were its clients as Tsarist Russia had been. On the other hand, these states' control of Ukraine expressed 'the element of "imperialism" in the widest sense of the word which was a property in the past of all monarchies, oligarchies, ruling castes, medieval estates and classes.'²⁰ It is unclear which term he was using, or, indeed, whether it was not both of them. A second point is of more lasting significance. Anticipating protests that a united independent workers' and peasants' Soviet Ukraine would mean the country's separation from the Soviet Union,

¹⁹ Trotsky, *Writings 1938-39*, New York 1974, P.304.

²⁰ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit.,P.31.

Trotsky replied: ‘The fervid worship of state boundaries is alien to us. We do not hold the position of a “united and indivisible” whole.’²¹ In a later article, he would meet the objection that separation would sabotage the soviet economic plan by arguing that the plan was already compromised by its bureaucratic drafters and that an independent Ukraine could help redraft it.²² Finally, to the objection that separation would weaken the USSR, he remarked: ‘In the event of war the hatred of the masses for the ruling clique [of the SU] can lead to the collapse of all the social conquests of October. The source of defeatist moods is in the Kremlin. An independent Soviet Ukraine, on the other hand, would become, if only by virtue of its own interests, a mighty south-western bulwark of the USSR.’²³ Trotsky expected that the Soviet Union would be defeated in the pending war but that its basic economic gains could be saved by world revolution. These positions completed his overall analysis of the USSR as Europe moved into the second World War.

²¹ Trotsky, *Writings 1938-39*, Op.Cit., P.305.

²² Trotsky, *Writings 1939-40*, New York, 2001, P.59.

²³ Trotsky, *Writings 1938-39*, Op.Cit., P.305.

The Great Split

There are several points to be recognised about the political fight centred in the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) between September 1939 and April 1940.

In the first place, the struggle was waged in the context of the World War. Admittedly, the USA was maintaining a shaky neutrality in this conflict, but this did not alter the view of its Trotskyist movement that as in 1918, the struggle would end in the world wide insurrections of the working people, and, this time, struggles that could be led to victory by the Fourth International that had learnt from previous defeats. Such a world struggle would end the usurpation of the bureaucracy of the USSR.

This helps explain the intensity of Trotsky's intervention. The minority (and, as Burnham was the pioneer of its line, he saw him as its leader) saw his 'intervention in the conflict' as

‘absolutely without parallel in the history of the international leadership of the Marxist movement.’²⁴ In fact, he believed that, in a potentially revolutionary situation, the strategy that he had been defending already had to be defended even more determinedly. He opposed the many who would use the manifest atrocities of the stalinite bureaucracy as an argument against the socialised economy. He opposed, too, the method of the minority that failed to recognise the dual nature of degenerated soviet state but asserted instead an undialectical view of it as wholly black.

Part of his problem was that both parties in the struggle were handicapped by the obtainable data being more limited than previously due to the war. He depended mainly on second hand sources from Menshevik publications. The SWP minority could often refute these in detail. Yet its details as given here do not seem to have amounted to an overall proof of its line.

As a corollary to this, it should be mentioned that the writer is

²⁴ Matgamna (ed), *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.Cit., P.745.

himself handicapped by the limited information available to him. Matgamna has broadened the field by publishing these two volumes, but, on the other side, the bulk of data he has for the dispute is contained in Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism* and Cannon's *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*.

Finally, the struggle was made the more bitter by the relationship between Cannon and Shachtman. It seems Shachtman described Cannon fairly accurately in his essay in Volume 2 of Matgamna's collection.²⁵ He portrays his staunchness, but also the philistinism that he learnt in his period in the IWW, a philistinism reflected in that body's most able theoretician, James Connolly, dismissing other theorists contemptuously as 'theorickers'. Though Cannon was no theorist and could not publish anything of equivalent detail on Shachtman, the latter was probably aware that he saw him as a windbag. In *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, Cannon mentions Shachtman's 'needless to say, a lengthy document'²⁶ Later, he describes Shachtman's 'naturally' long speech at a party convention.²⁷ Later, Shachtman would justify Cannon's view by publishing a translation of Trotsky's *The New Course* with an introduction by him longer than that work.²⁸ He was far more of an intellectual than Cannon, but not as clever as he seems to have thought himself. On the other hand, had he been on Trotsky's side in the dispute, he might not have acted as ruthlessly against Cannon as Cannon did against him.

²⁵ Ibid, PP. 737-745.

²⁶ James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, New York 1970, P.11.

²⁷ Ibid, P.76.

²⁸ Matgamna (ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.cit., P.398.

The struggle itself arose from Stalin's strategy under the Moscow-Berlin Pact of 1939. Its purpose was a matter of conjecture outside Russia at this time, but there is now little doubt that it was a desperate move to buy time before the inevitable German invasion. One of the terms of this entente was to allow the Soviet Union a free hand in extending its borders to the west, immediately partitioning Poland with Germany but also establishing its sphere of influence and frontier along the shore of the Baltic. This move westward reached its climax in the Winter War with Finland when the latter state refused to agree to surrender the territory demanded. Even here, however, the defeat of the Finns gained the Russians rather less than the terms they had demanded.

In the International, Trotsky denounced the Hitler-Stalin Pact. In the two weeks between the Nazi and the Soviet invasions, on 4 September, he wrote: 'The only "merit" of the German-Soviet pact is that in unveiling the truth [about the realpolitick behind Stalin's former democratic internationalism] it broke the backbone of the Comintern.'²⁹

The next day, James Burnham produced theses for the Political Committee of the SWP declaring that the soviet bureaucracy was an exploiting class and urging that the party and the Fourth International end its policy of supporting unconditionally the defence of the USSR. He withdrew it.³⁰

²⁹ Trotsky, *Writings 1939-40*, Op.Cit., P.97.

³⁰ Matgamna (ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 1, London 1998, PP.264-266.

Burnham's initiative may have inspired Trotsky to start work on his document,³¹ 'The USSR at War' in which he restated his position on the class nature of the Soviet Union, recalling his disputes with Urbahns and Craipeau and linking them to the Italian Bruno Rizzi, but not mentioning Burnham or his new allies.

By the next, special PC meeting of the SWP on 18 September, the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland had changed matters. Trotsky wrote on that day:

' The aspirations of various sections of the Ukrainian nation for their liberation and independence are completely legitimate and have a very intense character. But these aspirations are directed also against the Kremlin. If the invasion gains its end, the Ukrainian people will find itself "unified", not in national liberty but in bureaucratic enslavement. Furthermore not a single honest person will be found who will approve of the "emancipation" of eight

³¹ Trotsky mentions this initiative in a letter to Cannon on 12 September 1939, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit., PP1-2.

million Ukrainians and White Russians at the price of the enslavement of twenty-three million Poles!’³²

The article did not mention the question of the SU’s class nature.

In the USA, the invasion had enabled Burnham to become what might be described most accurately as a stalking horse for what would become a minority faction and ultimately a breakaway party. Burnham and Carter were joined by Max Shachtman in supporting three motions declaring that the SU was ‘participating integrally in a war of imperialist conquest’, that this view should be expressed in the party press and that a discussion on the nature of the SU should be opened.³³ These proposals were defeated, but the struggle had only begun.

The theoretical leader of the majority was Trotsky. This irritated his opponents,³⁴ though they could not deny him that

³² Trotsky, *Writings, 1939-40*, Op.Cit., P.108.

³³ Matgamna (Ed.) , *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 1, Op.Cit.,P.266.

³⁴ See Shachtman in, Matgamna (ed) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.Cit.,PP.745-746.

right. After all he had developed the analysis and had already been defending it. He himself seems to have felt the need to create a team around him³⁵, but his pre-eminence tended to weaken the self-confidence of those in whom he had hopes.

Nonetheless, his grasp of dialectics strengthened, as it still strengthens his case against his opponents. Within its philosophical framework, his case depended on the need to defend and, if possible extend state ownership of the economy. He would describe it later as the foundation of the well-being of the masses.³⁶ Like his opponents, he was handicapped by his lack of information. As he remarked, 'the cable dispatches contradict each other, since both sides lie a great deal.'³⁷ Nonetheless, he was able to anticipate the course of events more accurately than they.

His weaknesses were, of course, in the timing of events, which enabled the Shachtman faction to score apparently easy

³⁵ Trotsky, 'Letter to William F. Warde' in *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit.P.125.

³⁶ Trotsky, *Writings 1939-40*, Op.Cit.,P.239.

³⁷ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit, PP.21-22.

points. This was notable on the question of the soviet annexation of the Baltic states where the nationalisation of property relations was not imposed immediately, enabling Shachtman to make the point that Stalin's expansionism did not have even that mitigating factor.³⁸ Trotsky lived long enough to see his position on this vindicated.

On the other hand, Trotsky was fooled by Stalin on Finland, accepting that what can be seen now as a tactic of diplomacy by other means was a genuine attempt at revolution from above:

'Tomorrow the Stalinists will strangle the Finnish workers. but now they are giving - they are compelled to give - a tremendous impulse to the class struggle in its sharpest form.'³⁹

To this, Shachtman was able to reply, showing the result of the Polish invasion:

'The Red Army came in as a counter-revolutionary force. Far from "giving an impulse to the socialist revolution" it

³⁸ Matgamna (ed), *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 1, Op.Cit., P573.

³⁹ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit.,P.74.

strangled it.’⁴⁰

The Red Army might impose nationalised means of production on the territories it occupied. It could do so only at an excessive price.

Trotsky’s weakness was more than matched by that of his opponents. They were gathered on a single demand: ‘a revision of our previous concept of “the unconditional defence of the Soviet Union.”’⁴¹ Beyond this, there were deep divisions amongst them as to why there had to be such a revision. They covered this by referring to previous struggles in which Lenin and Trotsky had allied with doubtfully Marxist elements for a common cause. They ignored a basic difference: that their examples were those of united fronts aimed at final ends, such as expelling Menshevism or ending the First World War, whereas their own aim, because of their disagreements on the reason for it could be only the beginning of further divisive polemics.

⁴⁰ Matgamna (ed.), *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 1, Op.Cit.,P.574.

⁴¹ Ibid, P.549.

However, even in December, there was a formulation that anticipated the future trajectory of most of the group. In its 'Statement of the Position of the Minority', it declared 'the independent revolutionary movement cannot be brought into existence and advance if we support the Stalinist invasion. The forces of the *third camp* are already at hand - scattered, demoralized, without program or perspective. The problem is to bring them together, to infuse them with morale, to supply them with a program and perspective.'⁴²

This equated Stalinism to the same position as capital among the enemies of the working people. Both were to be opposed equally. Indeed, though this was yet to be stated by the minority, the more coercive Stalinism had to be fought harder than democratic capitalism. How this would affect the struggles of colonised and semi-colonised against the imperialism that grubstaked that democratic capital had yet to

⁴² Ibid, P.557.

be examined. Indeed, the effect of it on the Transitional Programme which they had welcomed less than two years previously was not considered.

Whether there was any possibility of preventing a split will never be known. Certainly one factor that might have helped was missing, In his debate with Shachtman on 15 October 1939, Cannon posed the growing division between them in terms used to describe the divisions in the socialist movement in the first World War:

‘Defensism and Defeatism are two principled , that is irreconcilable, positions. They are not determined by arbitrary choice but by class interest.’⁴³

What neither side noticed was that there had been a third, literally, if not politically centrist grouping in the earlier conflict. With hindsight, a Pacifist position of negotiated peace would have made sense, particularly in the case of the Winter War, where the harm to the SU internationally was probably more than what it gained territorially. That it was not pursued

⁴³ Matgama (Ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.cit., P.178.

seriously may have been the result of Trotsky's belief that a Soviet victory in that war would give an impetus to social revolution. Only one member of each camp, Herman Benson⁴⁴ of the Shachtmanites and, more hesitantly, the Cannonite Albert Goldman⁴⁵ seem to have suggested such a strategy.

This failure may have reflected the fact that no agreement was wanted by the leaders of either side. As his statement quoted above shows this was particularly true of Cannon. The Shachtmanites' departure from the SWP followed their defeat at the Party Convention in April 1940. Cannon anticipated the division reasonably accurately as being five to three in his favour.⁴⁶ How far he fixed matters may be questioned.

Certainly, it may be asked whether the refusal of the Minneapolis comrades, among the party's most militant, to give Shachtman an hearing was altogether spontaneous and, if so, whether its leaders tried to get them to give their opponents a hearing.⁴⁷ What is certain is that, after the

⁴⁴ Ibid, PP.226-7.

⁴⁵ Ibid, PP.242-6.

⁴⁶ Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, Op.Cit. P.14.

⁴⁷ Ibid., P.175.

convention, Cannon and his allies on the Political Committee moved to freeze the minority out of the party by passing a resolution that its members accept the committee decisions and carry them out in a disciplined manner. When the minority members abstained, they were suspended from the party. They and their supporters formed a break away Workers' Party, which Burnham abandoned almost immediately. On the SWP, in June, Cannon declared to Trotsky that the party should 'be considered as a military organisation.'⁴⁸ Trotsky corrected him mildly, remarking on the need to maintain a dialectical interreaction between centralism and democracy. If this prefigured a deeper disagreement will never be known. The Stalinites had Trotsky murdered two months later.

Without Trotsky.

World Trotskyism faced an escalating conflict without its theorist and as badly divided against itself as it had ever been. The Shachtmanite split remained restricted to north America; Craipeau does not seem to have been interested in associating with the breakaway party, probably because in semi-occupied France he had more immediate concrete problems. Nonetheless, the result of the struggle presaged future

⁴⁸ Trotsky, *Writings 1939-40*, Op.Cit., P. 337.

divisions. It left two sides with political positions set as if in aspic and, accordingly, less able to adjust to the changes made by the dialectic in the material conditions of world war.

In some ways, the Shachtmanite Workers Party was in a better place to advance, if only because it had not formulated its position at the time of the split or for months afterwards. Eventually, it 'arrived at analysis of our own, summed up in the phrase "bureaucratic collectivism," a new class exploitive state in Russia which is neither bourgeois nor proletarian but is basically different from any other class regime preceding or

contemporary with it."⁴⁹ Their arguments for this are not

impressive. In his Introduction to Trotsky's *New Course*,

Shachtman describes the bureaucracy as being 'without a past and without a future'.⁵⁰ In this way, he avoided the

embarrassing (and dialectical) fact that the said bureaucracy's material passed was rooted in the workers' own state. Still,

this analysis enabled the Workers' Party to do its duty struggling against the American war effort without worrying about whether it would hurt America's Soviet ally.

The SWP had more problems. It found it next to impossible to operate dialectically to oppose imperialism and Stalinism whilst defending the gains of the Russian revolution. At the beginning of the war, and of the faction struggle in the SWP,

⁴⁹ Matgamna (Ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.Cit., PP.407-408.

⁵⁰ Ibid, P.538.

Cannon had denied that defending the USSR meant giving approval to all acts of the Red Army.⁵¹ As late as October 1942, the Party's Convention repeated the demand for political revolution in the Soviet Union.⁵² After Stalingrad, the position changed; despite prognoses, Stalin was defeating Hitler. The united free independent soviet Ukraine was dropped (as it was for the Workers' Party, with less excuse).

The entrance of the Red Army to Poland was welcomed unequivocally as providing an impulse to revolution.⁵³ Cannon

himself went beyond this, dipping his feet in a sewer.

In his lowest move, he wrote from prison criticising the *Militant* editorial board for its alleged one-sided attack on the Red Army's refusal to support the Warsaw uprising in August 1944.⁵⁴ That this was a classic case of how the said army's advance could provide impetus for revolution and how it could act to sabotage such a revolution seems to have been lost on him. His only excuse is his isolation in prison.

⁵¹ Ibid, P.185.

⁵² Ibid , P. 308.

⁵³ Ibid, P.317.

⁵⁴ Ibid, PP.326-7.

The war ended and Stalin seemed to have disproved Trotsky's prognoses. The Soviet Union had not been defeated by Hitler, nor had its victories given any impetus to political revolution within its borders. Instead, it had extended its border and its sphere of influence over eastern Europe (but, interestingly, not over Finland, despite that country having ganged up with the Axis to get revenge for the Winter War). Against it, democratic imperialism had gained an extended lease of life as well. Save in a few cases, notably Yugoslavia and increasingly China, proletarian revolution had been crushed by one or other of the elitist forces.

It is to the credit of the trotskyist forces that few of them considered the stark possibility posed by Trotsky that the Stalinite survival was evidence that 'the socialist programme, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, [had] ended as a Utopia.'⁵⁵ Rather, they tried to analyse why the prospective revolution had failed. The trouble was that the existing divisions led different groups to different conclusions.

As between the SWP and the WP, the first tended to credit the Soviet Union's victory to 'the economic conquests of the revolution.....the tremendous resources of power that were lodged in the basic achievements of the workers' revolution of 1917 when they swept away capitalist private property and reorganised production on a nationalised and planned basis'.⁵⁶ The Shachtmanites were inclined more to see the victory as an expression of the USSR's new class structure. Neither group seems to have looked at the other side of the story: the fact that the Axis contributed to their own defeat by their political

⁵⁵ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit.,P.11.

⁵⁶ Matgamna, *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.Cit., P.546.

role as expressions of the most retarded forms of capitalism. These included their wastefulness and their racism which added to their alienation from the peoples of the areas they had occupied. Ignoring these factors to insist on their own explanations for the soviet victory, both groups deepened the division between them. They agreed on the need for the revolutionary overthrow of the two camps, but this was not enough to reconcile them. Certainly, it is doubtful whether reconciliation would have prevented the marginalisation of the overall trotskyist movement, or whether it would have been more than a temporary expedient. It might have improved its short term development.

As it was, world political hegemony was divided between the imperialist metropolises and the Soviet Union. The latter had turned the former imperialist semi-colonies of eastern Europe into semi-colonies of its own. This could be said to justify the WP accusation that it was imperialist, as it was indeed 'in the widest sense of the word', though not in the contemporary

sense of 'the expansionist policy of finance capital'⁵⁷ Had Shachtman and his party qualified its use of the term by putting an adjective like 'primitive' in front of the word, they would have had a case.

Instead, Shachtman quoted Lenin on imperialism 'in the widest sense of the word' and rendered Lenin and Trotsky more profound:

'The *driving force* behind the bureaucracy is the tendency to increase this "masked [and often not so masked] appropriation of the product of the labor of others" Hence its lust to extend its domination over the peoples of the weaker and more backward countries (if it is not the case with the stronger and more advanced countries than only because the power, and not the will, is lacking), in order to subject them to the oppression and exploitation of the Kremlin oligarchs.....We call this policy Stalinist imperialism.'⁵⁸

The trouble with this concept was that, as any sort of an imperialist force, the Soviet bureaucracy showed little talent to expand its colonies or to exploit them apart from one orgy of pillage by the Red Army at the end of the war. It seems clear that Stalin's original plan was to create a cordon sanitaire of popular fronts on the USSR's western frontiers. However, inability to maintain a friendly capitalist order in the face of infiltration by the much stronger (and in Marxist definition) imperialism forced him to impose bureaucratic autarchy on regimes dominated by his creatures which caused the leadership of the Fourth International after four years to term them deformed workers' states.

Yet the Soviet Union remained a powerful force rivalling the

⁵⁷ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit., P.31.

⁵⁸ Matgamna(Ed.), *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 1, Op.Cit., P.290.

USA. Apart from continuing failures in agriculture, its technological achievements compelled admiration, from its explosion of its atom bomb to its putting the first man into space in 1961. Soviet propaganda suppressed the fact of many of its fiascos: that for the Turk-Sib. railways, there was the North Sib. Railway, that for Magnitogorsk there was the White Sea Canal.

Above all, it was an inspiration for the peoples of the colonial and semi-colonial world (the 'Third World'). The brutalities of the soviet regime were less alienating to nationalities under the heel of imperialism. Capitalist prosperity did not percolate down to them, indeed it tended to be based on their super-exploitation. Social revolutions took place inspired but uncontrolled by the Kremlin. The state of Yugoslavia had broken away early. In 1949, it was joined by China, in 1956 by north Vietnam, in 1959 by Cuba. Thanks to their inspiration, these were all workers' states with deformities, though not quite to the organic extent of the east European countries. Sean Matganna does himself no favours when he dismisses their achievements as 'barbarism.'⁵⁹ If this is to be considered, it should be asked how he would define, say the French-Bao Dai colonial regime that the Vietminh overthrew or the Batista-Mafia order destroyed by Castro. Vietnam and Cuba are not ideal workers' states. Their leaders were influenced too much by the hack Kremlin pedants, as well as by isolation in a world of failed revolutions. Nonetheless, they are flickering lights in what would be otherwise a very black environment and should be honoured by the victorious revolutionaries of the future as we honour our utopian predecessors.

The pre-eminence of Stalinism in international working class politics after the second World War was a barrier to trotskyist revolution. At the same time, the Kremlin's well publicised vices gave the revolutionary activists some opportunities to

⁵⁹ Ibid, P.109.

grow. Politically the Workers' Party was in the stronger position. Its analysis of the war and post-war situation, was, because pragmatic, closer to immediate reality than the purely formal (and, hence, undialectical) dogma of the SWP and won to it, for a while, a number of the latter party's more able members. It failed utterly to capitalise on this. One reason was that it was too small. More important was the failure of its current to put down roots outside America. It had relative success in Ireland, where its followers were for a while more numerous than those of the Fourth International, but, as the numbers concerned were in single figures, its short term victory here was not impressive. Due to its emphasis on working class action regardless of other classes, Shachtmanism was essentially an ideology of the developed imperialist metropolises.⁶⁰ As Trotsky had warned when the SWP split:

'The schoolboy schema of the three camps leaves out a trifling detail: the colonial world, the greater portion of mankind!'⁶¹

The Party declined into the International Socialist League in 1949 and merged with the rump of the reformist Socialist Party in 1958. Shachtman himself went further. Impressed by both the strength and, in the Hungarian rising, the ruthlessness of the new class he had discovered, moved too, perhaps by the PR liberalism of Kennedy Democracy, he announced his support for the American invasion of Cuba, and continued a defender of his country's imperialism until his death. Trotsky's prophecy had been vindicated, though delayed by the tempo of events.

The SWP survived. Initially, it was confused by the failure of the post-war social revolutions as predicted by Trotsky. As keeper of the flame, Cannon declared that the war was not over:

⁶⁰ A later example of this can be seen in Sean Matgamna 'Afghanistan and the shape of the Twentieth Century' in *Workers' Liberty*, Volume 2, Issue 2.

⁶¹ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit.P.209.

‘It is perfectly clear to everybody that before any peace is concluded, the mobilization for the next stage of the war, a war against the Soviet Union, is already taking place and

proceeding at a feverish pace.’⁶²

It should be said that he was stating what was a general belief and one that was not so far inaccurate; there would be a war, but it was to be a cold war not an hot one. Nonetheless, Cannon’s formulation was mistaken and his party showed enough realism to jettison it. He himself found he had to oppose some of his closest followers who felt that he was ‘Stalinophobic’ and broke with him in favour of doing work within the Communist Party. This was part of a split within the International, which saw the SWP allying with a breakaway body that included two large ultra-sectarian national sections with diametrically opposed views on dialectical materialism. In 1963, it escaped back to an United International. By now, it was beginning to suffer from the wounds, some self-inflicted, of its past. Joseph Hansen produced his thesis on working for a Workers’ & Farmers’ Government, ignoring the question of the nature of the state. Cannon himself began to worry about proposals to increase

⁶² Matgamna, (Ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.Cit., P.547.

the internal discipline in his party. These two strands came together in the 1980s after several purges of members when a new party secretary published a document 'Their Trotsky and Ours', arguing for a Stalinite stages line to bring the working people to achieve state power. This signalled the party's parting of the ways with the International. It occurred formally shortly after the International's twelfth congress.

The SWP's move towards conscious Stalinism came when the original workers' state experiment in achieving a socialist society in a single country was beginning to collapse. It had been at its most impressive when it sent Gagarin to circle the world in 1961. From then onwards the bureaucracy became increasingly a more obvious handicap to the economy. As has been shown, Trotsky's insistence that the bureaucracy was negating Soviet economic growth was held implicitly to have been weakened by second World War victory and by subsequent economic growth. What was ignored was Trotsky's explanation of the negation:

⁶³ Matgamma (Ed.) *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 2, Op.Cit., PP.621-622.

‘Bureaucratism, as a system , became the worst brake on the technical and cultural development of the country. This was veiled for a certain time by the fact that Soviet economy was occupied for two decades with transplanting and assimilating the technology and organisation of production in advanced capitalist countries. The period of borrowing and imitation still could, for better or for worse, be accomodated to bureaucratic automatism, i.e., the suffocation of all initiative and all creative urge, But the higher the economy rose, the more complex its requirements became, all the more unbearable became the obstacle of the bureaucratic regime.’⁶⁴

‘The Bonapartist bureaucracy..... degrades the intellectual activity of the country to depths of the unbridled blockheads of the GPU.’⁶⁵

In the immediate postwar years, the tasks of reconstructing the soviet economy and the successful achievement of specific projects (the atom bomb, the space project) were enough to

⁶⁴ Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, Op.Cit., PP.7-8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, P.97.

camouflage the intellectual weakness imposed by the bureaucracy. As the sixties progressed and the capitalist world developed new techniques, it became much clearer. In 1970, three dissident scientists, Andrei Sakharov, Roy Medvedev and Valery Turchin wrote:

‘In comparing our economy with that of the United States, we see that ours lags behind not only in quantitative but also - most regrettable of all - in qualitative terms. The newer and more revolutionary a particular aspect of the economy may be, the wider the gap between the USSR and the USA. We outstrip America in coal production, but we lag behind by ten times in the field of chemistry, and we are infinitely outstripped in the field of computer technology.....Our stock of computers is *one per cent* of that of the United States. And with respect to the application of the electronic computer, the gap is so great that it is impossible to even measure it. We simply live in another age.’⁶⁶

This gap in growth industries grew wider. The soviet debt grew with it. After the state imploded, two hardline Stalinites

⁶⁶ George Saunders (Ed.), *Samizdat*, New York N.Y., 1974. P.402.

traced part of its crisis to 'defective computer chips deliberately sold to the Soviet Union by the US.'⁶⁷ That it might have needed to import such chips or that their defects should have had such a catastrophic effect are not considered peculiar by the authors.

Matters had to change. The bureaucracy could have reverted to Stalin's forced march methods, but this would have risked their lives and liberties and would not have saved the cultural deficit. It could have returned to the original Bolshevik vision, but this would have cost them their power. Its favoured solution was what it did: retreat into the arms of imperialism, privatising what could be privatised, with its leading members becoming CEOs, or 'Oligarchs'. Whether former Workers' State or Bureaucratic Collective, Russia was now capitalist. As Trotsky had feared, the bureaucracy had acted as a fungus killing the wood that had been the proletarian power.

Yet Trotsky's prognosis had not anticipated that the

⁶⁷ Roger Keeran & Thomas Kenny, *Socialism Betrayed: Behind the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, New York, 2004, P.36.

degenerative process would last as long as it did.⁶⁸ Nor did he foresee that that slow tempo in a dictatorial state would make possible the peacefulness of the counter-revolutionary putsch. The result has been to discredit belief in Marxism and to strengthen neo-liberal and neo-conservative illusions that even the 2008 crash could not shake effectively. Resistance to imperialism has taken the form of large, impressive but ultimately impotent mass movements, followed more recently by populist movements of left and right and by the increasing cancer of fundamentalism in most religious communities. Against these, the left tends to be divided against itself, with its organisations seeming often to hate each other more than they hate capitalism. Many of them follow strategies pointing at winning seats in parliaments that are essentially all class sub-committees of capitalist states. The crisis of working class leadership is as great as it has been since the Second World War.

⁶⁸ The possibility of it happening is implicit in his comparison of the French and Russian Thermidors, Trotsky, *Writings 1934-35*, New York 1974, pp.173-5.,

Conclusion

The 1940 split in the SWP can be seen to reveal faultlines on both sides. These came to be formalised into two essentially non-Marxist methods. On the one hand, the Shachtmanites tried to proceed according to the empirical practice of taking each obvious fact as it appeared. On the other, Cannon and his followers used the name of the dialectic in vain, and treated the thoughts of Trotsky as prophecies, rather than as guides to be related to changing circumstances. The SWP fared better for longer than the WP, but drifted into Stalinism, just when Stalinism was itself collapsing.

Now Sean Matgamna has reproduced many documents in the struggle, it is necessary to congratulate him but also to question why he did so, as an acknowledged Shachtmanite partisan. In particular, his undialectical approach is seen in his Introduction to the first volume of this collection: 'from a working class point of view, an advanced capitalism that still allows labour movements is better than this barbaric collectivism. Its socialist potential is greater.'⁶⁹ All things being equal, this is true, but dialectically all things are never quite that equal. The 'advanced capitalism that still allows labour movements' has in most cases been able to oil its tolerance by super profits from countries that do not have the luxury. What is more, it is these super-exploited countries that have shaken imperialism, however inadequately, whilst advanced capitalism has been able to stop its labour movements getting that far. The revolution in the semi-colonies will not be fulfilled without revolution in the metropolises, but metropolitan revolution must avoid the temptation to maintain itself economically from imperial

⁶⁹ Matgamne (Ed.) *The Fate of the Soviet Union*, Volume 1, Op.Cit. , P.78.

loot. Matgamna's position is suspiciously like the empiricism and metropolitanism of Shachtman. How does Matgamna differ from this? Or does he?

In the meantime, the writer can but restate his position. Much has to be relearnt by many, starting with the need for the holy trinity of Dialectical Materialism (the Holy Ghost, as it were), the Permanent Revolution (the 'paternal' strategy) worked by the international party of working people (the word made flesh). This recipe is the only one that can not only smash the capitalist state but but lead the working people from their own national state powers to the world system that is the only possible form of socialism.