



70 years since Leon Trotsky's death

Trotsky and the Stalinist state



The Hitler-Stalin pact summed up by the cartoonist David Low summed in the Evening Standard

BY SEAN MATGAMNA

It is 70 years since one of the greatest figures in the history of the socialist movement was assassinated. On August 20, 1940, Leon Trotsky, who, together with Lenin, had led the Russian workers' revolution of October 1917, was struck down with a blow to the head from an ice pick wielded by an assassin sent by the Russian dictator Stalin. He soon lost consciousness, and died the next day, August 21. Trotsky who had been an active revolutionary socialist for 43 years was a couple of months short of his 61st birthday.

No other socialist militant has ever had so broad and deep an experience of all the phases of working class struggle as Leon Trotsky had. In his teens in Tsarist Russia he was jailed for helping workers set up illegal trade unions. During the 1905 Revolution he was — still in his 20s — the leader of the

Workers' Parliament (Soviet) in St Petersburg. After this he stood trial for his life before a Tsarist court, which sentenced him to jail and exile.

He was a revolutionary socialist agitator, journalist, and a theoretician of the workers' movement. He was active in France, Austria and the USA as well as in Russia. He helped organise the first stirrings of resistance in France to the great slaughter that was World War One.

Back in Russia after the Tsar was overthrown in February 1917, Trotsky was again elected leader of the St Petersburg (Petrograd) Soviet.

Trotsky joined Lenin's Bolshevik Party and in October 1917, he was the central organiser of the working class insurrection organised through the Soviets.

When full-scale civil war broke out, which soon merged with the invasion of armies from no less than 14 capitalist states, including Britain, Trotsky,

as Commissar for War, was first the organiser and then the leader of the newly created Red Army.

With peace, Trotsky, like everyone else, turned to reconstruction work. Following the defeat of workers' revolution in the rest of Europe, a new ruling elite based on the state bureaucracy took control in the USSR. Trotsky separated himself from the bureaucracy and together with the incorruptible Bolsheviks, went into opposition. Defeated, he was expelled from the USSR. Many of his comrades were jailed or sent to Siberia, where eventually they would be slaughtered.

In exile again, Trotsky continued to be a far-sighted critic of Stalin's Communist Parties. In the period before Hitler came to power in Germany, crush-

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ing and destroying the German labour movement, Trotsky wrote prophetic pamphlets and articles to warn the German workers against the policies of the mass German Communist Party which were to lead to their destruction.

But Trotsky was now isolated. He would die isolated, with only a tiny handful of supporters.

Throughout the 30s he watched helplessly as one after another, the Stalinists and reformists led the European labour movements to destruction at the hands of fascism and reaction in Germany, Austria, Spain and France. His voluminous writings on these life and death questions armed only small minorities and had no effect on the Stalinist and reformist led mass workers movement. It would be decades before they became widely known to new generations of socialists.

In a private diary from 1935, he wrote that he felt, watching the European labour movement go to its destruction, like a wise old physician forced to watch the destruction of someone he loved whom he knew how to save but was prevented from saving.

The Stalinist domination of the would-be revolutionary sections of the European labour movement isolated and paralysed him.

He would never escape from the nightmare. He witnessed the Stalinist bureaucracy consolidating its power in the mid-1930s by waging a murderous, one-sided civil war on the Russian workers and peasants. He saw Stalin and Hitler make a pact to partition Poland, and the Nazis, with Stalin's backing, overrun Western Europe.

Trotsky's life and work were entwined with both the greatest achievements of the labour movement and with its descent into the abyss in the 1930s. Together with Lenin he led the October 1917 Revolution — he organised the insurrection which raised the workers to power; and he led the stubborn Bolshevik rearguard in fighting the Stalinist counter-revolution. The very manner of his death symbolised perfectly the fate of the mass revolutionary movement he, together with Lenin, had organised and led.

Yet Trotsky never gave up. He reasoned, analysed and wrote: he worked to prepare the future of the revolutionary socialist and labour movements. He told the bitter truth come what may. His writings are of immense value to the labour movement today — though he would surely have great contempt for those degenerate "Trotskyists" who treat them as holy writ.

The following passage, sometimes called Trotsky's Testament, sums up Trotsky's personal philosophy. When the future generations he talks of here have finished off class society they will remember Trotsky with love and gratitude.

"For forty-three years of my conscious life I have been a revolutionary; and for forty-two I have fought under the banner of Marxism. If I were to begin all over again, I would... try to avoid making this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged. I shall die a proletarian revolutionary, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and consequently an irreconcilable atheist. My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent, indeed it is firmer today, than it was in the days of my youth.

Natasha [Natalia Sedova, his companion of 37 years] has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass; beneath the wall, and the clear, blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence, and enjoy it to the full."

After the young Irish republican Robert Emmett was hanged, drawn and quartered in Dublin in 1803, the poet Shelley commemorated him in these words, dismissing those who had killed him: "When Erin has ceased with their memory to groan, she will smile through the tears of revival on thine". So it will be with Trotsky.

The best way to commemorate this great revolutionary is to look critically at his attempts, from 1923 to his death, to understand the nature of Stalinism, with which he was still grappling, intellectually, morally, politically and physically up to the moment that Stalin's assassin, Mercader, struck him down on 20 August 1940.

1. WHAT HAPPENED IN 1939-40?

A. According to the story in circulation in academic folklore as well as in accounts repeated for political generations by Trotskyist militants, in 1939-40 the

Trotskyist movement debated the "class nature" of Stalinist Russia.

In the folklore, Trotsky staunchly defended the position that Russia remained a degenerated workers' state, and would so remain as long as the economy was still nationalised. Shachtman, Burnham, and their associates, the minority, taking their ideas from the Italian Bruno Rizzi, defended the idea that Russia was not a degenerated workers' state, but a new form of class society.

After the debate, the movement split into two irreconcilable streams, whose divergences thereafter widened until they wound up on different sides in the great divide of the Cold War: the "orthodox Trotskyists" on the side of the Stalinist bloc, and the heretical Shachtmanites either "neutral" or (for Shachtman himself in the 1960s) actively on the side of US imperialism.

With few variations, this account is common. Even the respectable Marxist scholar Hal Draper gives such an account, and an extremely "vulgar" version of it too, with a preposterous story about what Trotsky was doing in 1939-40. (<http://archive.workersliberty.org/wlmags/wl57/rizzi.htm>).

The standard account is a gross misrepresentation. If there was a debate on that it was a matter of Trotsky elaborating, with himself, speeches for both sides. His main opponent, Max Shachtman, was still a workers' statist. James Burnham, who thought Russia a class-exploitative system, was silent.

The "innocent" explanation for this misrepresentation is that, over the years, the story of the two post-Trotsky Trotskyisms has been telescoped, simplified, and condensed, so that the later-emerging divisions that can be said to be rooted in 1939-40 are projected back and the whole story is more neatly tied up. That may well be the explanation for the standard account appearing even in the memoirs of Al Glotzer, who was very old and by then thought the 1917 revolution should never have happened.

There is a parallel, maybe, in the popular account of the splitting of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, which is usually located in the divisions over the definition of a member of the organisation at the Second Congress in 1903. (In that division the future "Bolsheviks", or majority-ites, were in fact in a minority, and the future "Mensheviks", or minority-ites, in a majority. The majority-ite/minority-ite terminology came from a later vote in the same Congress, on the make-up of the editorial board of *Iskra*).

In reality the division began to take shape between 1904 and 1907, when radically different alternative policies of a working-class alliance with the bourgeoisie (Mensheviks) or with the peasantry (Bolsheviks), in what both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks saw as a bourgeois-democratic revolution, were hardened out. The definitive split took place as late as 1912.

But the misrepresentations in the popular account of Bolshevism are not innocent, and nor are those in the prevailing account of 1939-40. What happened then?

In August 1939 Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, erstwhile greatest enemies, signed a pact of non-aggression. In fact it was far more than that. In secret clauses, Stalin undertook to provide Germany with raw materials. As Trotsky put it, Stalin enlisted as Hitler's "quartermaster" for the Second World War.

The cartoonist David Low summed it up in the *Evening Standard* of 20 September 1939, presenting Hitler and Stalin both in military uniform and bowing to each other. "The scum of the earth, I believe?" "The bloody assassin of the workers, I presume?"

b. The pact was the bugle-call for war, freeing Hitler to act without fear that Russia would attack him. On 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. On 3 September, Britain and France declared war on Germany in defence of their Polish ally. The long-expected and greatly-feared new world war had started. It was not quite 21 years on from the end of the First World War, in November 1918.

It seemed to Trotsky to be only the second in a likely series of world wars that would, he came to think, be the "grave of civilisation", unless the working class seized power in the advanced countries. That view proved to be wrong; but in 1939 it was not an unreasonable one.

c. On 17 September, Stalin invaded Poland from the east. On 19 September the Russian Stalinist and German Nazi armies met each other not as enemies but as close collaborators who in alliance had just "made their bones", the first of World War Two, by carving up Poland.

d. On 24 September Stalin demanded that Estonia concede military bases to the USSR, or face invasion. Estonia agreed. In October, Stalin would make the

same demand on the other Baltic states, Latvia and Lithuania, and force their agreement too.

e. On 12 October Stalin started making territorial demands on Finland. Finland would not agree to what Stalin wanted, and on 30 November Russia invaded Finland. Finland was on paper greatly outmatched, a David against an army of Goliaths, but incompetence, bungling, and disarray in the Russian army, whose top leaders and organisers had been slaughtered by Stalin in 1937, allowed the Finns to inflict defeats on the Russians and prolong their resistance.

There was serious talk of British and French forces landing in Finland to fight "Hitler's quartermaster". As the world war got going, it looked as if the Hitler-Stalin pact might become a lasting partnership in a long war.

On 12 March 1940, the Finnish war ended. Finland ceded territory to the USSR.

f. On 9 April 1940, Hitler invaded Norway and Denmark, in part to forestall planned British landings in Norway.

g. On 9 May 1940, the German armies attacked Luxemburg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. In the First World War, the Germans invading France through Belgium had been stopped before they could reach Paris, and a terrible war of trench-fighting stalemate settled in for four years. In May 1940 the Germans broke through completely, conquering France. By June the German armies and their allies had control of the whole of Europe, barring Switzerland and a few countries on the margins: Sweden, Britain and Ireland, and Yugoslavia and Greece, which Germany would conquer in 1941.

Stalin's pact with Hitler had led within nine months to Russia being left "alone" in Europe with an immensely strengthened Germany.

h. The Stalinist world movement, which for five years before late 1939 had advocated an alliance of "the democracies", including Russia, for war against Hitler, swung behind the Hitler-Stalin alliance after a short period of confusion. Raucously, the Stalinist parties denounced the British and French "warmongers" and demanded peace — on Hitler's terms. As for Poland? "Poland no longer exists".

In Britain, Stalinists, the Independent Labour Party, pacifists, and others launched a "make peace with Hitler" campaign that at first got a lot of labour movement support. After the fall of France and the Nazi seizure of western Europe, much of that support fell away. But the Communist Party continued the "peace" campaign until Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941.

In Mexico, the Stalinists denounced the "Jewish Trotskyists". In France, on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Russia, the Communist Party was negotiating with the German occupation forces for permission to publish a legal daily paper.

In western Europe, a notable current emerged that saw the Nazis as progressive — in "unifying" Europe, for example. Some of them, the French Neo-Socialists for example, collaborated with the occupying forces on that basis. That is a current that is largely forgotten now. One reason for this is that it is overshadowed in history by the enormous number of socialists — including most "Trotskyists" — who for decades adopted a similar approach to Stalinism and its spreading tide after 1944.

Natalia Sedova-Trotsky would say about this approach, in 1951: "In 1932 and 1933, the Stalinists, in order to justify their shameless capitulation to Hitlerism, declared that it would matter little if the Fascists came to power because socialism would come after and through the rule of Fascism. Only dehumanised brutes without a shred of socialist thought or spirit could have argued this way.

"Now, notwithstanding the revolutionary aims which animate you [the 'orthodox Trotskyists'], you maintain that the despotic Stalinist reaction which has triumphed in Eastern Europe is one of the roads through which socialism will eventually come..."

2. THE RESPONSE OF THE TROTSKYISTS

How did Trotsky and the Trotskyists see these events? Trotsky maintained to the end that Russia was a degenerated workers' state, progressive despite Stalin.

Between his expulsion from Russia in February 1929 and his death in August 1940, he shifted from being critical of the regime, but an all-out defender of the USSR against social-democratic and other enemies, to being an all-out advocate of a new working-class revolution against the Stalinist "autocracy". For "technical" reasons he called that new working-class revolution a "political revolution", but what he advocated was a

full-scale working-class social revolution.

In polemics in 1937 he had detached the idea that Russia was progressive, in terms of development of the productive forces, and should therefore be defended, from the idea that it was a workers' state. In 1936 he had ripped away all possible credence from any variant of the idea that nationalised property was automatically "working-class" by identifying the key question behind such system as: "but who owns the state?"

"The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy" (*The Revolution Betrayed*).

That was the crux of the argument of all those in and around the Trotskyist political current who would reject Trotsky's surviving conclusion that Russia was still some species of workers' state. By 1939 Trotsky, on Russia, was floundering in a large bog of contradictions and self-contradictions.

In the *Transitional Programme* (the founding document of the Fourth International which the Trotskyist movement declared in September 1938, having previously described itself only as the "movement for a Fourth International"), Trotsky wrote that "Stalin's political apparatus does not differ... [from] fascist countries [such as pre-Holocaust Nazism] save in more unbridled savagery".

He wrote that the form of exploitation the bureaucracy imposed on the workers "from the standpoint of the interests and position of the popular masses... is infinitely worse than any 'organic' exploitation. The bureaucracy is not a possessing class, in the scientific sense of the term. But it contains within itself to a tenfold degree all the vices of a possessing class".

"We can and must say that the Soviet bureaucracy has all the vices of a possessing class without having any of its 'virtues' (organic stability, certain moral norms, etc.)" "The Soviet oligarchy possesses all the vices of the old ruling classes but lacks their historical mission". "The bureaucracy... fights for its existence with a conservative fury such as has not been displayed by any ruling class in history. Along this road, it has arrived in a short time at the commission of crimes such as not even fascism has yet perpetrated..."

"Historically, no class in society has ever concentrated in its hands in such a short time such wealth and power as the bureaucracy has concentrated during the two five year plans".

In his last months Trotsky suggested that the system was no longer "progressive", only potentially progressive, on condition that the workers overthrew the bureaucracy and restored working-class rule.

"In order that nationalised property in the occupied areas, as well as in the USSR, become a basis for genuinely progressive, that is to say socialist development, it is necessary to overthrow the Moscow bureaucracy". "The conquests of the October Revolution will serve the people only if they prove themselves capable of dealing with the Stalinist bureaucracy, as in their day they dealt with the Tsarist bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie..." "The totalitarian oligarchy [has] become an absolute obstacle in the path of the country's development..."

But simultaneously he argued that the nationalised property in the USSR was the visible measure of its class nature, the sole empirical criterion for considering it a degenerated workers' state — and that the nationalised property was "owned" by the bureaucracy which "owned" the state.

Yet in September and October 1939 Trotsky wrote plainly that if the Stalinist system in Russia spread across the world — as some people then thought it might — then the new world system would be one of slavery.

"It would be necessary in retrospect to establish that in its fundamental traits the present USSR was the precursor of a new exploiting regime on an international scale... What social and political forms can the new 'barbarism' take, if we admit theoretically that mankind should not be able to elevate itself to socialism... Fascism on the one hand, degeneration of the Soviet state on the other, outline the social and political forms of a neo-barbarism..."

He did not mean that the system under which, in his words, the workers would become "the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society" would become on the world arena more intense or more complete in its slave-driving than he said it was in Russia.

And yet at the same time he called Russia a "degenerated workers' state". He insisted that the system which he had said would provide "a basis for genuinely progressive development" on when the workers "overthrew the Moscow bureaucracy" should be defended against conquest by any capitalist state.

There were many other contradictions and seeming contradictions. On the face of it, Trotsky seemed to be talking incoherent nonsense.

That it was all highly contradictory he did not deny,

but he insisted on his approach against people who (he thought) could see only one facet of Stalinism, not the phenomenon as a whole. That is why in a middle of a very heated faction fight he wrote an outline of dialectical logic.

Why, though he wrote so much that implicitly said that Russia was a new form of exploiting class society, did he go on until his death insisting that Russia was a degenerated workers' state?

3. NOT TROTSKY'S POSITIONS

A. It was not because the working class actively ruled in any day-to-day sense. Trotsky said that the bureaucracy was "in the full sense of the word the sole privileged and commanding stratum in the Soviet society". When Stalin invaded Poland, Trotsky wrote that this amounted to making the people of eastern Poland "semi-slaves" of Stalin, and of the USSR itself he wrote: "Semi-starved workers and collective farmers among themselves whisper with hatred about the spendthrift caprices of rabid commissars..."

It was not because the Russian state — even in Russia proper, let alone the Russian state ruling over oppressed nations like the Ukraine — represented the working class. Trotsky advocated the smashing of the state machine, its root-and-branch destruction, and the building of a working-class semi-state, based on democratic soviets from which the former bureaucrats would be excluded.

b. It was not just because Russia had a nationalised economy. It was not that a nationalised economy was automatically or implicitly socialist. The nationalised property was owned by the state which, as Trotsky said, was "owned" by the bureaucratic autocracy.

c. It was not because being a (degenerated) workers' state was inseparable from being economically progressive. Since 1937 Trotsky had argued that the USSR was progressive because, in contrast to world capitalism, it developed the economy, and he separated that argument from the question of whether it was a workers' state.

"The antagonism between feudalism and capitalism and the decline of the former has been determined precisely by the fact that the latter opened up new and grandiose possibilities for the stagnating productive forces. The same applies to the USSR. Whatever its modes of exploitation may be, this new society is by its very character superior to capitalist society. There you have the real point of departure for Marxist analysis!"

d. In Trotsky's last months, the argument was not even that Russia was definitely progressive. He said at the end that it was only conditionally progressive. The nationalised property was progressive on condition that the workers made a new ("political") revolution.

e. It was not because Russia was not imperialist. While insisting that it would cause political confusion to use the same term, "imperialism", for predatory monopoly capitalism and the Stalinist system, Trotsky plainly said that Russia was imperialist in a broad sense of the word.

"History has known the 'imperialism' of the Roman state based on slave labour, the imperialism of feudal land-ownership, the imperialism of commercial and industrial capital, the imperialism of the Czarist monarchy, etc. The driving force behind the Moscow bureaucracy is indubitably the tendency to expand its power, its prestige, its revenues. This is 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".

f. It was not because the long-standing Marxist programme of self-determination for nations and freedom from colonialism had no application within the USSR. In 1939 Trotsky came out in support of independence for the Ukraine and, implicitly, for other such oppressed nations within the USSR. By doing so he implicitly defined the USSR, with its 1939 borders, as itself an empire, relating to the oppressed nationalities as Tsarism had.

4. THE DISPUTE IN THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

A. Trotsky had written, after France and Britain surrendered to Hitler over Czechoslovakia at Munich, that "We may now expect with certainty Soviet diplomacy to attempt rapprochement with Hitler" (22 September 1938).

Trotskyists who read their own press should least of all have been taken completely by surprise in August 1939 by the Stalin-Hitler pact. Yet, of course, recognising in advance the prefiguring shadow of a possibility

could not prepare them for the shock of the reality when it came.

And what came in August 1939 was not merely a non-aggression pact, but a comprehensive alliance in which Russia would be Hitler's partner, playing at the very least the same quartermaster's role to Germany that the USA played for Britain before December 1941.

Then in mid-September came the joint German-Russian war of conquest and annexation on Poland. Eleven weeks later came Russia's war on Finland.

It was only on the level of a very general abstraction that all this could be seen as just an alliance with one imperialist power rather than another. Trotsky himself recognised the special horrors of the Nazi regime, when in June 1940 he advocated special measures for the workers in the bourgeois democracies, such as Britain and the USA, faced with an inter-imperialist war in which the workers in the bourgeois democracies had a very great deal to lose from a Nazi conquest that would destroy the labour movement.

"Militarization now goes on on a tremendous scale. We cannot oppose it with pacifist phrases. This militarization has wide support among the workers. They bear a sentimental hatred against Hitler mixed with confused class sentiments. They have a hatred against the victorious brigands.

"The bureaucracy utilizes this to say help the defeated gangster. Our conclusions are completely different. But this sentiment is the inevitable base for the last period of preparation. We must find a new realistic base for this preparation.

"We must oppose sending untrained boys into battle. The trade unions not only must protect the workers in peaceful times and protect their industrial skill, but they must now demand the possibility of learning the military art from the state... Schools should be set up in connection with the trade unions at government expense but under the control of the trade unions..."

"That which we workers find worth defending, we are ready to defend by military means — in Europe as well as in the United States. It is the only possibility we have of assuring the defence of civil liberties and other good things in America. But we categorically refuse to defend civil liberties and democracy in the French manner; the workers and farmers to give their flesh and blood while the capitalists concentrate in their hands the command. The Petain experiment should now form the centre of our war propaganda..."

"We must use the example of France to the very end. We must say, 'I warn you, workers, that they (the bourgeoisie) will betray you! Look at Petain, who is a friend of Hitler. Shall we have the same thing happen in this country? We must create our own machine, under workers' control."

Thus Trotsky put forward the ideas that after his death would lead to a special "proletarian military policy" in Britain and the USA, a policy whose essential idea was that the working class wanted to fight and defeat the Nazis, or at least stop them marching in as conquerors, but couldn't rely on or trust the ruling class to combat Hitler.

To put it at its weakest, this was very close to a policy of "revolutionary defencism".

The shock which the Nazi-Stalinist military alliance sent through the US Trotskyist movement belonged to the same order of things as Trotsky's proposed "proletarian military policy".

b. Trotsky denounced the Stalin-Hitler pact after a couple of weeks' delay. He was on a holiday in the wilds of the Mexican countryside in mid August, and explained: "From many sides I have been asked why I did not express myself sooner on the German-Soviet pact and its consequences. I was prevented by accidental personal circumstances (sickness and a departure from Mexico City to a village). I thought, moreover, the events themselves were so clear that they needed no comment".

The reality, however, was not quite the same as the general prospect that he had previously sketched. He may have wanted to think about it a bit.

c. At first he interpreted the pact entirely as a defensive move by Stalin. "The immediate advantages the Kremlin government receives from the alliance with Hitler are quite tangible. The USSR remains out of war. Hitler removes from the immediate agenda his campaign for a 'greater Ukraine'... The German-Soviet pact is a capitulation of Stalin before fascist imperialism with the end of preserving the Soviet oligarchy..."

Trotsky would go on seeing Stalin's policy as defensive for some time, though by 18 September he registered that "the secret is out... Voroshilov, together with the representatives of the German general staff, was discussing the best manner in which to smash and divide Poland".

Despite his general intellectual adroitness, and his ability to predict that Stalin would go for an alliance



Hitler after the invasion of France

with the competing imperialist bloc, Trotsky seems to have had some difficulty in registering the fact that Stalin really would be so short-sighted, so politically stupid, as in effect to help Hitler strengthen himself into an even more formidable potential enemy.

In general weaker powers are driven into alliance against the stronger, but in the Hitler-Stalin pact and after, Stalin strengthened the stronger (or, with Russia, which had an enormous army, the other strong) power in Europe.

After the fall of France, Trotsky would comment with especial bitterness on "the Kremlin's role in the European catastrophe" (title of an article of June 1940): "Nobody else rendered such support to Hitler as Stalin... By demoralising the popular masses in Europe, and not only in Europe, Stalin played the role of an agent provocateur in the service of Hitler. The capitulation of France is one of the results of such politics"

d. There is also in Trotsky's commentaries on events more than a suggestion that at first he thinks there is something simply incompatible between Russia and Germany. Thus, as the Russian army mobilises to invade Poland, he is not at all sure they will not clash with the German army when they meet it. "The complete defeat of Poland can prove fatal to the German-Soviet agreement..."

He feels that Russia is in an objective situation that limits options, and tries to separate Stalinist policy from the sort of manoeuvring any regime in Russia would have to make: "revolution does not change geographical conditions".

e. He interprets Stalin's moves in Finland and the Baltic states in terms — or in part in terms — of Stalin's fear of Hitler. That was at best one-sided.

Though Trotsky admits that there is a sort of Stalinist imperialism — Stalin participates in "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" — the positive Russian drive to imperial self-aggrandisement has little real weight in his early analyses.

f. While Trotsky laces his commentaries with explanations about the possible needs of USSR defence, in the public press, including the bourgeois press, he is roundly condemning virtually everything that Stalin does.

He condemns the pact. "The German-Soviet pact is neither absurd nor sterile — it is a military alliance with a division of roles: Hitler conducts the military operations, Stalin acts as his quartermaster. And still there are people who seriously assert that the objective of the Kremlin today is world revolution!"

He condemns the invasion of Poland: "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 million Ukrainians and White Russians, at the price of the enslavement of twenty-three million Poles!... It is not a question of emancipating an oppressed people, but rather one of extending the territory where bureaucratic oppression and parasitism will be practised".

He condemns the war with Finland: "The invasion of Finland indubitably provokes a silent condemnation by the majority of the population in the USSR".

5. TROTSKY BREAKS NEW

GROUND

A. At first there is, between Trotsky's material for the bourgeois press and the Trotskyist public press, and his writings for the internal discussions of the Trotskyist movement, simply a division of functions and levels.

In *The USSR In War* (25 September 1939) he uses the occasion to review his whole position on Russia, the literary device of a polemical discussion of a book just published in Paris (and banned by the French government for its anti-semitism), 'The Bureaucratisation of the World by Bruno Rizzi'.

He writes objectively — scientifically, as he would say — and not at all in anxious defence of the "degenerated workers' state" thesis. In doing so, he now deals a far more fundamental blow to the theory of Russia as a degenerated workers' state as he has had it than anyone else will in the 1939-40 dispute.

Until now, he had always identified counter-revolution with bourgeois restoration. Now, for the first time, he accepts that the USSR, without a bourgeois counter-revolution or capitalist conquest, and without further "degeneration", but exactly as it is when he writes, may have to be reconceptualised as a new form of class society. It would be a mere detail what one called such a society, a matter of more or less apt labelling, but in fact Trotsky seems to accept the term "bureaucratic collectivism".

"If... the present war will provoke not revolution but... the further decay of monopoly capitalism, its further fusion with the state and the replacement of democracy wherever it still remained by a totalitarian regime, it would be necessary in retrospect to establish that in its fundamental traits the present USSR was the precursor of a new exploiting régime on an international scale... [maybe] Stalinism and Fascism from opposite poles will some day arrive at one and the same type of exploitive society ('Bureaucratic Collectivism'...)"

"Bureaucratic collectivism" is an alternative way of seeing or interpreting what he sees and interprets. It is another way of summing up the result of the degeneration which Trotsky has traced since the early 1920s, step-by-step elaborating a working-class programme in response to it which grows in social weight to the point where he has advocated a working-class "political" revolution. (Trotsky advocated that in plain words since 1936, and in substance from 1933; but there was also a great deal of "revolution" in the pre-1933 policy which he called "reform". See the Introduction to *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*).

b. When members of the SWP-USA criticise Trotsky for what he says about "bureaucratic collectivism" in *The USSR In War*, taking their stand on dogmatic rejection of the possibility of such a system in the Marxist scheme of history, Trotsky defends his position:

"Some comrades evidently were surprised that I spoke in my article (*The USSR in the War*) of the system of 'bureaucratic collectivism' as a theoretical possibility. They discovered in this even a complete revision of Marxism. This is an apparent misunderstanding. The Marxist comprehension of historical necessity has nothing in common with fatalism. Socialism is not realizable 'by itself', but as a result of the struggle of living forces, classes and their parties".

Such a thing as bureaucratic collectivism is not only possible. To understand it as an undeniable reality may well be necessary, and very soon, in dealing with Stalinism.

"We have full right to ask ourselves: What character will society take if the forces of reaction conquer?... What social and political forms can the new 'barbarism' take, if we admit theoretically that mankind should not be able to elevate itself to socialism? We have the possibility of expressing ourselves on this subject more concretely than Marx. Fascism on one hand, degeneration of the Soviet state on the other outline the social and political forms of a neo-barbarism..."

The viewpoint that Trotsky rejects in *Again And Once More* — that the very idea of "bureaucratic collectivism" is "revisionism", and conversely that the assessment of Russia as a degenerated workers' state is

basic to "the programme" of the Fourth International — will after Trotsky's death become the great dogma of the "orthodox Trotskyists".

c. In terms of "revision of Trotsky's theory", Trotsky's discussion summarised above is the major development in the 1939-40 period during which Trotsky is usually presented as "defending the degenerated workers' state theory". In fact, he struck mortal blows at it.

His stated reason for rejecting the idea that the reconceptualisation of the existing USSR should be made now, and indeed should have been made earlier, is not some consideration about the nature of Stalinist Russian society as such, or about the relationship between the working class and the ruling "autocracy". (He frequently uses the term "autocracy" in the last period, in place of the earlier term "bureaucracy", as stronger and a nearer approximation to "ruling class" — just as in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), he wrote that "the regime had become "totalitarian" in character several years before this word arrived from Germany", thus accepting a high degree of similarity between the Hitler regime and Stalinism).

No, his stated reason was to do with the Stalinist regime's durability.

"Might we not place ourselves in a ludicrous position if we affixed to the Bonapartist oligarchy the nomenclature of a new ruling class just a few years or even a few months prior to its inglorious downfall?"

It was also about the regime's place in the historical scheme of things, as we will discuss below.

If the USSR was taken as something fixed and stable, then according to Trotsky's own reasoning it was no less reasonable to classify it as "bureaucratic collectivist" now than to project future developments which would mandate classifying it that way in retrospect.

Essentially Trotsky's position on the idea that Russia should be classified as an exploiting class society was: "Yes, but not now. Not yet".

d. In his later polemics Trotsky laid into Shachtman for placing a question mark over the existing analysis of Russia as a degenerated workers' state without having an alternative theory to offer. Shachtman stayed with the "degenerated workers' state" view throughout the discussion, and so did a big majority of the minority.

But Trotsky himself, in September-October 1939, had in effect rejected the theory, insisting only on a time-lapse — a further period of seeing what happened — before explicit rejection of the theory and acceptance that the USSR was a new form of class society.

Those in the 1939-40 discussion who were flatly against the theory of the "degenerated workers' state" were only a small minority of the minority (Burnham, Carter, Draper), who made little impact in the discussion (and a big impact only in the re-telling of the story by such as Draper).

Burnham, the "senior" opponent within the party of the "degenerated workers' state" theory, was silent on the question. Joseph Carter wrote a little-noticed text. The important "revisionist" in 1939-40 was Trotsky.

e. It took Trotsky more than a month to register the full extent of the partnership-in-plunder nature of the Hitler-Stalin alliance, and to become convinced that Russia and Germany were not about to clash in Poland. He had denied the possibility that the crisis-wracked Stalinist regime revealed by the purges could make expansionary war.

"The Red Army is decapitated. This is not phraseology but a tragic fact... In the 'purged' military staff not a single name remains in which the army could place confidence. The Kremlin fears the army and fears Hitler. Stalin requires peace — at any price..." (2 September 1939).

In general, Trotsky would go on to explain Stalin's real expansionary policy as driven by fear of Hitler and essentially reactive rather than driven by internal motives. He made a pretty thorough assessment in articles such as 'The Twin Star' (4 December 1939) but without revising the idea that Stalin in essentials acted on fear of Germany and to pre-empt Germany. This denial of positive goals and initiatives to Stalinism would be widely applied later and become a sort of dogma of post-Trotsky Orthodox Trotskyism — in relation to the Maoists struggle for power in China after 1946, for instance — long after it had become absurd to explain the expansion of Stalinism in such terms.

6. BUREAUCRATIC REVOLUTION?

A. Trotsky's uncertainty and disorientation in the new situation after the Hitler-Stalin pact and the joint Russian-German conquest of Poland is perhaps best portrayed in his eagerness to accept an obscure report that the Ukrainian and Polish workers in east-

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ern Poland had favourably received the invading Russians and on the arrival of the "Red" Army had begun to act against the ruling class.

Trotsky, it seems, based himself on a report in a Menshevik paper:

"In the Parisian organ of the Mensheviks... it is reported that 'in the villages — very frequently at the very approach of the Soviet troops (i.e., even prior to their entering a given district — L.T.) — peasant committees sprang up everywhere, the elementary organs of revolutionary peasant self-rule...' The military authorities hastened of course to subordinate these committees to the bureaucratic organs established by them in the urban centres. Nevertheless they were compelled to rest upon the peasant committees since without them it was impossible to carry out the agrarian revolution.

"The leader of the Mensheviks, Dan, wrote on October 19: 'According to the unanimous testimony of all observers the appearance of the Soviet army and the Soviet bureaucracy provides not only in the territory occupied by them but beyond its confines — an impulse (!) to social turmoil and social transformations'..."

In fact, the section of the émigré Mensheviks whom he quotes, that led by Fyodor Dan, was increasingly gravitating towards a critical support for Stalinism. (So, incidentally, was a section of the émigré right. One group of avowed Russian fascists began after the Moscow Trials to hail Stalin as Russia's fascist dictator. Mussolini, too, had written in the Italian press at the time of the Moscow Trials of Stalin as a species of Russian fascist.)

Nothing like the supposed rallying of the Polish and Ukrainian workers and peasants had happened. To the point, Trotsky himself had already written about the mass alienation of the Ukrainians from the Stalinist regime, insisting that Stalinism in power engendered only hatred.

"The ruthless hounding of all free national thought... has led the toiling masses of the Ukraine, to an even greater degree than the masses of Great Russia, to look upon the rule of the Kremlin as monstrously oppressive. In the face of such an internal situation it is naturally impossible even to talk of Western Ukraine [i.e. the Ukrainian part of eastern Poland] voluntarily joining the USSR as it is at present constituted..." (22 April 1939).

Events would prove him right in that. When the Nazis invaded Russia in 1941, they were at first greeted as liberators in the Ukraine and elsewhere..

Evidently Trotsky was trying to find some elements of revolutionary life in the unexpected phenomenon of Stalin expanding and "sovietising" areas outside the USSR.

b. In the same vein Trotsky would offer a very sour lesser-evil semi-defence of Stalin's annexation of eastern Poland.

"The occupation of eastern Poland by the Red Army is to be sure a 'lesser evil' in comparison with the occupation of the same territory by Nazi troops. But this lesser evil was obtained because Hitler was assured of achieving a greater evil. If somebody sets, or helps to set a house on fire and afterward saves five out of ten of the occupants of the house in order to convert them into his own semi-slaves, that is to be sure a lesser evil than to have burned the entire ten. But it is dubious that this firebug merits a medal for the rescue..."

If one re-reads this passage from within a "Trotskyist" culture where the idea of the USSR as a progressive, albeit degenerated, workers' state has wide acceptance, what is notable and important here is the description of Stalinist rule as "semi-slavery". Had Trotsky some inkling of the genocidal slaughter that became a part of Nazism from the start of the war, including the slaughter of Polish Jews by shooting them en masse?

c. All these elements — drawn from small, fleeting, provisional comments and responses — would blossom forth in the post-Trotsky "orthodox Trotskyist" current as reluctant acceptance that Russian Stalinism could carry through a variant or approximation of the workers' revolution.

When some of his opponents in the 1939-40 dispute accused him of improvising a doctrine of "bureaucratic revolution", Trotsky responded by accusing them of dishonest polemics.

He reacted as if he had been stung, and with indignant repudiation of the idea.

What is important here is not whether what he had written while groping in semi-darkness to come to terms with something new, unexpected, and still unclear did imply some hybrid species of "bureaucratic revolution". What is important is that Trotsky indignantly repudiated the idea that he subscribed to what would, by the end of the 1940s, become the basis of a

new world outlook in the Trotskyist movement.

d. Trotsky, taking it as a matter of fact that Stalinist Russia had annexed part of Poland and would socially transform it into a replica of the USSR, insisted that such things could only be marginal phenomena.

James P Cannon put this thought most sharply, in a letter to Trotsky (8 November 1939): "In our opinion Stalin could take the path of Napoleonic conquest not merely against small border states, but against the greatest imperialist powers, only on one condition: that the Soviet bureaucracy in reality represents a new triumphant class which is in harmony with its economic system and secure in its position at home, etc. That if such is really the case, we certainly must revise everything we have said on the subject of the bureaucracy up to now..."

Trotsky took his stand on questions of degree. In fact, though, Germany, pulverised by war, would have one-third of it, to a hundred miles west of Berlin, conquered and transformed by the USSR. Only the advance of the US and British armies from the West prevented all of Germany, and then France and Italy at least, from experiencing the same fate.

e. One of Trotsky's opponents, Dwight McDonald, said that Trotsky had two policies on Stalinist expansion, one for what he wrote in the bourgeois press, and one for the internal Trotskyist debates. On the face of it this was true.

A decade earlier, Trotsky had normally defended Russia in his comments for the general public, and kept his severe criticisms for the Trotskyist press, and especially for the Russian-language Bulletin of the Opposition. Now it was the other way round.

Trotsky's extensive writings in the bourgeois press condemned Russia, and his "defence" of the USSR was confined to the internal bulletins and the small-circulation Trotskyist press. In the former he dealt with politics, issues, events; in the latter, he dealt mainly with theory, almost with an esoteric lore, about the nature of the USSR.

Trotsky responded to McDonald by saying that he was simply "stupid"; and Trotsky had a right to ask of his comrades that they took what he was writing, in the bourgeois and in the Trotskyist press, as a nuanced whole. His followers would do the opposite, publishing the very one-sided *In Defence of Marxism*, a collection of Trotsky's pro-Russian polemics in late 1942, a text that would be one of the main foundation texts of post-Trotsky "orthodox Trotskyism".

In fact, what his "orthodox Trotskyist" followers would do for decades after his death was fade out much of the substance of his public comments on Stalinism in its new phase, and give central place to the "defence of the USSR" in his pieces "for the Trotskyists".

This was done first in *In Defence Of Marxism*, a very one-sided selection of Trotsky's "internal" or "theoretical" articles from late 1939 and early 1940 which combined the very important *The USSR In War* and *Again And Once More* with Trotsky's very violent polemics against the "degenerated workers' state"-ists Shachtman and Abern who disagreed with him on Poland and Finland.

At the end of his life Trotsky was projecting a collection of articles on current affairs. The "orthodox Trotskyists" instead put out *In Defence Of Marxism*. The current-affairs pieces dropped into the archives for a third of a century.

7. RUSSIA'S INVASION OF FINLAND

A. On 30 November Russia invaded Finland, and a five month war followed, in the course of which there was a serious possibility that French and British troops would land to aid the Finns, thus driving Russia into World War Two on Hitler's side.

Whereas Poland was conquered quickly, and in terms of active Trotskyist policy presented no major problems, policy for what was unfolding in Finland had to be worked out on the move.

Finland was a bourgeois democracy, with the Social Democrats the biggest party in Parliament (85 out of 200; 40% of the vote) and governing in coalition with the Agrarian League. In the two decades of Finnish independence, a major agrarian reform had been carried through. There was a strong Finnish labour movement.

The cause of war was Finland's refusal to give up strategic areas to Russia; but there was no knowing whether a Russia victorious in the war would limit itself to such demands. A full Russian occupation of Finland would destroy the Finnish labour movement no less than fascist occupation of west European coun-

tries would destroy their labour movements.

Trotsky would later comment (April 1940): "During the war with Finland, not only the majority of the Finnish peasants but also the majority of the Finnish workers proved to be on the side of their bourgeoisie. This is hardly surprising since they know of the unprecedented oppression to which the Stalinist bureaucracy subjects the workers of nearby Leningrad and the whole of the USSR"

But the Trotskyists were for the "unconditional defence" of the "degenerated workers' state". That meant defence against capitalist attacks irrespective of the policies of the Russian autocracy. What did that imply for Finland? Unconditional support for Russian victory? Or what Trotsky would rightly call "conjunctural defeatism" — wanting the defeat of Russia in Finland?

But Trotsky himself had already approximated to "conjunctural defeatism": "We have never promised to support all the actions of the Red Army which is an instrument in the hands of the Bonapartist bureaucracy. We have promised to defend only the USSR as a workers' state and solely those things within it which belong to a workers' state..."

"In every case the Fourth International will know how to distinguish where and when the Red Army is acting solely as an instrument of the Bonapartist reaction and where it defends the social basis of the USSR..." ('Again And Once More').

Why should this not apply to Finland? Max Shachtman and the other "degenerated workers' state"-ists in the SWP minority said it should. Trotsky, backed by the majority in the SWP leadership, said it could not.

The Finnish conflict was now part of the Second World War. It might soon lead to Russia being directly embroiled in the World War. There could be no "conjunctural defeatism" here.

And Finland's rights? In the world war such rights would be destroyed one way or another.

"The invasion of Finland unquestionably aroused on the part of the Soviet populace profound condemnation. However, the advanced workers understood that the crimes of the Kremlin oligarchy do not strike off the agenda the question of the existence of the USSR. Its defeat in the world war would signify not merely the overthrow of the totalitarian bureaucracy but the liquidation of the new forms of property, the collapse of the first experiment in planned economy, and the transformation of the entire country into a colony..."

"Finland's resistance to the USSR was, with all its heroism, no more an act of independent national defence than Norway's subsequent resistance to Germany. The Helsinki government itself understood this when it chose to capitulate to the USSR rather than transform Finland into a military base for England and France. Our wholehearted recognition of the right of every nation to self-determination does not alter the fact that in the course of the present war this right does not have much more weight than thistledown. We must determine the basic line of our policy in accordance with basic and not tenth-rate factors..." (May 1940).

Trotsky feared that any approach saying that Finland was an exception would be an uncontrollable break in the "defence of the USSR".

On these issues, though Trotsky wrote the polemics, he was backed by SWP leaders who held to a wide range of positions.

James P Cannon, who would shape post-Trotsky Trotskyism, thought that such things as the invasion of Poland were military-technical matters, for the Russians to judge and not the business of Trotskyists at a distance to endorse or to condemn. Albert Goldman initially thought that the Trotskyists should positively support the occupation of eastern Poland. Trotsky, on the available records, did not attack their positions, though in his polemics he denounced Shachtman and other "degenerated workers' state"-ist opponents for forming an unprincipled coalition with Burnham on the grounds that Burnham had long rejected the "degenerated workers' state" thesis.

Amidst a great US public outcry against Hitler's ally Stalin over Finland, the US Trotskyist press tried to pretend that Finland was the same Finland as that of 1918, when the Finnish ruling class had responded to the danger of the workers' revolution spreading from Russia to Finland by White Terror. They reprinted Victor Serge's account of the Finland of that White Terror twenty years earlier.

Public knowledge of the realities of the Finland of 1939-40 could not but balance that in the heads of readers of the Trotskyist press at the time, but in the polemics of the time reprinted after 1940 and kept in circulation for decades, readers without such background knowledge were left with the idea that Finland was a military dictatorship under "Mannerheim" (Carl Mannerheim, leader of the White Terror in 1918 and

brought back from retirement to lead the Finnish army in 1939-40).

Much of the split dynamic in the 1939-40 dispute came from purely organisational issues in the SWP-USA around the question of the "Cannon regime". To the call for some SWP leaders for a discussion of the USSR in the light of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Cannon responded by denouncing their "light-mindedness" and "irresponsibility", and declared such a discussion to be a "luxury" they could not afford.

Trotsky took a contrary view: self-evidently a discussion was necessary. Trotsky prevailed, at first.

Trotsky's letter to Cannon on this issue was left out of the selection of Trotsky's writings which was published as *In Defence Of Marxism* at the end of 1942, with a preface by an SWP-USA leader stating that "defence of the USSR" was part of the "programme" of the Fourth International. It was finally — most likely after protests — published as a footnote in Cannon's companion volume, *The Struggle For a Proletarian Party*. A letter to the same effect from Trotsky to Cannon's partner Rose Karsner did not see the light of day for 40 years, appearing finally in one of the "supplementary volumes" of Trotsky's writings from the 1930s.

Trotsky got drawn into the organisational dispute as the politics of the conflict heated up. Cannon won a bare majority at the SWP conference in April 1940, though the minority got by far the majority of the youth organisation.

At the first Political Committee meeting after the conference, the minority were faced with a resolution by Cannon, condemning them; and when they abstained on that, they were immediately expelled.

That was the beginning of post-Trotsky Trotskyism.

In late 1942, in a world where the USSR was the much-lauded ally of Britain and the USA, and there was much popular good feeling for "Uncle Joe" Stalin as the tide of the prolonged Battle of Stalingrad was turned in Russia's favour and Germany's retreat began, the SWP-USA published a selection of Trotsky's writings of 1939-40 which became the foundation text of post-Trotsky Trotskyism and its position on the USSR.

The selection contained both Trotsky's very important *The USSR In War and Again And Once More* and some of Trotsky's extremely savage attacks on Shachtman and others. As a polemical package it was formidable.

The polemics were an emotionally powerful and effective bar to any reconsideration of the "degenerated workers' state" thesis (although erecting such a bar was not Trotsky's intention, nor his position) — while to understand the importance of Trotsky's innovation in *The USSR In War* the reader would need to have a serious understanding of the discussion on the nature of the USSR in the 1920s and 30s.

In the war many Trotskyists were murdered by Stalinists, and after the war the "orthodox Trotskyists" were reorganised in a Fourth International narrowly redefined as a one-tendency International, that of the "orthodox Trotskyists" after 1940 (see, for instance, the discussion of a dissident Italian Trotskyist group in Cannon's *Letters From Prison*). It was dominated by the ideas of the SWP-USA and its co-thinkers.

By the late 1940s very few of the Trotskyists had the background knowledge to fully appreciate what Trotsky did in *The USSR In War*. In *In Defence of Marxism* it seemed to be a severely theoretical discussion of basic issues that seemed to be expounded in the rest of the collection by way of the insistence on the "degenerated workers' state" character of the USSR.

8. "SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY" AND TROTSKY'S REJECTION OF "BUREAUCRATIC COLLECTIVISM"

Why did Trotsky hold on to the view that Russia remained a degenerated workers' state, when others argued that it was a new form of exploitative class society by basing themselves on his account of the realities of Stalinism and his formula of 1936 about the bureaucracy "owning" the state?

In fact, by the end, Trotsky held on to the idea that Russia remained a workers' state with increasing tentativeness. I will come back to that.

He rejected the idea that Stalinist Russia was a viable class-exploitative society for the same reason that he had rejected Stalin's and Bukharin's programme of building up socialism in an isolated Russia ("socialism in one country"). He did not believe that a system of production more advanced and more viable than capitalism could be developed in an enclave alongside cap-

italism.

Trotsky stuck to the idea that Russia remained (or maybe remained) a workers' state, a very degenerated workers' state, for one fundamental reason: to fit his assessment into the Marxist notion of the necessary evolution of the stages of class society.

Class society had gone through a number of stages — primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc. — and a number of in-between transitional formations, with each stage or formation leading into another. There had been distinct systems of "Asiatic despotism" or "hydraulic society" in various parts of the world, from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, through the Inca and Aztec societies in the Americas, to India and China, which in terms of social and economic development had been blind alleys and which had been broken up by the impact of the arms and the trade of European capitalism.

In the basic Marxist theory, working-class rule and socialism could not precede advanced capitalism. Capitalism prepared the way for socialism by its creation and education of the proletariat itself. Socialism, the beginning of the elimination of class exploitation, was impossible until relative economic abundance, the social precondition for the abolition of classes, had been created.

Before modern capitalism that precondition had not been created and could not be created. In conditions of low labour productivity and of scarcity, classes of slaves and masters had arisen again and again. Classes and class exploitation were a necessary condition of civilisation for human history before capitalism.

The idea of socialism preceding advanced capitalism was in Marxist reasoning as absurd as the idea of the child preceding its parents. Capitalism was the father of socialism, and the working class its mother.

As the Russian workers and the Bolsheviks had proved in 1917, the workers could take power in conditions of capitalist underdevelopment where in isolation they could not hope to build a socialist society. They could take power there because the technology and capital of advanced capitalism could be transplanted to a generally underdeveloped country, like Russia, and there create a highly concentrated working class existing in an urban archipelago within a social sea that had scarcely emerged from feudalism. To develop a new society on the basis of that power the Russian workers would depend on the extension of the revolution, by workers taking power in the more advanced countries.

It was in defence of that basic pillar of the Marxist theory and programme of working-class socialism that Trotsky and his comrades had rejected "socialism in one country", the early rallying-programme of the Russian bureaucracy that had overthrown the working-class power set up in 1917.

That way of focusing it — socialism in "one country" — was supplied by Stalin and Bukharin. It was misleading. The question was not whether socialism could be built in one country, or six countries, or eight countries. The USSR was anyway a great deal more than "one country". Its territory covered one-sixth of the Earth's land surface.

The question was whether socialism could be built in backwardness, before advanced capitalism had done its work of developing the economy and the working class.

The Marxist programme of socialism presupposed the resources of the entire international economy, woven together into a world system by advanced capitalism. It was an international programme to replace international capitalism, or it was an utopia, an attempt akin to the colonies constructed by pre-Marxist utopian socialists to build up an alternative society and compete with capitalism from outside.

The Marxist programme was built on the development of the working class within advanced capitalism, and that working class eventually coming to be able to overthrow and replace capitalism. A classless socialist society could not be created at will in conditions of economic backwardness.

In conditions of economic scarcity, exactly the same thing would happen with any new putatively socialist society as had happened throughout history. In Marx's words, "all the old crap" would re-emerge: class differentiation, class struggle, the establishment of an exploiting class lording it over the producers.

Like Lenin and the Bolshevik party in 1917, Trotsky saw and expected that in isolation the economically backward Russian state where the workers had power would inescapably be engulfed by world capitalism, which would link up with the peasantry and other petty bourgeois groups within its boundaries.

An alternative society — in the theory of "socialism in one country", a nominally socialist society — could not be built side by side with advanced capitalism and go on to replace it. The "alternative" society would

inevitably suffer an inner transformation, rooted in its backwardness, that would reduce it to the surrounding international level of capitalist society.

A stable, fully-formed alternative type of exploiting class society emerging on the fringes of capitalism to compete with it and replace it from outside was ruled out for the same reason that "socialism in one country" was.

A system built on a low level of economic development, and therefore of labour productivity, and cut off from the world networks and connections created by capitalism, could not, just as "socialism in one country" could not, coexist independently side by side with advanced capitalism and successfully compete with it.

9. THE NIGHTFALL OF CAPITALISM?

A competing alternative society to capitalism, emerging from its margins, could only thrive and develop if capitalism were in irreversible decline and fated to be overtaken by a historic reversion to a more rudimentary system.

Within his framing ideas about broad historical development, and as aspects of them, Trotsky rejected the notion that Russia should be classified as a new class society for two linked reasons.

What existed in the USSR was a by-product, seized and transformed by the bureaucracy, of the 1917 revolution. That revolution, in turn, was a product of the world crisis of capitalism. It was not an episodic quirk like the seizure of the city of Münster in 1534-5 by communistic Anabaptists, or the Paris Commune of 1871, but a beginning of a world transformation for which the world was not merely ripe but becoming rotten-ripe.

In Marxist thought, the idea of state capitalism — the full realisation of the tendency of modern capitalist societies to concentrate more and more of industry and of the whole economy into gigantic monopolies — was accepted in theory but rejected as something that could happen in reality.

"Theoretically, to be sure, it is possible to conceive a situation in which the bourgeoisie as a whole constitutes itself a stock company which, by means of its state, administers the whole national economy... Such a regime never existed, however, and, because of profound contradictions among the proprietors themselves, never will exist — the more so since, in its quality of universal repository of capitalist property, the state would be too tempting an object for social revolution".

No such concentration of the bourgeoisie into a single "stock company" had happened in Russia. In the Russian revolution, the working class had overpowered and destroyed the bourgeoisie as a class. Then the bureaucrats had politically — and therefore socially — expropriated the working class.

The existing nationalised economy of Russia was in that way rooted in the workers' revolution. The bureaucracy that had expropriated the working class, from the heights of the state created by the working-class revolution, could not have arisen as a class able to overthrow the bourgeoisie. In that sense, the system remained rooted in the October revolution. It could not have existed without the working class first destroying the bourgeoisie. The state bureaucracy was a parasitic growth, a freak of history.

One aspect of this singularity or freakishness of the bureaucratic system was that it was unique in the world. In terms of the nationalised economy there was nothing like it.

Trotsky wrote: "State-ism, no matter where in Italy, Mussolini, in Germany, Hitler, in America, Roosevelt, or in France, Leon Blum — means state intervention on the basis of private property, and with the goal of preserving it... To expropriate the capitalists would require other forces, other cadres and other leaders... The first concentration of the means of production in the hands of the state to occur in history was achieved by the proletariat with the method of social revolution, and not by capitalists with the method of state trustification".

Despite Stalin's "Second Revolution" — forced collectivisation of agriculture and forced-march industrialisation — there was proof that the system was rooted in October, and could not have come about without the workers' revolution. It was an epiphenomenon of the October revolution.

For reasons rooted in the most fundamental ideas of Marxism on the necessary shape of history, the system could not survive, consolidate itself, and compete with advanced capitalism — not unless that capitalism was in precipitate and terminal decline towards a "new barbarism", not unless World War Two was, as Trotsky



The cult of Stalin

feared, one of a continuing series of wars that would be “the grave of civilisation”.

Trotsky believed that for the Stalinist system to turn out to be a stable social regime, neither capitalist nor socialist but an alternative class society, capitalism would have to plunge down into history’s abyss. The working class created by capitalism as the bearer of an alternative system would have to be shown to be bankrupt. “Nothing else would remain except only to recognize that the socialist program, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, ended in Utopia. It is self-evident that a new minimum program would be required — for the defence of the interests of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society”.

10. A “CONJUNCTURAL” NEW CLASS SOCIETY?

Wasn’t it possible to admit that the Russian system was an exploitative class society, but with all the instability, ephemerality, and lack of scope for historical development imposed by the limitations of its competition with capitalism? Logically, yes. In Trotsky’s concrete assessments of Stalinist society, and in his programme for a new working-class socialist revolution in it, he did in effect define it that way.

He wrote of the Russian conquest of eastern Poland as making the people there the “semi-slaves” of Stalin; and declared that “historically, no class in society has ever concentrated in its hands in such a short time such wealth and power as the bureaucracy has concentrated during the two five year plans”.

He refused to express this conclusion in general summary terms. In effect, he refused to accept that it was useful — rather than confusing and disorientating — to categorise Russia as a new form of class society, neither socialist nor capitalist, neither working-class nor bourgeois, other than within a general grounding concept of world history.

In the same way, while plainly admitting that the Stalinist state displayed “the element of ‘imperialism’ in the widest sense of the word”, and elaborating a programme for freeing its victims, Trotsky refused, for fear of confusing issues, to call the USSR imperialist.

To those who insisted on dotting Trotsky’s i’s and crossing his t’s, he had by 1939 for long used the argument: all right, if I grant your “terminological” thesis, what does it add to our tasks, to our programme?

“The Fourth International long ago recognized the necessity of overthrowing the bureaucracy by means of a revolutionary uprising of the toilers. Nothing else is proposed or can be proposed by those who proclaim the bureaucracy to be an exploiting ‘class’... Our critics refuse to call the degenerated workers’ state — a workers’ state. They demand that the totalitarian bureaucracy be called a ruling class. The revolution against this bureaucracy they propose to consider not political but social. Were we to make them these terminological concessions, we would place our critics in a very difficult position, inasmuch as they themselves would not know what to do with their purely verbal victory...”

The great tragedy is that Trotsky, removed from the scene by a Stalinist assassin, bequeathed very great confusion.

He continued to insist that in terms of concrete politics, he said everything that needed to be said, and advocated everything that needed to be advocated for a working-class (“political”) revolution against Stalinism. He begged the question: why were his own “terminological” innovations — “autocracy”, “Bonapartist bureaucracy”, “degenerated workers’ state” — superior to those he rejected?

It is hardly to be denied that Trotsky — like many post-Trotsky Trotskyists — used the “workers’ state” terminology to anchor a view of the USSR as somehow more advanced than capitalism and to be defended against it — though in fact he shifted and redefined that view until at the end there was almost nothing of substance left in it.

It was also a question of perspectives inside the USSR. Trotsky sees imminent collapse in which bureaucracy, because it is fragile and unstable, will collapse into rival factions. If the Trotskyists ally themselves with the faction defending nationalised property, they can prevail. If they don’t, they put themselves on the margins and may miss the historic political opening. This idea in various forms goes back more than a decade, to when Trotsky defined what he advocated as “reform” — but a reform that would be possible only because the regime would be falling apart in a crisis, that involved radical disruption brought on by the bureaucracy’s bungling shortsightedness.

Trotsky’s reasons for his position, can be schematised thus:

The Russian system was rooted in the working-class revolution. Trotsky did not mystify nationalised property as automatically bestowing a proletarian character on the system. Rather the opposite: the revolutionary working-class origin of the nationalised property bestowed its class character on it, its collectivist, anti-bourgeois-property class character.

“The property relations which issued from the socialist revolution are indivisibly bound up with the new state as their repository. The predominance of socialist over petty bourgeois tendencies is guaranteed, not by the automatism of the economy — we are still far from that — but by political measures taken by the dictatorship. The character of the economy as a whole thus depends upon the character of the state power”.

The working-class character of the nationalised property was defined by the fact that only the working class could have overcome and overthrown the old ruling classes, including the bourgeoisie. “The first concentration of the means of production in the hands of the state to occur in history was achieved by the proletariat with the method of social revolution, and not by capitalists with the method of state trustification”.

Without that proletarian clearing of the way, the bureaucracy that now ruled could not have come into existence, still less have achieved the nationalisation of the economy. That the Stalinists had made a “second” revolution after 1928 did not disprove that, but illustrated it.

To make that “second” revolution in the way they did, they had to overthrow the power of the working class; and what they did was on the basis of the new property system created by the now overthrown working class.

The result was a unique system. That was an aspect of its origins in the proletarian revolution. It could not have come into being other than by way of the workers’ revolution, and nothing like it had come into existence otherwise. That would change, of course, in the 1940s and 50s, but on the facts, to Trotsky’s thinking all through the 1930s, it was fundamental.

The Stalinist system was therefore historically unstable, tentative, provisional, and unable to continue for long. From around 1931 through to his death, Trotsky repeatedly expected the imminent collapse of the USSR regime, and the convulsions of the system gave him good reason for that view.

Counter-revolution would be in terms of the dominant property system in the world — bourgeois private property.

There was no possibility that the Stalinist system — with its roots anticipating the socialist world economy, but operating in a still undeveloped country, where the peasantry still formed a petty-bourgeois sea as the majority of society — could compete with and outstrip capitalism, carving out a new historic road for humanity.

For the same reason that there could be no “socialism in one country” on the edge of a capitalist world, building up in parallel to it, there could be no alternative social system that would compete successfully with advanced capitalism from a position on its margins. Stalinist Russia was not an stabilised exploitative class society, but a freak of history.

The decrepitude and collapsing state of world capitalism from the end of the 1920s had been a major part

of the reason why the “natural” thing had not happened, and capitalist property been restored.

Trotsky went through the 30s refusing to see the USSR as a “finished”, “fully-formed” thing, something “achieved” and coherent. It was process, an ongoing process.

This framework did not stop him registering and analysing the “moments” or stages in the process, and elaborating step by step after 1923 a working-class programme for self-defence and self-liberation.

He was wrong only in the time-frame — but in terms of politics that was fundamental. The USSR was incoherent, unfinished, not a fully articulated society. It could not compete with capitalism. The basic laws reasserted themselves. But that would not be for fifty years after 1940.

Trotsky’s time scale was massively inaccurate. He drew straight lines and foreshortened perspectives. The same characteristic is found in the *Communist Manifesto* and other texts of Marx and Engels, too. It is an occupational hazard in drawing up “perspectives”, in which there must be an integration, a bi-focal coherence, between the long view, and the immediate or imminent situation.

Trotsky rejected the “new class”, “bureaucratic collectivist” conclusions in explicit summary, though he accepted much of their content in substance, because he did not want to confuse the historical perspective.

There is a parallel in method and approach here with his rejection of “conjunctural defeatism”, his description of the approach of Shachtman and his comrades on Poland and Finland.

Trotsky’s writings for the public press on Poland and Finland condemned Stalin fiercely and made no mention of the USSR being any sort of “workers’ state”. They were close to what Shachtman and his comrades argued. But in polemics among the Trotskyists, Trotsky still insisted strongly on keeping the general formula of unconditional “defence of the USSR”.

Trotsky even commented: “We have never promised to support all the actions of the Red Army which is an instrument in the hands of the Bonapartist bureaucracy. We have promised to defend only the USSR as a workers’ state and solely those things within it which belong to a workers’ state...”

“In every case the Fourth International will know how to distinguish where and when the Red Army is acting solely as an instrument of the Bonapartist reaction and where it defends the social basis of the USSR...”

“Conjunctural defeatism”? In substance, yes. But Trotsky still insisted against Shachtman on the general formula of “unconditional” defence of the USSR.

It needs to be emphasized that the only conditions, as Trotsky saw it, in which the Stalinist system might become something more than a short-term freakish quasi-class society, was if capitalism itself went into terminal historical decline, if it had reached an impasse and begun to regress into more rudimentary form of society.

That is the alternative that Trotsky posed at the end: that unless the workers soon overthrew the bourgeoisie on a world scale, civilisation would decline, perhaps irreversibly. The Second World War would be one of a series of such wars that would be “the grave of civilisation”, something perhaps like the impasse and collapse of ancient Roman slave society, the decline of the old civilisation and a shift to a mode of production which would operate for a long time on the basis of a lower level of civilisation.

11. RIZZI

That is the significance of Trotsky’s discussion “with” Rizzi. Rizzi was a political crank, an anti-semitic, and believed that both fascism and Stalinism were routes to one and the same goal, “bureaucratic collectivism”. That was a progressive system that would ultimately lead peacefully into socialism.

Anti-semitism was a mode of anti-capitalist opinion and feeling. Fascism and Stalinism (“communism”) should unite into one movement.

In a sharp definition, Rizzi was a quirky fascist, but on Russia he avowedly based himself on Trotsky. Nothing he said on Russia, specifically, was original or new, or even new as a target for Trotsky’s polemic.

Trotsky had dealt with similar issues in 1933 in polemics with Hugo Urbahns, who called Russia state-capitalism, and with Lucien Laurat (Otto Maschl), who called it bureaucratic-collectivist; and again in 1937 with the French Trotskyist Yvan Craipeau (who had a sort of “bureaucratic-collectivist” assessment of the USSR) and two Americans, James Burnham and Joseph Carter, who argued that bureaucracy had coalesced into a sort of “petty-bourgeois” ruling class, halfway on



the road to full restoration of capitalism.

In his writings "about" Rizzi in 1939, Trotsky did not even allude to most of Rizzi's ideas. What interested Trotsky was Rizzi's generalisation — his idea that the world was evolving towards a new bureaucratic-collectivist class system.

Hal Draper later wrote that: "Trotsky was in the midst, right after the outbreak of World War Two, of a general revolt inside the Trotskyist groups... against his insistence that the Stalin regime... had to be defended in the war as a 'workers' state', solely because its economy was satiated... Trotsky was busy casting anathemas and thunderbolts in [the minority's] direction; on reading Rizzi's book, he seized on it for ammunition. Rizzi entered history when Trotsky whirled him around his head like a dead cat and let fly at the opposition". (*Workers' Liberty* 57).

This account of what Trotsky was doing is altogether too sweepingly dismissive and far too uncomprehending.

What Trotsky did was state the issues as he saw them in the historical framework — the view of the "shape of history" — which in fact determined what he made of Russia. The two articles of September and October 1939, *The USSR In War* and *Again And Once More On The Nature Of The USSR*, are as we have seen above very important in embodying an enormous step in Trotsky's thinking.

Trotsky's polemics from 1939-40 — though not his articles for the public press, giving his public assessment of the invasions of Poland and Finland — were later, 1942, collected into a book, *In Defence Of Marxism*. The polemics collected there stop at 25 April 1940 (though the book contains a few letters from later months).

Trotsky lived four more months. In those months he had a lot to say about Stalinism — as indeed he had had in the public press, side by side by the pieces for internal Trotskyist discussion bulletins collected in *In Defence Of Marxism*. The short excerpts from those articles printed in this *Workers' Liberty* give a truer picture of Trotsky's evolution than the one-side selection in *In Defence Of Marxism*.

If Trotsky had lived, how would his thinking on Stalinism have evolved? Would he have gone on to elaborate a theory of "bureaucratic revolution", creating "deformed workers' states", as the "orthodox Trotskyists" did? Would he have gone on to make a theory out of the view which he repudiated, as if his skin had been tabled by corrosive acid, when Shachtman and others attributed it to him?

"My remark that the Kremlin with its bureaucratic methods gave an impulse to the socialist revolution in Poland, is converted by Shachtman into an assertion

that in my opinion a 'bureaucratic revolution' of the proletariat is presumably possible. This is not only incorrect but disloyal. My expression was rigidly limited. It is not the question of 'bureaucratic revolution' but only a bureaucratic impulse".

Capitalism did not spiral down into the "grave of civilisation". Having levelled large parts of Europe and especially of Germany, and divided the world with the Stalinists and their system, world capital, centred around the USA, revived and eventually prevailed in competition with the Stalinist system.

It was "history's" last word on the position that Trotsky had taken against "socialism in one country" and against the idea that Stalinism could be a new form of exploiting society, arising on the margins of capitalism and then successfully competing with it. History, after a long delay, echoed Trotsky's answer to the question if that could happen: a resounding no.

The development of nuclear weapons prevented war between the Stalinist system and capitalism. The two strands of post-Trotsky Trotskyism coming out of the split in 1940 both had great difficulty coming to terms with the revival of capitalism, Shachtman and his friends no less than some of the "orthodox Trotskyists". The idea that capitalism was on its deathbed shaped their view of Stalinism and its prospects up to its end.

How Trotsky would have responded to the survival and tremendous expansion of Stalinism is, on one level it is an unanswerable question. Trotsky's response to the invasion of Poland had been startlingly unexpected to many of his comrades. However, if for the sake of argument we take it that Trotsky's ideas in his last period — the last nine months, say, dating it from the innovation in *The USSR in War*, would have guided him, then he would have broken with the "degenerated workers' state" theory some time in the war, as Stalin's empire burgeoned and the looting and mass-raping "Red" Army advanced as far as central Europe.

Trotsky had said that it was a matter of seeing what happened in the war: if the bureaucracy survived, then the phenomenon of Stalinism would have to be reconceptualised.

As it was, Trotsky died in August 1940, seventy years ago, and left a movement in a state of ideological and theoretical flux.

Those who shaped post-Trotsky "orthodox Trotskyism" — in the first place, James P Cannon — finally, after much wavering, opted for a variant of the "bureaucratic revolution" account of Stalinism. In 1952-3 Cannon would recoil from the pro-Stalinist implications some "orthodox Trotskyists" were drawing from what had been a common position of critical support for the Stalinist empire and for further Stalinist expansion (which was deemed to be the "World Revolution",

a "deformed World Revolution", though they did not use the term).

Cannon and his comrades would in 1953 split the Fourth International they had re-established on a very narrow political basis at the end of World War Two, and recoil back towards the crossroads of 1939-40. They would never get there, stopping halfway.

12. LENIN IN 1917 AND TROTSKY IN 1940

Trotsky once compared his conception of Russia as a "degenerated workers' state" to Lenin's theory of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry".

The democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry had proved in its broad framework to be wrong. Lenin had postulated an equal alliance of workers and peasants to bring about bourgeois-democratic revolution. Until 1917 he considered a purely workers' revolution for working class goals impossible in Russia's economic and social backwardness. It turned out that the only revolution possible in 1917 was a working class revolution. Then Lenin in effect went over to Trotsky's Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky had predicted that the conservative, negative side of Lenin's formula would reveal itself in a revolutionary situation. In fact, before Lenin's return to Russia (April 1917), the Bolshevik Party, led temporarily by Stalin and Kamenev, supported the bourgeois Provisional Government. It took Lenin a sharp fight to reorient the Bolshevik Party toward the working class revolution it would lead seven months later.

In Trotsky's opinion, if Lenin had died in exile at the beginning of 1917, the Bolsheviks could never have been reoriented in time to stop the victory of a very bloody counter-revolution and the abolition of the possibilities that the October revolution and the Bolshevik Party went on to prove to have existed.

Trotsky, who organised the October insurrection, said that if he had been present in St Petersburg in 1917 and Lenin absent, the revolution would have been defeated. If Lenin had been present and Trotsky absent, the revolutionary workers would nonetheless have won: for despite being wrong in his general formula — democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry — Lenin had focused accurately, the party had grasped the realities of the Russian revolution.

The Bolshevik Party was rooted in the real tasks of educating the workers and separating off the revolutionary workers into a distinct and independent workers' party.

Despite the confusion that followed the departure of the Tsar and the setting up of a Provisional Government pledged to call a Constituent Assembly, the previous record of the Bolshevik organisation and its habits of mind had allowed Lenin to win a quick and easy victory over those who wanted the party to settle into legality and a long term opposition to a new bourgeois regime.

So, too, with the Trotskyists and Stalinism. They had step by step from 1923 worked out concrete programmes for the workers of Russia, up to and including the advocacy of the armed overthrow of the autocracy. So, what — said Trotsky repeatedly to those who wanted to call Russia a stable anti-working class exploitative state — do you want to add to our concrete programme? They had nothing to add.

Yet, what Trotsky said about the dual nature of Lenin's slogan of a Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry offers a pretty exact parallel for Trotsky's degenerated workers' state position. With the survival and expansion of Stalinism in 1941, the negative side of the "degenerated workers' state" formula came out. Such a position as "unconditional defence of the USSR", which in Trotsky had one meaning, took on a meaning it never had for Trotsky. It tied the "orthodox Trotskyists" into "uncritical" support for the foreign policy of the Stalinist imperialist bloc: into "one-campers" — the Stalinist "workers' state" camp. Trotsky himself in his responses to both Poland and Finland deepened the confusion.

But where Lenin could by returning to Russia change things and pull the Bolshevik Party policy in 1917 into line with the new possibilities and the drives of its militant working class supporters, Trotsky died in the struggle with Stalin, leaving theoretical chaos to his comrades from which the movement never recovered. It was, indeed, as if Lenin "had died in Switzerland at the beginning of 1917".

All that is easy to see looking back: the point is that it was anything but that then. Trotsky had good reasons for holding at he did to the basic perspectives of Marxism — there can be neither a socialism-in-one-