

Trotsky's Real Legacy: The Counter Revolution Devours Its Own Children



The 70th anniversary, this August, of the assassination of Leon Trotsky at the hands of NKVD agent Ramon Mercader and was met with much verbose fawning within the publications of the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party.

Beyond the grand proclamations that he was "was the brains of the working class"^[1], "the greatest living revolutionary"^[2], "symbol of implacable opposition to capitalism and totalitarian Stalinism"^[3] and of course that he is "inspiration for today"^[4] we are offered little of substance. The superficial nature of these articles serves at once to glorify and sanitise Trotsky's role in the Russian Revolution and his part in the subsequent rise of Stalin. It is to reduce Trotsky to an empty signifier, a disembodied spirit defined primarily through his opposition to Stalin, a vessel for historical dreamers and their 'what ifs', a means of superficially maintaining fidelity to the revolution whilst remaining divorced from it's degeneration. In it's crudest form Trotsky becomes the goodie to Stalin the baddie and is upheld as 'proof' that Bolshevism need not have ended in such brutal terror if only Trotsky had been at the head of it.

It is easy to see the appeal of such notions to young people seeking to defend the very idea of revolution against the endless army of ideologues armed as they are with idiotic misreadings of Orwell's "Animal Farm" and "1984" who are all desperate to smugly point out that any attempts to make a better world are destined to totalitarianism and that capitalism for all it's faults is the best we can hope for. However just as Marx could see the appeal of religion as the 'heart of a heartless world' it should not dissuade us from criticising such illusions in Trotsky, rather it is all the more necessary, we should pluck "the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower."^[5] Contrary to the image painted of Trotsky

as a hero of the revolution who saw his endeavours undone by the rise of Stalin and the bureaucracy the truth is that Trotsky played the most important role in paving the way for the rise of the bureaucracy and ultimately Stalinism. The fact the latter would have him murdered does no more to change this than Robespierre's execution removed his responsibility in the building of the guillotines.

Trotsky's role in the strangling of the Russian revolution and the subsequent spiral into Stalinism begins almost as soon at the revolution began - before the dual tragedies of the civil war and famine which are often used to excuse the brutal policies of 'War Communism'. Straight from the start workers control over the economy was curtailed:

"a few weeks after the upheaval (the October revolution) the Factory Committees attempted to form their own national organisation, which was to secure their virtual economic dictatorship. The Bolsheviks now called upon the trade unions to render a special service to the nascent Soviet State and to discipline the Factory Committees. The unions came out firmly against the attempt of the Factory Committees to form a national organisation of their own. They prevented the convocation of a planned All-Russian Congress of Factory Committees and demanded total subordination on the part of the Committees".^[6]

Soon after at the First Trade Union Congress the Bolsheviks would successfully pass resolutions making the Trade Unions subordinate to the State. Whilst Zinoviev was voice for the measure it was supported by both Trotsky and Lenin. Already the stirring of "Stalinist" logic could be heard in Zinoviev's argument that:

"independence' of the trade unions under a workers' government could mean nothing except the right to support 'saboteurs'"^[7].

The castration of workers control and autonomy did not stop simply at these

measures, much like the ascendant bourgeois the Bolsheviks did not simply seek to formally subsume the management of industry but moved onto reshaping it, first decrees were passed limiting the amount of worker representatives on management committees to less than half, whilst Taylorist production methods and piece rates were introduced. In 1918 under the control of Trotsky the pretence of workers control was jettisoned within the railways and replaced instead with one-man management. All this was prior to the Civil War and "War Communism".

The onset of the Civil War would make things much worse, not because it forced Trotsky and the Bolsheviks into breaking from their plans but rather because it served both to 'justify' and weaken working class opposition to them. The decree that no more than half of any management committees was to be made up of workers was augmented with one declaring that no more than a 1/3 of the management was to be elected. At the IXth Party Congress of 1920, as the Civil War came to a close, the militarisation of labour was put forward by Trotsky as the means for the construction of socialism:

"the working class...must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded just like soldiers. Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps."^[8]

Again the cornerstones of Stalinism are shown to have been laid down well in advance by Trotsky and not simply as concessions to circumstance but rather as revolutionary principles as shown in his denouncement of the Workers Opposition:

"The Workers' Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers' right to elect representatives above the party, as it were, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy. . . . It is necessary to create among us the awareness of the revolutionary historical birthright of the party. The party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering in the spontaneous moods of the masses, regardless of the temporary vacillations even in the working class. This awareness is for us the indispensable unifying element."^[9]

A unifying element indeed acting as it does as the common thread from Trotsky to Stalin. Indeed Trotsky's attacks on the independence of the Trade Unions were so vehement in 1921 that they provoked criticism from Lenin himself.

Trotsky's forthright opposition to workers control, democratic process or working class autonomy would reach a crescendo upon the ice of the Gulf of Finland. The sailors stationed at Kronstadt had been hailed as the leading lights of the revolution and praised by Trotsky himself, that was until they rose up in solidarity with a series of strikes in Petrograd against the reduction in bread rationing. They had set out a 15 point set of demands including the equalisation of rations, the restoration of freedom of speech for workers organisations, the

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