

1. CONSTRUCTING THE SOCIALIST ORDER

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

“Social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice, and in the comprehension of this practice”. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerback, VIII*.

HUMAN BEINGS MAKE their own history, but not as they themselves will it; nor do they work in conditions which they can at will control. People follow one intention, holding to one interpretation of their situation and its possibilities, and the result is often not at all what they intended or would have chosen. Sometimes it is the opposite of what was intended and would have been chosen. Other wills, other intentions, and other interests are at work too, in unforeseen and unknown ways. Afterwards, we do not always easily understand what has happened, or why. Sometimes we radically misunderstand. So it was with the Bolshevik Revolution.

Early in 1917, the workers, soldiers and peasants of Russia rose in revolt and destroyed the autocratic Tsarist monarchy. They organised themselves in democratic councils (soviets). On 25 October 1917, according to the Russian calendar in use at that time (7 November our style) the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet — under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, chair of the Petrograd Soviet — organised an insurrection in Petrograd (St Petersburg) and overthrew the unelected Provisional Government.

At the All-Russian Congress of Soviets which opened in Petrograd that same day, 25 October, a clear majority supported the rising. In place of the bourgeois Provisional Government, the Congress set up a soviet government: the rule of workers’ councils. The political leadership of the soviets was in the hands of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks), at whose head stood Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Trotsky.

The Bolsheviks were Marxists. They understood the working-class conquest of state power in Russia to be the first step in an international working-class movement to build a new society, free from the exploitation of human being by human being. “We will now proceed to construct the socialist order”, said Lenin to the Congress of Soviets on 25 October 1917.

What order? The socialist order. But in the event Lenin was not to build “the socialist order” or even the foundations for it. The Bolsheviks would suffer total defeat. Not socialism, but Stalinist totalitarianism would arise in the USSR, on the grave of Bolshevism. The Bolshevik defeat, and the unexpected forms it took, would disrupt Marxism and disorientate the left wing of the world labour movement for the rest of the 20th century. That was not the Bolsheviks’ fault, but it was — and is — the abiding consequence of their revolution. What happened to the Russian Revolution?

What happened to the socialists who, holding to the Revolution’s original

ideas, and fighting the Stalinist counter-revolution, tried to make sense of its degeneration and defeat? What happened to the ideas and perspectives of Marxian socialism in the era of Stalinism, in the flux and friction of subsequent social and political life? What was the relationship of the “October ideas” to the Russian Stalinist society that existed from the late 1920s to the early 1990s? These questions are the subject of this book and another to follow.

II THE BOLSHEVIK PROGRAMME

“Whatever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary far-sightedness and consistency in a historic hour, Lenin, Trotsky and the other comrades have given in good measure. All the revolutionary fervour and capacity which western Social Democracy lacked were represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution, it was also the salvation of the honour of international socialism.” Rosa Luxemburg.

SOCIALISM IN 1917 had a different meaning from that it has had for most of the last 80 years. Socialism and democracy were understood to be each an essential part, one and the other, inseparable dimensions of one indivisible movement — “social democracy” — for working-class emancipation from wage slavery and from social, economic and political rule by the capitalist class. “Social democracy” aimed to replace capitalist exploitation of wage labour by a “co-operative commonwealth”, in a Workers’ Republic. Lenin and Trotsky defined the nature of the regime they erected on the victory of the soviet insurrection of 25 October as the dictatorship of the proletariat, of the wage-working class. They defined Britain, France, the USA, Switzerland and the other parliamentary democracies of that time as dictatorships of the bourgeoisie. They understood the dictatorship of the proletariat as they understood the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie — the rule of a class which “dictated” political and social terms of existence to the other classes.

The “dictatorship of the proletariat” was not the dictatorship of a party, or of an individual, but of a class. The soviets, not the Bolshevik party, took state power on 25 October — though without the Bolshevik Party the soviets could not have taken power and consolidated it. It was in the name of the soviets and through the soviets, which gave unimpeachable democratic legitimacy to the October insurrection, that the Bolshevik party rose to power. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” was mass democracy, dictating to the defenders of the old order. It dealt ruthlessly with the resistance of the old exploiting rulers and their supporters. All the often-quoted ferocities proclaimed and enacted by the Bolsheviks concerned the struggle to win power and hold it against armed and mass-murdering opponents; all the talk of dictatorship was about the dictatorship of a class organised democratically for mass action in the soviets, and of a party only as representative of that class. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” — the rule of the workers — would, as the Bolsheviks understood it, define a whole epoch of history, just as had the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Repressive rule — even repression of the old social masters and their supporters by the majority of the people — would be a more or less short-term and transitory beginning of this epoch. Its conclusion would see

the end of force and coercion in human affairs.

The Bolsheviks believed, with Marx, not only that “The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race or sex”, but also, and fundamentally, that “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves”.

The rule of a class, the proletariat, which was itself in Russia a minority, had inescapably undemocratic implications if it was to be imposed against the will of the peasant majority. The new government had the support of the masses of the peasantry and would keep it, even against the peasant parties, until the end of the civil war (1918 to November 1920). The first Bolshevik-led government was (until July 1918) a coalition with the Left Socialist-Revolutionary party, which shortly after October 25 gained a majority in the Congress of Peasant Soviets. The Bolsheviks did not envisage long-term rule by a minority class in an isolated Russia.

The idea of party rule as against soviet rule, or of soviet rule being one-party rule in perpetuity, lay far in the future, at the other side of the civil war. In the form in which it is best known to us, “one-party rule” lay at the other side of Stalin’s counter-revolution — the one-sided civil war of the bureaucracy to subjugate the disarmed people. That counter-revolution left intact nothing of “October” except the emptied and stolen names of the soviets, Bolshevik Party, working-class rule and Russian labour movement.

If in 1917 the Bolsheviks were dismissive and contemptuous of parliamentary (“bourgeois”) democracy, as indeed they were, it was because they wanted much more than a one-dimensional political democracy. They wanted “social democracy” — the real day-to-day self-rule throughout society of the mass of the people. Democracy as both its friends and enemies had understood it up until about 1850 — rule of the majority, by the majority, in the direct material, cultural and spiritual interests of the working majority.

They said they would establish a state power “of the Paris Commune type”. In Paris in 1871, 46 years earlier, the Paris City Council — “the Commune” — had seized power in the city and held it for nine weeks before the Parisian workers were defeated and massacred in their tens of thousands, or deported to tropical prison islands. They had ruled directly, without a bureaucracy or a standing army, that is, without a bureaucratic state machine raised above the people. “The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen’s wages. The whole of the educational institutions were opened to the people gratis, and at the same time cleared of all interference of Church and State”. (Marx)

In Russia, after the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, the soviets developed a pyramid of factory, district, city and all-Russian representative gatherings. Delegates could be recalled and replaced, easily and repeatedly. This was the framework of “a state of the Paris Commune type” — a uniquely flexible and responsive system of democratic self-organisation and, increasingly, of self-rule by the Russian workers and peasants. The Soviet-Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October had put the stamp of security on it.

When the Bolsheviks and the soviets set up the dictatorship of the proletariat in 1917, they acted in the name of democracy, and indeed of a higher

and more profound form of democracy than what goes under that name in Western Europe, the USA and other places now — not of “dictatorship” understood as anybody’s tyranny over the people. The “dictatorship of the proletariat”, fearsome and replete with quite different meanings though it sounds to our ears after its appropriation and misuse by the Stalinist dictators, was, to its proponents in 1917, the democratic self-rule of the working people. Not until later would the terminology of Lenin and Trotsky, used by others, take on the commonplace meanings it has now. Most of the other key words in the lexicon of the Russian Revolution, of Marxism, and of the left would also by the mid-twentieth century have been given other meanings.

Nor did Lenin’s conception of “the socialist order” involve the wholesale seizure by the workers’ state of all economic assets, a “command economy”, or a forced march for economic development to “catch up with” the advanced countries. Their ideas here were fundamentally those of Karl Marx in the Communist Manifesto. The working class, having “won the battle of democracy”, would rule in its own and the working farmers’ interests, using the state to regulate and control the “commanding heights” (Lenin) of the society and economy.

The Bolshevik government did not immediately intend to nationalise even large-scale industry. They favoured and helped create “workers’ control” — that is, dual power between workers and owners in the factories. In 1918 the workers drove out the factory-owners and imposed on the government a decision to nationalise, that is, eliminate the capitalists.

III: THE PRECONDITIONS FOR SOCIALISM

“The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce par décret du peuple. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its economical agencies, they have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historical processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society is pregnant”. Karl Marx.

THOUGH THE BOLSHEVIKS knew and proved in practice that the working class could take power, they did not believe that socialism could be created in backwardness and underdevelopment such as that which prevailed in the old Empire of the Tsars. The Russian economy in 1917 had not developed even the minimum preconditions for socialism. They believed, with Marx, that socialism had to be built on the foundations, structures, and social potentialities that the most advanced capitalism had created. Why?

In all previous human history, ruling classes, embodying advanced culture and knowledge of social organisation and administration, had owned and administered the economy, society and the state. They had taken for themselves abundance, luxury and extravagance at the expense of the mass of the people, who were held as slaves, serfs or wage workers. To provide “surplus product” for the rulers, the subordinate classes had had their consumption rationed and restricted, their lives cramped and curtailed, their economic, social and political freedom limited to what was compatible with rule by the

dominant classes in their own interests. They had been forced to work in conditions and under rules dictated to them by the master classes.

Capitalism, for the first time in history, had made possible an end to exploitative class rule by creating a society able to produce the means of life in such abundance that everybody could be guaranteed an adequate minimum. In part capitalism had even realised it. With the tremendous powers of social productivity unleashed by international capitalism, “the last form of class society”, humankind had arrived at a point where it could cut the roots — low productivity of labour and scarcity — from which social division and re-division into classes, into rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited, had sprung throughout human history. For the first time ever it had become possible for everyone to have comfort, culture and leisure, and thus for humankind to create a society free of the cannibal curse of exploitation — a classless society. The wage-working class, the proletariat, which found no class lower than itself in the social hierarchy and which did not and could not exploit any other class, could take power and begin to reorganise society on a classless basis of democratic self-rule.

Without the possibilities of producing plenty created by international capitalism, socialism would have remained a utopia — impossible. With them, socialism became a rational and realistic project for the reorganisation of human society — to realise the potential which capitalism, its creator, stifles, and thus allow humankind to move to a higher level.

“Marxism sets out from the development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress, and constructs the communist program upon the dynamic of the productive forces... Marxism is saturated with the optimism of progress... The material premise of communism should be so high a development of the economic powers of man that productive labour, having ceased to be a burden, will not require any goad, and the distribution of life’s goods, existing in continual abundance, will not demand — as it does not now in any well-off family or ‘decent’ boardinghouse — any control except that of education, habit and social opinion. Speaking frankly, I think it would be pretty dull-witted to consider such a really modest perspective ‘utopian’. Capitalism prepared the conditions and forces for a social revolution: technique, science and the proletariat.”¹

Like the modern proletariat that would create it, socialism was necessarily and inescapably the historical child of advanced capitalism. This meant that to Lenin, Trotsky, the Bolshevik party, and the Bolshevik-educated workers who made the revolution, socialism was simply not possible in 1917 Russia. If the workers’ revolution in Russia were not part of an international revolution, it would not be a socialist revolution.

The Russian working class was a comparatively small minority in a vast land inhabited by peasants scarcely two generations out of serfdom. The country was one hundred and more years behind advanced Europe. Circumstances and superb leadership had allowed the revolutionary workers to seize power; but only the spread of the revolution to advanced Europe would allow them to build socialism. The Bolsheviks would have dismissed as impossible and ridiculous the idea that the Russian workers, having seized power, would or could then begin to construct, in parallel to capitalism, and in competition with it, a closed-off society on socialist principles. They under-

1. Trotsky: *Revolution Betrayed*.

stood that in those conditions socialist principles could not for long govern society. Out of economic, social and cultural backwardness would unavoidably come a re-growth of class divisions. That, they believed, in Russian conditions, could only be the triumph of the bourgeoisie and capitalism: they were, as we shall see, radically mistaken in this.

The Bolsheviks seized state power, but they understood that there were proper limits to the use of the surgical and engineering power of the state — that is, of force — in relation to society and the people making it up. Their “reshaping reason”, armed with the state power, was limited objectively by the level of the economy and social culture. It could only reorganise, modify, and set lines of development. Society could not be reduced to a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which anything could be written. It could not at will be recreated from the ground up. Society could not be taken by storm, like political power, but only transformed over time. The immense concentration of state power characteristic of Stalinism — and the use Stalinists made of it, from Stalin’s forced collectivisation through China’s Great Leap Forward to the Khmer Rouge — would have seemed to those who formed the government in October 1917 to be a throwback to Pharaoh’s Egypt or pre-Spanish Inca Peru.

They would have branded the programme the Stalinist bureaucrats propounded in October 1924, building “socialism in one country”, as a regression from Marxism to the utopian socialism of 70 or 80 years previously — to the socialism of Robert Owen and Etienne Cabet. Following imaginary maps of history, as far from social reality as was the chart which guided Christopher Columbus, so he thought, to the Indies, from the real geography of the Earth, Owen and Cabet had built doomed primitive-socialist colonies in the backwoods of America, thinking to prove the superiority of this “socialism” in competition with capitalism. That conception of socialism had been vanquished by Marx and Engels on the level of ideas, and bypassed by history, which had generated a tremendous development of capitalism, and of the proletariat and its labour movement within capitalism. Marx had established the all-defining nexus between capitalism, the proletariat it creates, and socialism; the development of socialist labour movements had, Marx’s followers believed, shown capitalism’s proletariat to be the agency of socialism. Capitalism which created the social conditions for its own replacement — an economy capable of providing abundance, and production increasingly socialised through big firms — also created its own gravedigger, the proletariat, which would break the power of the capitalist class, and take over and develop the progressive potential of the means of production created by capitalism.

By the middle of the 20th century, under the impact of Stalinism, the predominant form of “actually existing socialism” — and, extrapolated from that, the predominant idea of what socialism was — would have turned all this on its head. Socialism? State-imposed forced marches in economically backward countries for the industrial growth and development which in history and Marxist theory alike was the work of the bourgeoisie and of the bourgeois epoch. In this “socialism”, an authoritarian or totalitarian state held the proletariat and the whole people in an iron grip of terror and exploitation. The model, supposedly rooted in the Russian Revolution, had nothing to do with the Bolshevik policy of 1917. It was the policy of those who drowned the Bolshevik revolution in blood, stole its identity and its symbols, and buried it in a falsely marked grave.

Before the rise of Stalin's USSR, no Marxist could have put forward such a policy as "socialism" for a backward country without inwardly hearing the voice of the founders of Marxism insisting that in such conditions, no matter what the rulers' intentions were, "all the old crap" (as Karl Marx once forcefully put it) of class society would inevitably return — in the first place, class differentiation and class exploitation. Classes cannot be abolished by decree, or merely because millions of people want their abolition. Classes cannot be abolished unless society has reached the stage where enough is produced for everyone to live comfortably, and therefore can dispense with the class structures which human history so far has found indispensable to the development of economy and culture.

If in 1917 Lenin knew all this, then what sense did his proclamation "We will now proceed to construct the socialist order" make? Lenin did not think he was making, and was not trying to make, in any purely Russian sense. He believed the Russian workers were but the advance-guard for the German and west European workers. "The absolute truth", he declared on 7 March 1918, "is that without a revolution in Germany, we shall perish". On 1 October 1918 he wrote to Trotsky and Sverdlov (the organiser of the Bolshevik Party): "We are all ready to die to help the German workers advance the revolution which has begun in Germany". Again, on 5 July 1921, he explained: "It was clear to us that without aid from the international world revolution, a victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible. Even prior to the revolution, as well as after it, we thought that the revolution would also occur either immediately or at least very soon in other backward countries and in the more highly developed capitalist countries, otherwise we would perish. Notwithstanding this conviction, we did our utmost to preserve the soviet system under any circumstances and at all costs, because we know that we are working not only for ourselves, but also for the international revolution".

Lenin believed that only in unity with the workers of the advanced countries, which were ripe for socialism, could the Russian workers begin to "construct the socialist order".

The Russian October revolution could win its proclaimed goals and survive only as part of an international working-class revolution. All its socialist and Marxist legitimacy, its right to be seen in the Marxist tradition and not in that of the utopian socialists or the Russian populists, depended on its connection with that international revolution.

IV: THE ISOLATION OF THE REVOLUTION

"United action of the leading civilised countries, at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat". Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

THE REVOLUTION WHICH the Bolsheviks had expected did erupt in Europe, beginning with Germany in November 1918. Soviets appeared all across central Europe, and even as far from Russia as rural Ireland. In 1919 Soviet regimes ruled for a few weeks in Bavaria and Hungary, before being crushed by bourgeois forces.

In Germany the workers' revolution threw out the Kaiser and set up a democratic republic. Before 1914 the creation of such a republic would have had a tremendous revolutionary democratic significance; now it was used as the plat-

form for the bourgeois counter-revolution against the German working class. The social democratic leaders of the German workers had become "Kaiser socialists" in 1914. In 1918-19, though they failed to save the Kaiser, they saved German capitalism. Controlling the German soviets, they stifled them, slaughtering revolutionaries like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The Weimar republic enshrined the rights of bourgeois property in its constitution. It was fundamentally unstable; Hitler was 14 years in the future.

In Austria it was the same. By the end of 1919, post-war bourgeois Europe had weathered the storm unleashed in 1914. Bourgeois control was re-established. The strength of the capitalists in some countries, and the strength and loyalty of their "labour lieutenants" in others, preserved capitalism and isolated the Russian revolution. Like the lone first soldier over the parapet into the enemy fortress who finds that no-one else has got through, the Bolshevik revolution was doomed. A gap between Bolshevik intentions and expectations on one side, and uncontrollable reality on the other, opened wide under the feet of Lenin's regime, shook it out of recognisable shape, and then pulled it down.

Other wills, other intentions, other interests, other strivings, had cut across, and would ultimately nullify, the Bolsheviks' will, their hopes, their programme. Alongside Bolshevism, international socialism would go down too, and for the rest of the 20th century.

The Bolsheviks, who had will and determination in greater than common measure, did not submit passively to their fate. Though they had had great, and, as it turned out, false hopes, they had never believed that the bourgeoisie would fall like a stone tumbling into an abyss. It would have to be cut down in battle — prolonged battle, so it now seemed. They believed that the World War had radically dislocated the world economy. Capitalism had achieved no more than a temporary stability in 1920-21. The objective necessity and the possibility of a world socialist revolution remained. The difficulty, the weakness lay in the "subjective factor", in the state of the labour movements. The victorious Russian revolutionaries set out to build on the achievements of the International Socialist conferences at Zimmerwald and Kiental in 1915 and 1916, of which they had been part. A new workers' International — Lenin had called for it in 1914, when the old International collapsed at the outbreak of war — was set up in Moscow in March 1919.

V: THE CIVIL WAR REGIME

"It would be a crazy idea to think that every last thing done or left undone in an experiment with the dictatorship of the proletariat under such abnormal conditions represented the very pinnacle of perfection... nothing can be further from [Lenin's and Trotsky's] thoughts than to believe that all the things they have done or left undone under the conditions of bitter compulsion and necessity in the midst of the rushing whirlpool of events, should be recorded by the International as a shining example of socialist policy."

Rosa Luxemburg.

FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR erupted in mid-1918. It would last for two and a half years. The Reds successfully contested with the counter-revolutionary "Whites" for the allegiance of the peasants in the countryside. Looking back at the revolution through the opaque, bloodily-smeared lens of the Stalinist regime, later commentators have imagined a tyrannical and bureaucratic "Stalinist" state machine inexorably working its tank-like power

against the people in a drive to create a totalitarian state. Later in the century, Stalinist armies and parties calling themselves “communist” would do that, taking power as already-mighty military-bureaucratic machines, in Yugoslavia and China for example. That is not what happened in Russia! To see the civil war that way is to read backwards into past history things that did not and could not exist then; it is to mix up the pages of two different calendars, that of the workers’ revolution and that of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

The party that led the revolution was working-class, unruly, argumentative, and democratic. As late as 1918 its central administration had a staff of no more than a dozen, for a party with hundreds of thousands of members. Bolshevik party centralism did not produce the authoritarian state; it was the exigencies of civil war and invasion that made the Bolsheviks develop a strong centralised party machine in the same process that produced the authoritarian state.

In October 1917, the working-class soviets firmly controlled only the cities and the major towns. In July 1918 their erstwhile partners in government, the Left SRs, took up arms against the Bolsheviks — they shot and wounded Lenin — because they could not agree to accept peace with Germany on terms dictated from strength by the Kaiser. In order to create the state that existed by 1921, at the end of the civil war, the soviets and their Bolshevik leaders had to win the leadership and support of the mass of the people, the peasantry, in a fierce, free competition of ideas, leadership and arms with their bourgeois-landlord opponents. These were led by Tsarist generals like Kolchak, Denikin, and Wrangel and supported by liberals and some of the anti-Bolshevik socialists. No fewer than 14 states intervened to subvert the workers’ republic. The workers and peasants chose soviet power, and fought to consolidate it against the bourgeoisie and the landlords. If the urban soviets and the Bolshevik workers’ party had not first won the competition for the minds and assent of the rural people, they would never have won the armed contest with the White armies and their foreign allies. The Bolshevik-led Soviets would have been crushed and the workers massacred, as the workers of Paris were massacred in May 1871.

In the course of the civil war much changed. This is our central concern here because from it international socialism would be radically reshaped and redefined. Not their ideas and intentions of 1917, but the exigencies of the civil war and the wars of intervention determined what the Bolsheviks did. Their democratic-socialist, soviet-socialist programme was subverted and overridden. So, ultimately, was the socialism of those who rallied to their call for a new working-class international.

Civil war wreaked great destruction, pushing Russia backwards even from the level of 1917 and what had seemed possible in 1917. The working class itself was scattered, massacred, absorbed into the machinery of state or otherwise depleted. Much of industry seized up. Self-defence imposed on the revolutionary workers the need to staff the new immense army and the state machine. Society and industry were subordinated to their struggle to survive and prevail. In the civil war the Bolsheviks felt obliged to suppress, insofar as they could, the operation of markets, and to substitute a barracks communism of backwardness, in which the produce of the peasants was simply seized in order to feed the towns and the armies. This was “war communism”. A vast bureaucratic administration of society grew up. Layers of the

old bureaucracy, and even of the old military bureaucrats, the officers, had to be utilised. At first they were strictly under the control of the workers' party. But soon Stalin would bring the party apparatus under the control of the state bureaucracy.

The soviets too, the organs of popular self-rule, were subverted by the civil war. Many of the Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary participants in the 1917 soviets — the bourgeois-democratic opposition to the Bolshevik-led majority in the days of the October Revolution — actively or passively supported the anti-soviet armies fighting the Bolshevik government, and therefore left the soviets or were driven out. The soviets, like so much of society, had their life and vitality drained out of them and into the work of the army and of organising a state which administered backwardness and, now, chaos and economic regression.

Very soon, the Russian workers had not a state of the Paris Commune type, free, easy-going self-administration, with minimal bureaucracy, but a heavily bureaucratized state, increasingly modelled on and intertwined with the command structures inseparable from the sort of army they felt obliged to create.

Yet the Bolshevik regime kept its popular support. It could not have survived without it. Throughout the civil war the peasants continued to support the revolutionary government — not without dissatisfaction, bitterness and episodes of militant resistance, to be sure — in the interests of winning the war against the White and foreign armies whose victory would have brought back the landowners to lord it over them once more. They supported the “Bolsheviks” who gave them the land while disliking the armed “Communists” who requisitioned their grain (the RSDLP Bolshevik Party had changed its name to “Communist Party” in 1918).

VI: THE POST-CIVIL-WAR REGIME

THUS, IN THE PROCESS of fighting to survive and prevail, the workers' state had ceased to be what it was in 1917. It was now a workers' state because it was ruled by a workers' party acting as stand-in, watchman, gatekeeper, or “locum” for the proletariat. The locum party ruled in the interests and in the name of the working class — in a backward country, where the working class was a small minority. Judged by the Bolshevik programme, the civil-war regime was already a degenerated workers' state. At the 10th congress of the Communist Party, in early 1921, Lenin himself called it a “workers' state with bureaucratic deformations”. He said that in the course of championing free trade unions: the workers, he believed, would have to fight the workers' state and resist its giant pressure. 18 months later, the dying Lenin used a striking metaphor for the situation of the Bolshevik Party at the head of this state: it was, he said, like driving a car in which the wheels did not respond to the steering mechanism. Lenin did not live to analyse it, but this was because an increasingly dominant section of the party had fused with the state bureaucracy.

What were the Bolsheviks to do? They undertook now not to “construct the socialist order”, but to survive in power as locum for the working class. The ruling party would defend and serve the working class and develop the backward territory over which they ruled until socialist revolution in the West would come to their aid. The fate of the defeated Communards of 1871, the massacres of communist workers in Germany and Hungary and Finland (where maybe a quarter of the entire working class was killed), and the massacres of workers and peasants and the anti-semitic pogroms unleashed by their own opponents during the civil war — in the Ukraine, especially, a terrible slaughter of Jews was unleashed by the White armies — kept the Bolsheviks in mind of the alternative.

The idea that there could be a locum for the working class was a rational if problematic response to adverse circumstances. The “locum” would grow and develop, rationalised by the idea that wholly nationalised property, after the old rulers had been overthrown, was necessarily working class, until it dominated what passed for Communism and revolutionary socialism during the rest of the 20th century. The locum could, it would be discovered by Trotsky and others, itself have a locum.

If the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky after the civil war could be a locum for the working class, Stalin, defending nationalised property after he had buried the Bolshevik Party, could be the locum of the locum. The idea would over the next decades stretch to encompass a wide variety of locums allegedly developing “socialism” in countries other than Russia, where no working-class revolution had occurred. The Bolsheviks never thought that Russia could be socialist on its own. Now something new and other than socialism began to develop in the workers’ state — a result not of Bolshevik intentions or the socialist programme, but of backwardness, continued isolation, the exigencies of the long series of wars and the struggle against economic and cultural poverty.

In 1921, three and a half years after the October revolution, a “New Economic Policy” (NEP) put paid to war communism. Markets were restored, in which narrow self-interest and the drive for the accumulation of wealth would motivate farmers and merchants, under the ultimate control of the workers’ state, which, as Lenin put it, would hold “the commanding heights” of the economy for the working class. Socialism and communism would have been better; but in Russian poverty this market was better than the primitive communism of the civil-war economy. Essentially this was a limited bourgeois counter-revolution, but regulated by the workers’ state and subjected to its purposes. To control the transition from war communism and to help hold on amidst devastation and war-weariness, the government banned even those parties such as Julius Martov’s Menshevik Internationalists who had never risen against the Soviet government or supported those who had. Soviet government now became in fact what it had so far not been either in fact or in theory — an institutionalised one-party monopoly. Theory would catch up. As a logical and necessary corollary of the ban on every other political party, the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (March 1921) banned factions within the ruling party’s own ranks.

This was a radical departure. In the course of 1917 and the civil war there had been many factions in the Bolshevik party. The emergency measures in 1921 were intended to be a temporary response to an extraordinarily tense and dangerous situation, not the establishment of a permanent regime in

state and party, or of new norms. But in fact in this as on so much, the emergency measures — enforced Bolshevik practice, in a backward, war-torn country where the proletariat was a minority inhabiting urban atolls in an agrarian sea — came to be the norm and then the theoretical precept for Russia, and for most of those calling themselves communists in the whole world. Ideas would change to follow practice that contradicted the initial guiding ideas.

VII: PRACTICE RESHAPES THEORY

“Without... the development of the productive forces... want is generalised, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means that all the old crap must revive.” Karl Marx.

THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY would last from 1921 until Stalin created the command economy at the end of the 1920s. Under this regime occurred the struggles that would shape, reshape, and disrupt the communist movement. Despite the ban on factions, all the political struggles, the class struggles and incipient class struggles, until 1928 took place inside the ruling party which had a monopoly on politics. Layers of the ruling party — which in relation to society was already a bureaucracy, based on a much shrunken remnant of the old working class — merged with the layer of state officials carried over from the Tsarist regime and crystallised into a privileged elite. Gropingly this elite developed an awareness of its own distinct political, economic, and social interests. Slowly the new rulers began to express their interests in the language of a bureaucratically reshaped, disarranged and miscombined scholastic “Marxism”. This became the ideology of a new privileged ruling class in process of formation; and the root theology of its official state religion.

In 1924 Stalin proclaimed the goal of the state to be the creation of “Socialism in One Country”. This, he insisted, was “Marxism” and “Leninism”. The old Bolshevik ideas were now “Trotskyist” heresy. “Trotskyism” would be the hood which the counter-revolution put over the head of Bolshevism as it was led to the guillotine.

On the level of ideas, the Stalinist drive was connected to and sustained by the idea of building socialism in one country. This led to a wholesale reconstruction and reinterpretation of all the ideas of world communism and of socialism in general; it lay at the root of the monstrous many-branched Stalinist tree of lies about the USSR’s “socialism”, and thus also about what socialism was, that would spread its poisonous branches and shoots all through the working-class movement for decades to come.

The party’s political monopoly in the state became the monopoly of the ruling section of the party; the party, a prison for those who resisted the growing power of the bureaucracy, the incipient new ruling class. Before it made itself master of society, the rising bureaucracy first allied with the new bourgeoisie of traders which grew up under the NEP, and with the class of well-off, labour-hiring kulak farmers. The party-state bureaucracy raised itself above society, balancing between its working-class base and the newly-burgeoning neo-bourgeois classes. It stifled working-class initiative and used its monopoly to terrorise and control the workers in the party and in the trade unions.

VIII: LENIN AGAINST STALIN

“Stalin has accumulated immense power. I suggest that the comrades think about a way to remove Stalin from [his] post and appoint in his place another man who in all respects differs from Comrade Stalin in his superiority, that is, in being more tolerant, more loyal, more courteous and more considerate of the comrades, less capricious, etc.” Lenin.

BY 1922 LENIN had become greatly alarmed. He saw that the workers were increasingly being pushed aside by the new bureaucratic elite, whose leader and personification was Stalin. The policies of the state were beginning to be shaped by that elite in its own interests and not those of the working class. From the point of view of the working class, the political system needed overhauling, cleansing, and reform. But Lenin was paralysed by a stroke in May 1922. His last Party Congress was the 11th, in 1922. Except for brief periods thereafter he was removed from the political scene, speechless for months before his death in January 1924. At the end of 1922, in a series of notes from his deathbed, Lenin indicted Great Russian chauvinism in the treatment of Georgia. He condemned the all-stifling bureaucratism that made a nullity of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate in industry, and called for action against it. He ended by identifying Stalin, general secretary since the creation of the position in March 1922 — he had controlled the party apparatus for a year before that — as the most dangerous figure, the official who most embodied in himself narrowness, bureaucratism and boorish instinctive brutality. He had been against Stalin’s appointment as General Secretary, saying: “This cook will make only peppery dishes.” But he had not fought Zinoviev, Stalin’s sponsor, on it. Now, on the 4th January 1923, he called on the party to dismiss Stalin. But Stalin already controlled the increasingly all-powerful party machine, which was now completing its fusion with the state bureaucracy.

Trotsky launched what became the Left Opposition at the end of 1923, along the same lines as Lenin’s campaign, but with ideas and proposals that were more comprehensive and more fully elaborated. For four years, first the Trotskyist opposition, and then the Joint Opposition of Trotsky and Zinoviev, fought the ever-more-powerful bureaucracy, demanding a restoration of inner-party democracy, better conditions for the working class, and a systematic drive for planned industrialisation within the system of the NEP.

Significantly, Trotsky began by protesting against a proposal that the police be used to regulate an internal affair of the party. The ban on factions decreed as a temporary transitional measure at the 10th party congress in March 1921 was two and a half years old; Trotsky’s earliest co-thinkers (the “Platform of the 46”) proposed to rescind it.

The Opposition fought for the material conditions that would make it possible for the workers to exercise democratic self-rule — higher standards of living, more and better industrial jobs, more leisure, so that the workers would have time and energy to devote to the affairs of the workers’ state. They concerned themselves too with the health of the Communist International. Everything depended on the success or failure of the broader socialist revolution, of which the Russian revolution had been only the first part, and ultimately was only a lesser part. Without revolution in the West in

the medium term, there would, they were sure, be counter-revolution in Russia that would restore the bourgeoisie. The workers' revolution would spread, or it would die.

IX: THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION

STALIN HAD AN unshakable bureaucratic control of the party. When Lenin died in January 1924, a quarter of a million people were recruited to the ruling party, a so-called "Lenin levy" of aspirants for place and office who would be a solid phalanx of support for the apparatus.

In late 1925 the party-state bureaucracy split again, when Zinoviev and Kamenev and the Leningrad organisation became alarmed at Stalin's alliance with the "right wing" around Bukharin, who openly favoured extensive concessions to the Nepmen and kulaks. In 1926 they formed a Joint Opposition with the Left, adopting the core policies of the 1923 Opposition.

The Left Opposition and the Joint Opposition feared a capitalist counter-revolution. How did they think this could occur? The NEP bourgeoisie and the bigger farmers who employed wage-labour, the kulaks, could hope for the backing of the increasingly dissatisfied middle and poor peasants. With other parties banned, the forces those parties might have represented began to find expression within the ranks of the ruling party — the neo-bourgeoisie through the right wing, led by Bukharin.

The Bukharinites were allied with the so-called "centre" faction of Stalin, which controlled the bureaucratized party and state machine. Political power was the keystone that kept everything in place. Government policy would determine the direction of development. Trotsky feared that the Bukharin wing would open the door to capitalist restoration, and that the Stalin wing would fail to resist. As against the Bukharin and Stalin and neo-bourgeois wings of the all-embracing state-party, the Trotskyists saw themselves representing the proletariat and the old ideas of 1917 Marxism.

Allied with Bukharin, and backed by all the conservative and neo-bourgeois forces in the country, Stalin defeated the Joint Opposition, as he had defeated the 1923 Trotskyist Left Opposition.

By the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, in 1927, the Stalinist bureaucracy was firmly and irremovably in power, allied to the kulaks and bourgeois forces. Stalin told the opposition in the Politburo that "only civil war will remove these cadres" — his colleagues and himself. The four-year-old split between the Bolshevik party and the congealed "party"-state bureaucracy was formalised by the expulsion — on 14 November 1927 — of the real working-class party from the ruling state-party. Its members were exiled to the wastelands of the USSR or jailed. Two years later the Stalinist state would shoot its first Oppositionists — Blumkin, Silov and Rabinovich — the precursors of millions who would die within a decade. Trotsky, the organiser of the 1917 insurrection, and of the Red Army in the Civil War, was expelled from the USSR in January 1929.

Early in 1928 a new political-economic crisis erupted. The kulaks withheld grain. The reason: the lag of industry, the gap between agriculture and industry, the paucity of industrial goods that the kulaks could buy with the price they got for their grain. There had been four years of concessions to the kulaks

since a similar, milder crisis in 1923; the Bukharinite right would have continued now on the same road. Most likely that would have led on to something like the scenarios for bourgeois counter-revolution against which the Left Opposition had raised the alarm. To Trotsky it seemed as if the bourgeois counter-revolution was very close. But something startling and unexpected — and without precedent in history — now occurred.

Political power had been taken from the workers not by the neo-bourgeois forces but by Stalin and what the Left Opposition called the “centrist bureaucracy”. Stalin now turned on his kulak and bourgeois and Bukharinite allies, and crushed them as social forces and social categories — and to a great extent as living people. Using immense waves of physical force, like a quarryman with dynamite — that is, using the state power at the disposal of the bureaucracy to revolutionise society from above — Stalin made his own revolution and began to shape a new socio-economic formation.

Having resisted the rational, planned industrialisation within the NEP proposed by the Opposition, Stalin now broke the framework of the NEP and embarked on an immensely destructive forced march for industrialisation and agrarian collectivisation. The trade unions were destroyed and replaced with pseudo-unions, fascist-style “labour fronts” to serve the bureaucracy and the police in controlling the workers. All of society was put under the bureaucratic whip and under severe military discipline enforced by savage terror wielded by a state with modern technological resources whose power over society was unprecedented in history.

The Opposition could not but see in Stalin’s industrialisation policy something akin to their own. Unsustainable adventurist forced march, unbalanced caricature, bureaucratic savagery, it might be — but nonetheless it was a turn away from the threatening bourgeois-peasant counter-revolution. It would be years before Trotsky ceased to believe that this “left zig-zag” would most likely be succeeded by a right zig-zag like that of 1923-28 and concessions to the kulaks — who would re-emerge from new economic differentiations within the collectivised farms.

In fact, the Bukharinite right wing, the reflection inside the apparatus of the kulaks and NEP bourgeoisie — but also of the bureaucratic leaders of the stifled trade unions — crumpled before the Stalinists. The Stalinists drummed up support among the workers for their turn, invoking (but rigidly controlling) the working-class “heaven-storming” spirit of the revolution, the civil war, and war communism. In the face of the turn, the Opposition began to fall apart.

Zinoviev and Kamenev and their followers capitulated to Stalin in late 1927. In February 1928 a wave of capitulators from the Trotskyist wing of the Opposition was led by Pyatakov and Antonov-Ovseenko; in July 1929, Radek and Preobrazhensky led a new wave; and in October 1929 there was yet another. The hard core around Trotsky and Christian Rakovsky remained; alongside them were the Democratic Centralist faction, who had gone into opposition in 1921 and concluded in the mid-20s that the working class had already lost power. Trotsky knew that it was not only what was done but how it was done and by whom, that the bureaucracy cut most heavily against the working class, stifling, persecuting, pushing aside and displacing the people who were, in Trotsky’s view, the necessary protagonists of any socialist development. In world politics they had wreaked havoc with the Communist International. They were an anti-working-class force. The question of “regime” was of para-

mount importance. Trotsky criticised the wild and arbitrary production targets set by the bureaucracy, its bulldozing and slavedriving techniques, its suppression of all democracy and of all initiative in the working class, the substitution of blind bureaucratic edicts for informed planning, the lack of any system of feedback on the plans decreed from above, the collectivisation of agriculture before there existed the machinery to make it a step forwards.

Thus to new-born Stalinism Trotsky counterposed a rational, economically balanced and humane conception of the development of the USSR — a conception indissolubly linked in Trotsky's integrated world outlook to rule by the working class itself in the USSR, to the world revolution, and to the perspectives and politics of 1917.

The proletariat, the supposed "ruling class", was now subjected to regimentation and terror in the factories and deprived of all civil and human rights: freedom of speech, assembly, or even movement from place to place. Internal passports were introduced. From the beginning of the 1930s outright, undisguised slavery reappeared. For most of the rest of Stalin's rule, and even later, there would at any one time be eight or ten million slave labourers — people condemned on any pretext, or none. Slave labour was used, for example, to build the prestigious and "modern" Moscow underground railway system in the 1930s, under the direction of Nikita Khrushchev, who in the 1950s as the second bureaucratic Tsar would reform and humanise Stalin's system. The liberation of women which the revolution had decreed, and, despite the backward conditions, in part realised, was reversed. Hungry children of 12 were subjected to the death penalty for theft...

One of the great and most successful achievements of the revolution, its nationalities policy — self-determination and the theoretical and then sincerely believed in right to secede from the multi-national state — was also undone. The rigidly Moscow-centralised party-state machine deprived the constitutionally enshrined national rights of any meaning because it deprived the national sections of the party, the sole initiating agency, of any autonomy. By way of party and state hierarchies, the smaller nationalities were once again bolted in helpless hierarchical subordination to the Great Russian nation. The USSR was transformed from a voluntary federation of equal peoples back into a bureaucratic version of the old tsarist empire — the "prison house of nations".

Lenin and Trotsky had campaigned against Great Russian chauvinism. In his deathbed struggle against Stalin, Lenin had denounced Stalin's tendency towards Great Russian chauvinism against the Georgians (Stalin was a Georgian himself).

Now the Stalinists proclaimed anew the Tsarist doctrine: the pernicious nationalism was that of the smaller, Russia's traditionally oppressed, nations, not the nationalism of the dominant Great Russians. Soon there would be active persecution. National sub-sections of the Stalinist party were repeatedly purged to make the USSR safe for Great Russian chauvinism. For fifty or more years there would be Russification programmes, in the Ukraine in the '70s for example, and even the forcible transportation of small nations like the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens in their entirety from one end of the USSR to the other.

In the 1920s, anti-semitism was already being used by the Stalinists against the Opposition. It would gradually become a big force in USSR life until in the early 1950s Stalin was running a raging world-wide campaign against

“Zionism”, staging show trials in satellite countries such as Czechoslovakia, and preparing a show trial of the “Kremlin doctors”, most of them Jewish, in Moscow. That might have been the starting point for rounding up and deporting the Jewish population of the USSR — or for Stalin copying Hitler on this as on other things, and slaughtering Jews. Stalin died in 1953, and his successors abandoned the scheduled trial of the Kremlin doctors.

By every possible measure of politics, culture, economy, and human relations, Stalinism was counter-revolution. Its prerequisite had been the defeat of the working class and the oppositions in the struggle between 1923 and 1927-8. Yet it was not a capitalism-restoring counter-revolution. It was a bureaucratic counter-revolution in which the state bureaucracy, led by Stalin, wiped out both the new-grown bourgeois classes and the Russian labour movement. It destroyed all the defences and the rights of the working class, and turned the peasants into slave-driven, expropriated serfs of the new bureaucratic state. Who now ruled? The bureaucracy ruled. In whose interest? Its own.

The working class cannot own industry except collectively, and therefore it can only rule itself in industry through democratic, political self-rule. In the system established after 1928, as Trotsky would put it in 1936: “The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, ‘belongs’ to the bureaucracy”. The October Revolution had ended in defeat for the working class and, indirectly, in the creation of a strange new socio-economic formation.

“Other wills”, adverse conditions, the brute necessities of the struggle, changes in the function and thinking of key people and layers, and the cumulative defeats of the working class and the Opposition, had by now changed virtually everything.

Stalin had led a section of the old Bolshevik party, a layer of politically short-sighted people, and behind them a much larger layer of the tired, the self-seeking and the relatively well-off. In the middle 1930s, almost all of the Trotskyists in Siberian exile would be slaughtered. So would almost all the leaders of the 1917 revolution. Most even of the original Stalin faction would die. The 1934 congress of what was now, after the defeat of the Trotskyists and the Bukharinites, indisputably their party, was called the Congress of Victors. By 1938 1,108 of the 1,966 delegates to that conference had been killed in Stalin’s great purges.

Society was crushed beneath the power of the gigantic all-controlling Leviathan state. A large range of privileges, regulated and controlled by the state, existed for the bureaucracy, which would have its own special shops selling goods unavailable to others, in a parallel economy that was a separate consumer system for the elite.

Trotsky, summing up the experience on the eve of his assassination in 1940, said that the bureaucracy had after 1928 made itself “sole master of the surplus product”. The same drive to maximise the resources in the hands of the central bureaucracy led after 1929 to “nationalisation” of everything that twitched in economic life, to a degree and with a thoroughness that in Marxist terms would have been inappropriate for a far more developed economy, or, indeed, for any existing economy. One consequence was Russia’s transition from an authoritarian regime to an outright totalitarian state.

The Bolshevik party’s composition and its role in society had changed, and changed again, until the party had fragmented and had ceased to be itself, and it had become impossible to identify continuity except in the forms and names

— forms now filled with radically different content and names naming different things. From the worker-composed leader and defender of the workers in Lenin's time; to the worker-rooted bureaucratic state power raised above the workers to balance between the classes, until 1928-30; after 1928-30, the rigidly authoritarian "sole master of the surplus product" and of society.

But while the Revolution ended in outright defeat for the working class and for socialist hopes, those who rose to power on its defeat continued to proclaim — and Stalin may have believed it — that in their rule, working-class socialist rule was alive in the USSR and going from triumph to triumph. Thus revolutionary socialism was transmuted from the great clear cleansing truth of the October Revolution into the great lie of the twentieth century.

X: THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

"SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY", the organising dogma of the bureaucracy, was a radical break with genuine Marxism, with the Bolshevik conception of the Russian Revolution and with the Marxist idea of the place of socialism in the evolution of human society. On the level of ideas, it was a strange reversion to utopian socialism: a socialism that would emerge in the wilderness, on the margins of capitalism, and, by competition over decades, vanquish it.

For socialism to be built up in a backward country — leaving aside the question of whether such a regime of scarcity and backwardness could be socialism — implied decades at least of peaceful development, in which the capitalist world would leave the USSR alone. It implied the belief that there would be no socialist revolution in any other country. For the non-Russian CPs it meant, and the logic would work itself through in the 1920s, that they were not primarily revolutionary parties in their own countries, but frontier guards for the Soviet Union, foreign legions to be used as the Russian bureaucratic ruling class thought fit. Their duty was to work for Russia's advantage, irrespective of the consequences for working-class struggles in their own countries. The entire Marxist conception of the Russian Revolution and of the Communist International was thus inverted.

From the 1920s the effects of Stalinism on the non-Russian Communist Parties ensured that these parties accelerated, where they might have reversed, the degeneration of the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks after 1920 understood that capitalism was in a fundamental state of disequilibrium and disruption and had managed only a temporary post-war stabilisation. The chance of new working-class revolutions had not gone. It was an epoch of wars and revolutions. Defeated Germany was both fundamentally unstable and "rotten ripe" for the socialist revolution aborted in 1918-19. There it would be socialism or fascism.

The bar to the international revolution was the state of the working-class movement itself, the necessary protagonist of the revolution. The Bolsheviks had set out with the Communist International in 1919 to rebuild the revolutionary movement; the degeneration of the Bolshevik revolution made the

problem worse — ultimately it made it intractable for those like Leon Trotsky, who continued Bolshevik politics after the triumph of Stalinism.

Just as the bureaucratisation of the ruling party in Russia nullified the nominal autonomy of the USSR's republics, subordinating them by way of militarised hierarchical, bureaucratic control to Moscow, so the Stalinists' rise to control in the Soviet Union welded the Communist International to the ruling Kremlin bureaucracy. Russian hegemony was there from the start, rooted in the real achievements of the Bolshevik Party. It was exercised at first primarily by way of reason and debate, and by the political and moral authority of the Bolshevik leaders. The Stalinists used bribery, bureaucracy and then terror by the Russian political police outside the USSR with no scruples. They purged the International. The leaders of the French party and the Italian party, for example, backed the Opposition in the early and mid 1920s; the German party was taken through four generations of leaders before the fifth, round Thaelmann, proved docile enough for Stalin. Under the banner of "Bolshevisation" began the process of stifling the Communist International's internal life, subordinating everything to a rigid hierarchy centred in Moscow. By the late 1920s Moscow's control in the International was akin to that of a hold-up man pointing his gun — the organisational, moral and financial authority of the "International" — at the revolutionary militants of the Communist International.

The Communist International was used with undiluted cynicism as a mere collection of overseas supporters of the Soviet Union who could — with proper "Marxist", "dialectical" "explanation" — be got to do and say virtually anything. In Spain, during the civil war of 1936-9, Stalin and his Spanish party, stiffened by the Russian political police, suppressed the working-class revolution. Stalin's aim was, by doing the work of fascism, to convince the Western bourgeoisie that they did not need fascism. The CPs could do the job for them, if they should ally with the USSR to contain Hitler. Stalin would control, and where necessary kill, the "Bolshie" workers. The Stalintern could do anything.

From 1934 the Communist International preached a crusade against fascism and then, more narrowly, against German fascism. Stalin signed a pact with Hitler on 23 August 1939, and joined him in mid-September to invade and partition Poland. The Communist Parties switched round and denounced Britain and France as warmongers against peaceful Hitler. They made propaganda for Germany.

The hard-core working-class base of the Communist Parties followed the leaders of the Soviet Union, because they thought they shared a common anti-capitalism with them. There had been an enormous loss of the understanding that was basic to the politics of socialism. By now there was utter befuddlement about what their own working-class alternative to capitalism must be if it were to bring working-class liberty. Yet, even though they were tied to a ruling class worse than their own, they behaved like revolutionaries.

Future Stalinist dictators like Matyas Rakosi and Erich Honecker spent many years as prisoners of Hitler and Hungary's Admiral Horthy. The French Stalinists behaved with great courage when the signal came in 1939 to go into outright opposition. Many might have been relieved that the class-collaboration era of the Popular Front was over.

When Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, the Communist Parties again became the best patriots of Britain and (after December 1941) the USA, newly

allied with Russia. They became chauvinists and strikebreakers. In Britain, CP leader, Harry Pollitt, who had balked momentarily at the Hitler-Stalin pact, pronounced the beginning of a new epoch in which “it is the class-conscious worker who will cross the picket line”. In the USA, in 1944, the CP advocated that the striking coal miners be conscripted and forced down the pits under military discipline. Everything for the war effort!

Jews more than any other people were the victims of the convulsive crisis of mid-20th century capitalism, driven from country to country, persecuted, massacred. In this hard school, and drawing on a culture conducive to sweeping conclusions, large numbers of them, and not only workers, learned about capitalism and enrolled in what they thought was the working-class fight to overthrow it and replace it with socialism. Attitudes to Jews and to anti-semitism were a defining question for a whole age. On this question, at least, the Communist International, especially in its anti-fascist phases, seemed clean and on the side of sanity and humanity. Yet even here, Stalinism overlapped with Hitlerism. Trotsky pointed out the plain elements of anti-semitism in Stalinist policy (for example, the insistence on the original Jewish names of men known for decades as Trotsky and Kamenev and Zinoviev). Anti-semitism had been used against the Opposition in the mid-20s. In 1940 the Mexican Stalinists inveighed against the “Jewish Trotskyists”. It burst out in Eastern Europe in the late 1940s as a campaign, with repression and show trials, against “Zionism” that was only thinly disguised anti-semitism.²

At every turn, people would leave the Communist Parties — outside Russia. If they happened to be refugees living in Russia, they would be slaughtered, as foreign communist refugees were during the Moscow Trials. The Polish Communist Party, denounced as incurably infected by Trotskyists and Luxemburgists, was dissolved in 1938 and its membership lists surreptitiously given to the Polish military dictatorship’s police.

But always “the party”, defined fundamentally by its allegiance to the USSR, would go on or be rebuilt, around a new policy and with new drafts of members.

In the course of the Second World War the Russian Empire, already dominating dozens of “its own” smaller nations, expanded enormously. It clawed in the East European states and half of Germany. Imperialism? No: the socialist revolution! Imperialism? That is only another name for what the big capitalist powers do.

Here too we find the turning of things on their heads and inside out, the annexation of words by their opposites, and the arbitrary confinement of words to mean only what preconceptions and ideology could tolerate allowing them to mean. “For reason in revolt now thunders...” thunders the Internationale. This was the revolt, sustained over many decades, against reason, and the destruction of both the tools of reason and the propensity to reason. The Catholic Church long ago developed a dogmatic escape clause to “explain” the accumulated absurdities of its doctrines. A doctrine like the Trinity — God is both one person and three — in fact arose out of the incoherent amalgamation by the church bureaucracy of once bitterly hostile doctrines. It makes no sense? That, says the Church, is a “mystery of religion”. It makes a higher sense, above human reason. You don’t need to understand. All you need do is have faith. The Stalinists used “dialectics” in exactly that way. Everything is relative, fluid, changing, historically conditioned... Stalin understands. Keep the faith! You could not get further from reason, from

Marxism, from Marx's dialectics — or from the old socialism, that had set out to make war on all thrones, pontiffs and dictators.

Yet, all these attributes belonged to a movement which waved the banner of Lenin's and Trotsky's revolution, which seemed to talk in the language of Marxism and which claimed to propound a system of ideas that codified the historical experience of the revolutionary workers' movement! For decades these people defined what socialism, Marxism and communism were. The Communist Parties were the biggest parties of the working class in France and Italy, smaller but still imposing in countries like Britain. They attracted working-class militants. They pursued the class struggle — in their own way and for their own goals — but only in ways and with means consonant with Moscow's interests; and they pursued it only until it was in Moscow's interests to betray it.

XI: COUNTER-REVOLUTION WITHIN THE FORMS OF MARXISM

THE GOVERNING IDEAS of any society are those of the ruling class, argued Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The German Ideology*. The unfalsified ideas of the 1917 revolution could not serve the new ruling elite. But "Marxist" forms and phrases could, filled with radically new and different social, class and historical content. "Marxism", like the collectivised property, and other forms seized by the Stalinists, was not simply overthrown but retained and altered, to serve the new bureaucratic rulers in the social struggles of the 1920s. Their state "Marxism" became for the Stalinist bureaucracy what the doctrines of the Orthodox Church had been to Tsarism, but with enormous international ramifications derived from Moscow's control of the Communist International.

Stalin's counter-revolutionary struggle against Leninism took place in the name of Lenin; his fight against communism, in the name of communism; against equality, in the name of future communist egalitarianism; against Marx, in the name of Marxism; against any form of democracy, in the name of a higher democracy. The totalitarian bureaucracy enslaved the workers and the rural population in the name of working-class freedom. The dictatorship of the proletariat was replaced by the dictatorship of the bureaucracy from "within", without a clean rupturing of forms or an open honest break with socialism. From that grew up Stalin's Dictatorship of the Lie.

This was the typically nightmarish, surreal world of Stalinism — a world of double-talk and double-speak, where "trade unions" were not trade unions, "soviets" were not soviets, "socialism" was not socialism, "Leninists" were not Leninists, "democracy" was not democracy, and where the worker-enslaving bureaucracy appropriated to itself the right to speak as the working class.

Contrast what happened in the French Revolution. The political counter-revolution against Jacobinism, started in 1794 by a section of the Jacobins,

2. The Communist Parties followed suit, and created a culture that is with us still, especially now, in the ranks of would-be Trotskyists, as "anti-imperialism" focused on Israel, where the Jewish population now and the Jewish national minority in the 1930s and '40s are deemed to have no rights to exist as a nation, or to defend themselves.

soon turned into a reaction against all Jacobins. "Terrorist", "Montagnard", "Jacobin" became terms of abuse. In the provinces the trees of liberty were chopped down and tricolour cockades trampled underfoot. Why did this not happen in the Soviet Republic? Because "the totalitarian party contained within itself all the indispensable elements of reaction, which it mobilised under the official banner of the October Revolution. The party did not tolerate any competition, not even in the struggle against its enemies. The struggle against the Trotskyists did not turn into a struggle against the Bolsheviks because the party had swallowed this struggle in its entirety, set certain limits to it, and waged it in the name of Bolshevism". Thus, in 1940, at the end of his life, Trotsky looked back over the strange and unexpected course of events that had led to the triumph of Stalinism in the USSR³.

Something akin to this "bureaucrats' Marxism" — "Marxism" reworked and bowdlerised to express interests other than those of the socialist proletariat — had developed once before in Russia: for a while, important sections of the Russian bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie had expressed their interests in a dialect of Marxism.

In the 1890s, anti-Tsarist intellectuals who wanted to break with the old, heroic and self-sacrificing, gun-in-hand tradition of "Narodnik" (populist) resistance to Tsarist tyranny in the name of "the people", and of a rather ill-defined utopian socialism, had become "Marxists". They came to stress only that "anti-utopian" part of Marxism which said that capitalism was progressive and unavoidable. Thus they licensed themselves to make peace with developing Russian capitalism. These so-called "Legal Marxists" soon became liberals. The revolutionary working-class Marxists — future Mensheviks and Bolsheviks alike — agreed that capitalism was inevitable and progressive in Russia, but combatted the one-sided bourgeois Marxism. If they had not done that successfully, the militant Russian labour movement that made the revolution would not have developed.

The new-hatched state bureaucrats who took over "Marxism" and gutted it took it over from "inside", from a position of leadership of and dominance over a world-wide segment of the working class and its movement. The revolutionary Marxists of around 1900 had been able to base themselves on a rising working-class movement in their defence of an unfalsified working-class Marxism. Those who resisted Stalinised "Marxism" in the USSR had no such base.

Indeed, the responses of the Bolsheviks themselves, as they held on against all the odds in the circumstances in which isolation had trapped them, had created a powerful base for the gestation of a new bureaucratic pseudo-Marxism and a world organisation for its dissemination. This happened despite the struggle to the death of Trotsky and the Bolshevik rearguard against the Stalinist counter-revolution. The Bolsheviks had held on by way of tremendous and brutal exertions against the "other wills" operating inside and outside Russia; and, so doing, they extemporised a first draft of what the Stalinist counter-revolution, overthrowing the rule of the workers, would develop into an elaborate bureaucratically-drawn route-map of history that was as fantastic as any drawn up by the mid-19th century utopian socialist colony-builders. This they imposed on the army of revolutionary workers who had been grouped in the Communist International.

While the parties of social democracy remained tied to the bourgeoisie, except where the bourgeoisie had knocked them on the head, as in Germany,

the Communist International, which had been set up to recreate independent working-class politics in opposition to social democracy, was captured by the new anti-capitalist bureaucratic Russian ruling class. With the millions-strong Communist International and its semi-militarised parties as transmission belt, the governing ideas of the new bureaucratic ruling class in the USSR dominated the revolutionary workers in capitalist countries — the workers who still looked to the October Revolution for a lead and an example. In consequence, during the long, convulsive mid-century crisis of capitalism, the revolutionary workers' movement was removed as an independent factor from world politics. That, in a sentence, is the story of 20th century socialism from 1914, when the socialist international collapsed, to the disintegration of the USSR in the 1990s.

Inexorably, the corruption spread into every key idea of socialism and Marxism and into every model of behaviour, endeavour and precept of socialism and Marxism. Exigencies that determined so much of what was done in Russia became the source of general theories dogmatically applied to all conditions under the guiding whip of the self-serving bureaucratic rulers. Already the Bolsheviks had erred in this direction; Stalin, representing an anti-working-class new ruling class, made it a system, and, suppressing all dissent, an airtight, lightless system, designed to serve the new Russian rulers.

What Stalin did and said, and what Stalin said Lenin had done or said or would have done or said — that was Marxian socialism and “Bolshevism”. All the basic shaping, morale-engendering, old left-wing ideas were twisted inside out and turned round into their opposites, as the bureaucrats took over “Marxism” and gutted it.

Specifically, what they did was take all of Marxism that was negative and critical of bourgeois society and bourgeois democracy, and cut off the positive working-class Marxist alternative to capitalism: social democracy, expanded liberties, and working-class control. In their place they put their own bureaucratic anti-working-class alternatives: bureaucratic rule and totalitarian state power, miscalled socialism. Here they followed the pattern of the reactionary or feudal socialists criticised in the *Communist Manifesto*: “incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core... In political practice they join in all coercive measures against the working class”.

The Marxist criticism of the limits and the shallowness of “bourgeois democracy” became a condemnation of it supposedly in the name of progress but in reality in the name of political regression to before the French Revolution, if not to before the Renaissance and the Reformation. Uprooted, too, were all the best old “bourgeois” notions of liberty, ideas which preceded mass democracy and were separable from it.

XII: REVOLUTION AND DEMOCRACY

“To raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.”
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

IN 1917 LENIN, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks had believed that unless the rev-

3. *Stalin*, p.407.

olution unleashed a great deepening and broadening of democracy, it would fail. We must pause and examine this question in some detail, for it is one of the central issues posed by the degeneration and defeat of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Marx and Engels had written in the *Communist Manifesto* that to make the proletarian revolution was to “win the battle of democracy” and make the working class the ruling class. Everywhere, including Russia, the socialists had, under the influence of Marx and Engels, been ardent champions of parliamentary democracy and democratic liberties. Labour movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries fought to extend the suffrage and enlarge the power of parliaments — often by revolutionary means. In Belgium they organised general strikes to win the vote. Marxists had made the democratic tradition their own. It was not for any other reason that they called themselves social democrats, advocates of democracy in all, not only the political, aspects of society. Always and everywhere the socialists were for extending and unfettering democracy and for cutting down the prerogatives of capital and the power of government and bureaucracy.

The creation of new working-class forms of democracy began in St Petersburg, Russia, in 1905, when striking workers who did not have political rights elected their own local parliament - the council of workers’ deputies, or “soviet”. The drive for democratic self-rule overflowed existing institutions and led to the creation of new specifically working-class democratic institutions.

After October 1917, revolutionary-minded people all across the world recognised the Soviets as the working-class form of democracy. Commitment to Soviets — workers’ councils, within which there would be a plurality of “soviet” parties — became a central part of the programme of revolutionary socialism.

Inevitably the Russian reality after 1921 — one-party rule and Soviets withered and curtailed — confused many communists about exactly what “soviet rule” was. The more the Stalinists turned the USSR into an unprecedentedly savage exploitative dictatorship, the more they proclaimed it to be the purest and fullest democracy — ever. Democracy? That, like socialism, is whatever exists in the USSR! The result, in a short time, was to banish concern with anything that had before 1917 been considered democracy, and to falsify the very language and conceptions of the socialist movement and the early communist movement on this fundamental question. Even before full-blown Stalinism, “communism” acquired an anti-democratic bias, rooted in the experience of the Russian civil war and its aftermath. It was “Leninism” understood as Lenin himself would not — Rosa Luxemburg was surely right on that — have wanted it understood and used.

After the full-scale Stalinist counter-revolution of the late 1920s, the one-party system was proclaimed as the true working-class democracy, universally applicable. The “party’s” right to a political monopoly was written into Stalin’s 1936 “democratic constitution”. The very idea of socialism as democratic self-rule was thus confused, pulped and destroyed. Democratic ideals and goals that had been central to radical thought since the French Revolution or even since the English Revolutions of the 17th century had their vocabulary appropriated to endorse extreme versions of the statism and authoritarianism which the left had been fighting against for hundreds of years. Mystification, confusion, and soon an almost indecipherable corruption of

language and ideas followed.

This was the fault not only of the revolutionaries, or even the Stalinists. In the hands of the right wing of the international labour movement, the old socialist commitment to perfecting the democratic institutions of capitalist society had become a commitment to defend the bourgeoisies against the revolutionary workers and their soviets, which were the realisation of all the old socialist drive for expanded democracy. In Germany the bourgeois-democratic regime set up by the 1918 revolution became the vehicle for a landlord/bourgeois/right-socialist counter-revolution against the workers. The old drive for radical social democracy was thus ground to nothingness by the upper millstone of the bourgeoisie and Stalin and the nether millstone of social democracy.

What the social democrats did with “democracy” softened up the revolutionary workers to receive the Stalinist revelation that all the old talk of democracy was nothing but bourgeois lies. Democracy became increasingly indefinable. Norms were corrupted until the existence or nonexistence of democracy became not something that could be measured by commonly-agreed standards, but a matter of assertion and counter-assertion. Here, as in so many other fields, the Stalinists took over and caricatured what the bourgeoisie did. This helped destroy the norms by which the revolutionary workers could have evaluated the Russian claims that Stalinist totalitarianism was democracy.

The association of “democracy” with the right wing all across Europe in the 1920s and 30s, and then its collapse in country after country before authoritarian right-wing regimes or fascism, helped ease revolutionary workers into acceptance of the one-party Stalinist totalitarian state as the true working-class democracy. This lie became an article of faith for two generations of revolutionary workers. Those who eventually saw it for the oxymoronic absurdity it was, tended as a rule to collapse back into acceptance of the bourgeois counterfeit of democracy.

The basic idea that socialists must continue to struggle for human liberty and freedom was expunged from the programme of “communism”. “Democracy” — like “socialism” — became a cynical catch-cry, shot through with double-think about the “socialist democracy” of the society where the Stalinist bureaucrats ruled with neither socialism nor democracy.

The hazard of taking seeming for identity is strong here: the Bolsheviks and the early Communist International did impatiently denounce “bourgeois democracy”, did counterpose direct action to parliament, did abuse the democratic pretensions of the reformists, did advocate general strikes and insurrectionary tactics. But, as has already been said, always and everywhere what they counterposed to “bourgeois democracy” and to constitutional methods was mass action — majority action, or action that would quickly become majority action and could not succeed if it didn’t — led by Communist Parties which were free associations within which democratic norms of debate and decision-making were taken for granted. What they counterposed to parliamentarism was the soviet system, conceived of as a more radical, real, thorough-going and responsive form of democratic mass self-rule.

To confuse this with what Stalin made of it is to falsify history — indeed, it is to walk in the track of long-established Stalinist falsifications.

The Stalinists removed the positive alternative that the Bolshevik party and

the early Communist International opposed to the bourgeois “democracy”, “narrow constitutional methods” and “parliamentarism” which they denounced — and put in its place their own totalitarian alternative. The very idea of democracy, workers’ democracy or any democracy, and of liberty against the State, disappeared — except in words that in fact now denoted their very opposites.

Bolshevik “discipline”, the discipline of a voluntary association of socialists, became rigid, hierarchical, semi-militarised submission of the Communist Parties to control by Moscow. A police state became the model for both their “socialism” and their “democracy”. These workers’ movements were not under their own control. They could not steer their own course or learn from their mistakes.

XIII: THE NEW “RELIGION OF SOCIALISM”

“Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, of the duplication of the world into a religious and a secular one... That the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice...” Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*.

AS “DEMOCRACY” LOST all real meaning, so too did “socialism”. The model for a socialist economy became the airtight autocratically “planned” command economy of the USSR, in which even small corner shops were staffed. “Socialism” came to be measured by success in industrialising a backward and underdeveloped economy, that is, in doing the work which had so far been done by capitalism in history — and doing it by slavedriving under incomparably severe totalitarian dictatorship.

A tremendous leader cult, with Stalin as Pope, Caesar and pseudo-Tribune of the People combined, developed in the USSR in the 1930s. There too Stalin and Hitler learned from each other. The intellectual life of the international “Communist” movement centred on interpreting, augmenting, justifying and implementing Papal pronouncements from on high — assertions that often flew in the face of known reality, or of the “line” of the day before — and on the “sacred books”, the misappropriated books of Marxism that said many true things but could only “speak” for today as the high priests of Stalinism interpreted them. “Proof” was defined as citations from the “four great teachers”, Marx, Engels, Lenin and... Stalin. This was “Marxism” degraded into a pidgin philosophy for the bureaucratic parvenus and their Caesar-Pope at the head of a new state religion.

The centrality in Stalin’s “New Marxism” of the idea and practice of forcibly industrialising a backward country by autonomous state power gave it a power of attraction in underdeveloped countries for individuals and classes with no interest in socialism as conceived of in 1917. By the end of his life Trotsky would come to describe the attractions of this “Marxism” for the leaders of Stalinist parties thus: “The predominant type ... is the political careerist ... Their ideal is to attain in their own country the same position that the Kremlin oligarchy gained in the USSR”⁴. In the 1970s, for example, a sizeable

section of the educated middle class and the technological elite of the armed forces in Afghanistan made up the Stalinist party there, and in the years before their failure led to the Russian invasion of December 1979 they tried to transform themselves into a new ruling elite, apeing the Russians.

The totalitarian state not only laid down standards in art and literature and music for the Communists of the whole world: by the 1940s the Russian state was even laying down the conclusions biological research should arrive at, appointing Trofim Lysenko pope, or “Stalin”, in this sphere. Culture became a sub-section of the ministry of police... So did every idea capable of expression fall under police regimentation and regulation; so did the ideas that had dominated and defined socialism so far.

When the Stalinist pope pronounced that the old socialist ideas about equality had never been part of Bolshevism, but were a petty-bourgeois deviation, nobody who was under the direct control of the Stalinist police, or who wanted to remain in the Communist Parties, could dissent, or even quibble and try to qualify it. The Soviet Union — an imaginary Soviet Union — was both Vatican and heaven of the Stalinist religion... to those who did not have to live in it. The Stalinist “religion” was bureaucratically enforced and patrolled by the GPU and not only inside the USSR. The acceptance of this system indicated a self-debilitating immaturity and underdevelopment in the Communist movement.

The international Stalinist labour movement’s “secular basis detached itself from itself” and became idealised not in the clouds but beyond the seas and mountains. The successive defeats — epoch-defining in the case of the victory of Hitler in Germany — to which the Stalinists led the working class enhanced the value and sharpened the need for the quasi-religious consolation offered by the myth of Stalin’s “socialist fatherland”, the “Sun City” beyond the mountains”.

The disease of nationalism in 1914 had meant the international labour movement splitting into many inter-warring national parts; now Communist International unity, conceived in 1919 as internationalist unity for combat against capitalism, served to enforce international working-class prostration before a narrow and brutal Russian nationalism, that yet somehow was the highest form of internationalism, under the “red” Tsar who yet, somehow, was not a Tsar. The mystifications and befuddlements and a mass working-class element of culpable fantasy and unreason defined this movement of frequently heroic would-be revolutionary workers as unfit to rule even its own affairs.

All of this was a tremendous regression. All the old socialist ideas of the relationship of means to ends, of subject and object, of the proletariat as the protagonist of modern history, of what socialism was and was not, gave way to pre-bourgeois ways of thinking and organising and to relationships between people within “the movement” that were the very opposite of those appropriate to socialism and to the preparations of socialism.

Workers rooted in the modern class struggle of their own advanced capitalist countries had their ideas dictated and their strategies set by the Russian ruling class; their collective performance in the class struggle shaped and reshaped to suit the needs and interests of the class-hostile bureaucratic Russian rulers. Where Marxism, even the cautious Marxism of west European socialist parties before the Russian Revolution, had rejected “saviours from on high” and seen the working class itself as its own liberator, and its own

movement as the centre of the forces of liberation, now something else was central: the “workers’ state”, the living socialism beyond the border, the heaven over the seas and beyond the mountains, to which the world movement was subordinated. The building of socialism, somewhere else, was everything; the communist parties’ alleged goals nothing.

In the mid-19th century, readers of the *Red Republican*, George Julian Harney’s paper, where the *Communist Manifesto* first appeared in English (in 1850), were avid for accounts, which the paper provided, of Etienne Cabet’s socialist colonies in America. That was where socialism was. Now, in a very much more developed workers’ movement, devotion to a utopia far away was repeated on a gigantic, hugely-distorting scale. Socialism was again something being built somewhere else: not, except in ceremonial speeches that meant nothing in practice, the goal of the class struggle inside your own capitalism. Enormous regression!

“No saviours from on high deliver”, the great socialist republican message of the Internationale, was amended in fact to mean — saviours and popes only from the liberated lands and the higher socialist civilisations far away. The parties so guided were vigorous forces on their own terrain; they drew their strength from working-class revolt; they took the will for change, the courage, the hope, the capacity for self-sacrifice and the life-enhancing idealism of generations of revolutionary working-class militants: but their guiding principle was all for the workers’ fatherland — for socialism, somewhere else. Thus they destroyed generations of revolutionary militants.

“Communism” became first a rigid and rigidly-organised sect whose sole core belief was in the infallibility of Stalin and the Soviet Union — and later a spectrum of competing Brezhnevite, Maoist, Castroist, Titoite sects. Beyond faith in the leader and “the Party”, any belief, alliance, loyalty or aspiration could be annulled and anathematised overnight, and new beliefs put in its place. Much of the devotional literature of “Communism” consisted of lies and fantasies about one or another Socialist Fatherland, and vicious libels against socialism and socialists, especially the unreconstructed Bolsheviks.

Thus by the middle of the second quarter of the 20th century, the most militant segments of the great working-class movement built up over three-quarters of a century in political and ideological recoil from utopian socialism reverted to a variant of it, focussed on the vast anti-capitalist utopian “colony” in the USSR — whose socialism was an edifice of lies and falsifications and whose rulers were more savage in every sense than any other ruling class. The effect on the labour movement was justly compared by Trotsky to syphilis and leprosy.

XIV: THE BOLSHEVIK REARGUARD

“The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a Government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents and for the realisation of the measures which that domination would imply... What he can do is in contrast to all his previous actions, to all his

4. *Writings 1939-40*, pp350-1.

principles, and to the present interests of his party; what he ought to do cannot be a c h i e v e d " .
Frederick Engels.

THE SECOND WORST thing — in the Russian case it flowed from the first — is for a revolutionary party to have its banners, symbols and erstwhile language, appropriated by a powerful state and its dupes overseas, who proclaim plausible counterfeits of its goals as theirs, and use them to serve alien interests.

It cannot reach its own people; its place in politics is usurped and ruined; those it would help to victory, misled to defeat and catastrophe. Perhaps an epoch of history will have to pass, bringing its own slow clarifications, before it can come into its own. By then much will have changed and it will itself have mutated and have to define itself all over again. So it was with the incorruptible and unbreakable Bolsheviks, the Marxists who stood out against the bureaucratic counter-revolution and the Stalinist falsification of the ideas and perspectives of Bolshevism.

They fought the new Russian ruling class even before it was fully formed and before they had learned to recognise and define it. The surviving Bolsheviks, led by Trotsky, had to start again from almost the beginning. Now they faced adversity and complications such as the older Marxist movement had never known, in a nightmare world in which all their banners and symbols had been annexed and appropriated to be used against them .

A dozen years on from October, the international-socialist Bolsheviks were reduced to a numerically marginal force, politically expropriated, and seemingly by-passed and outmoded. The “perspectives” on which Lenin and Trotsky had oriented themselves in 1917 — the world-wide dislocation of capitalism, and the opportunities it provided, again and again, in country after country, for the working class to overthrow capitalism — were still valid, if the labour movement could take its opportunities. Yet now the Communist International, formed to push aside the social democracy and organise the working class to settle accounts with capitalism, was a force that acted against socialism with a brutality, discipline, consistency and lethal effect that pro-capitalist social democracy had matched only in Germany in 1919, if even then.

Out of the victory of 1917 had come the most debilitating of defeats. Lenin and Trotsky knew they could be defeated and possibly massacred: they did not imagine this sort of defeat, or this massacre of the ideas of Marxism and socialism.

Not only did the Bolsheviks take power, then find themselves unable to realise their programme and forced to implement, in whole or in part, another programme; but then a seeming facsimile of their programme was seized and annexed by their conquerors. “All the old crap” did reappear, but disguised as the best realisation of its very opposite. Stalinism permeated the socialist programme; it petrified it as calcifying chemicals seep into the cells of trees to turn the organic wood into another substance, stone.

The consequences for socialism can only now, after the fall of the USSR and its empire, begin to be undone.

Against the Communist Parties, after the mid-1920s, competed tiny groups led by Trotsky, representing and embodying the ideas of the 1917 Revolution, but with few resources. The existence of state-licensed Stalinist “Marxism”

made their work uniquely difficult. In addition, they would be half-buried under an enormous USSR-inspired and -financed deluge of misrepresentation, slander, and persecution, including murder. To the Stalinist counter-revolutionaries — and to the millions of revolutionary workers who followed them — these representatives of the ideas of October, and in the first place Trotsky, the organiser of the October rising, were Mensheviks, reactionaries, White Guards, and fascists. Their identity, like their banner, had been stolen by the new Russian ruling class and its agents.

The unreconstructed Jacobins and the poor people of Paris had experienced something like this when the slogans of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, under which they had made the French Revolution, were seized by the bourgeoisie, who came to power after the Revolution had cleared the way for them and crushed the people. The bourgeoisie gave the old revolutionary slogans *their* meanings. They rendered the revolution unrecognisable and unacceptable to those who had made it. Under the self-same slogans, or the same broad ideas, an alien class had harvested the state power. The revolutionary ideas were not sharp enough and clear enough to make them undetachable from those who thought they had blazed a path that would lead to a world very different from the one that they had. Ideas are porous: reality is richer and more complex; it possesses potentialities that are not to be seen in advance.

The democrats of the 1830s and 1840s in Britain and elsewhere had seen their ideas seized and corrupted in the '50s and '60s, when democracy was tamed by the bourgeoisie, deprived of its earlier radical social dimension and turned into something other than what it had been for friends and enemies alike since the French Revolution, and earlier.

"I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name".⁵

The Bolsheviks' experience after Stalin's "Second Revolution" in 1928 had much in common with those earlier experiences.

Of course, socialists had known, and repeatedly said, that state nationalisation of industry was not socialism; that it could only serve socialist working-class goals if the workers held social and political power. These ideas had differentiated Marxism from Fabianism and middle-class reformism. In its spiralling degeneration the Russian revolution presented the problem differently. Nationalised property there was rooted in the great revolution. Though the Bolshevik Party and the revolution had been destroyed, the manner of their destruction was unexpected. The result was unprecedented and therefore mystifying and disorienting.

Both "the Bolsheviks" and "the October Revolution" seemed to have survived. Despite the programme-rooted expectations of those who led the revolution that there would be bourgeois counter-revolution in Russia if the workers' revolution did not spread to the advanced countries, there had been no bourgeois counter-revolution. The bureaucratic counter-revolution that had taken place said it was Bolshevik, socialist, working-class.

The Stalinist counter-revolution was not only a counter-revolution within the property forms established by the workers' state, but also, as we saw, a counter-revolution within the forms of the old governing Marxist ideas. When it snuffed out the remnants of working-class political power, and seized the means of production, the new ruling class seized "Marxism" too, twisting,

changing and bowdlerising the old ideas, turning the old Marxist language into its liturgy of state and the sacerdotal language of a bureaucratic “socialism”.

When the rising collectivist ruling class, in its process of separation from the old party, created a pseudo-Marxism that deconstructed and dismantled the Marxism of October, it inflicted its worst possible, because all-embracing, defeat on Bolshevism. One consequence was to prevent the re-emergence of a replacement for Bolshevism. The taking of power in 1917 turned out to have been a kamikaze exercise, not only for the Bolshevik party in its physical existence, though ultimately it was that, but kamikaze for a whole political doctrine. The Trotskyists had to rebuild Bolshevism in a labour movement doubly poisoned — by its open enemies and by the Stalinist imposters — against “Bolshevism”. The task proved impossible.

The “battle of ideas” is central to the outcome of class struggle. Here was Karl Marx’s idea that “the ruling ideology of an epoch is that of the ruling class” confronting the international revolutionary movement in a new form — as an international extension of the new USSR ruling class, assiduously purveying a counterfeit of the old Bolshevik ideas, and maintaining a world-wide organisation with vast resources and no scruples or restraint to impose its version of “Marxism”. Bad slogans drove out good; opulent counterfeits, nourished by the successes of the USSR, occupied the place of the genuine Marxism. Possessing power and wealth — that of a ruling class — unimaginable to the old labour movement, the bureaucracy could define what it decreed to be Marxism, socialism, Leninism, Bolshevism. Money, prestige, “red professors” in their version of academia, and police, jails, and concentration camps could, and for decades did, make good the claim. The bureaucrats’ great power to set the agenda for large parts of the labour movement could sustain it. The past was blurred, half blotted out, and “overwritten” with the bureaucracy’s myths of its own origins, purposes, and pidgin-Marxist ideologies, spread among revolutionary workers along paths laid down to and from the USSR in the days of Bolshevism. When parody and pastiche and scholastic kitsch “Marxism” became the creed of the mass revolutionary labour movement, revolutionary Marxism confronted the most murderously hostile environment it had ever had to face — a political world in the grip of nightmare and delirium such as no liberating movement had faced since the mysticism enshrouded primitive revolts of the religion-bound Middle Ages.

Those in the Bolshevik party and the Communist International who resisted the rising Stalinist bureaucracy had to dispute with those who, in possession of the “conquests” of the October Revolution, were plausibly the heirs of Lenin exactly what was and was not Marxism, what was and was not Bolshevism, what was and was not the proper policy and *modus operandi* for the Communist Parties in capitalist countries, what was and was not the necessary socialist working-class perspective on the evolution of the USSR. They fought an immense entrenched state power which presented itself as the real — the victorious, and therefore better — embodiment of the ideals proclaimed also by the anti-Stalinists. To side with the opposition needed courage and clarity. It meant standing with a tiny persecuted minority against a vast multitude who seemed to have the successful and prosperous variant of the same ideas.

5. William Morris: *A Dream of John Ball*.

Moreover, the revolutionary socialists had the disadvantage of seeming to accept the core claims of the Stalinists. The Soviet Union was, they said, an immense gain, though they criticised the bureaucrats' methods and their rule. Its economic successes were the decisive practical proof in history so far that collectivist economy worked. So said even Trotsky.

The representative experience of the proto-Fourth International was that of Germany from September 1930, when Hitler made a spectacular electoral breakthrough, to 30 January 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor, and the few weeks after that, before the Nazi grip had taken the German labour movement by the throat, during which effective resistance was still possible. Trotsky understood Hitlerism early. He raised the alarm in good time. In pamphlets and articles he warned the German labour movement, criticised it, advocated proper anti-fascist tactics for the whole German labour movement.

Despite Trotsky's warnings, the social democracy remained the supine conservative force it had been for 20 years. The German Communist Party made violently pseudo-revolutionary statements and competed with the Nazis by mimicking their ideas (they too called for the "national liberation" of Germany) and by intermittently allying with them against the social democratic labour movement — even to collaboration with the Hitlerites in the breaking of social-democrat-led strikes. They insisted that Hitler fascism was neither the main danger nor the only "fascism".

Here the confusion about "democracy" must have been a big element in getting German Communist workers to accept the idea that Hitler's victory was not uniquely threatening to the very existence of the German labour movement, Communist and social-democratic alike. To the Communist Party, the main enemy was "social fascism", the social democracy — the old enemy, the traitors of 1918-9, "the murderers of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht".

The couple of hundred Trotskyists were unable to make themselves heard by those who could shape and reshape reality. They could not break through the barriers of bureaucratic organisation to influence Social-Democratic workers, or surmount the barricades of Stalinist slander to influence Communist workers.

The unquiet ghosts of old Bolshevism, still abroad in the world but no longer a force in it, they were able to see and understand but no longer able to touch reality and shape it. Revolutionary Marxist theory was divorced from the revolutionary-minded workers and thus from the possibility of practice. To the Stalinist workers, the Oppositionists were the "Trotsky fascists"; to the social democrats, the unteachable old Bolsheviks; to the working class at large, people outside their own organisations, heretics, renegades, defeatists — or agents provocateurs in the service of the enemy.

By the time Hitler came to break its back and smash its skull, German Communism was a quasi-religious mass cult, in which the Stalinist Popes and bishops — operating, like the medieval Church, by ideological terrorism supplemented by physical repression — had outlawed the propensity and capacity of the party to think, and driven unauthorised "discussion" underground. The Trotskyists? People sacrilegiously questioning the most sacred doctrines and pouring scorn and venom on the images of their leaders and teachers. Alien, petty-bourgeois, "revisionist" — subversive of the revolutionary enterprise! To disobey or disagree was to place yourself outside the great army of the revolutionary proletariat, outside the revolutionary party on which so much depended.

Trotsky was right, foreseeing events clearly and in good time to arm the workers, truthfully warning the German labour movement that it was faced with imminent destruction — and yet he was starkly cut off from any possibility of affecting events. In Germany Trotskyism was Bolshevism without masses, arguing perspectives that required masses, in conditions where the very life of the German working-class movement was at stake. This was to be the fate of Trotskyism in history. Trotskyism would be shaped and reshaped by it.

After the German CP's surrender to Hitler in 1933, Trotsky declared the Communist International dead and set out to build a new International, the "Fourth". The forces were very small. The proponents of the new International would have to do the same work as had been done for the nascent "Third" (Communist) International at the Zimmerwald and Kienthal Conferences in 1915 and 1916 after the collapse of the old International at the outbreak of war in 1914. But there were no victories like that of 1917, out of which grew the Third International. Defeat followed defeat; disaster followed disaster; massacre followed massacre at the hands of the fascists and the Stalinists. A new movement had proved necessary — but also, as Europe moved to a new world-engulfing war, impossible.

The fundamental difference between the prospects for the nascent Third International, in its day, and the still-born Fourth, lay in the existence and character of Stalinism — a rich and powerful pseudo-revolutionary force with a stable base in the USSR that allowed the Communist Parties to survive any political shift, zig-zag or glaring contradiction. This was not politics as hitherto known in the labour movement, but a variant of the state-serving politics hitherto confined to the bourgeoisie, whose parties, alternating in power, would, despite differences, commonly serve the fundamental social status quo, the rule of the bourgeoisie.

In the Stalinist parties, policy zig-zags occurred repeatedly within one entity, defined by the interests of the USSR ruling class. This would change the map of the labour movement's political world, intruding into it a bureaucratic force as powerful and unscrupulous as the state and the ruling class it served. The laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus, Trotsky would write. In fact the Stalinist apparatus inserted a reshaping force into history — not for ever, as the once seemingly all-powerful Russian Stalinist rulers would learn in 1989-91, but for a whole epoch, and enough to derail, confuse and crush progressive forces falteringly moving forward in the class struggle. The strength of the Stalinist apparatus, against whole societies and against more easily dispersible and destructible labour movements made up of voluntary associations of workers, was something new in history. In Germany, Spain and France, Stalinism acted as one of the two giant millstones which ground into nothingness labour movements, which, had they been able to develop, might have reconstructed society on a higher socialist level.

By the time Trotsky died, on 21 August 1940, the European labour movement had been pulverised. Excepting Britain, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland and Sweden, fascism and authoritarianism ruled Europe. To the east Stalin had erected a bureaucratic throne above the grave of the Russian labour movement.

Trotskyism was an epiphenomenon of the early Communist International: a critical satellite of the mass parties of the Communist International, desperately trying to reorient them; and then a disablingly weak competitor with

both the Communist International and the older social democracy. It was armed with the unfalsified ideas, goals and perspectives of 1917 Bolshevism and the early Communist International in a capitalist world rushing towards disaster and the biggest and most destructive war in history.

The contrast between what followed the collapse of the Communist International in 1933 and the aftermath of the collapse of the Second International in 1914 was decisive for the subsequent history of Europe. In 1914 and after, the Kaiser socialists and their counterparts in other countries had visibly and audibly broken with the old ideas. There was resistance — led by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Klara Zetkin, Franz Mehring, Otto Rühle and others — which swelled and grew in response to events. In 1916 the German Social Democracy split. Radicalisation grew, especially after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Revolutionaries rallied to the clean red banner of October. After the decisive collapse of the Stalinised Communist Party in 1933, nothing was clear-cut. The bureaucratic Russian state twisted and shaped everything. In 1933 and after, the Trotskyist opposition did not appear boldly and clearly as the revolutionary opposition, nor the Stalinists as renegades who had served the enemy and helped destroy the most powerful labour movement in Europe.

Decisively, the Stalinists had not gone over to the bourgeois enemy, they were demagogically very left wing and “revolutionary”; they served the anti-capitalist Russian bureaucracy. There was neither freedom to organise in the Communist Parties, nor the possibility of open discussion; nor, now, was there unadulterated Marxist education to build on. There had already been a decade of radical miseducation, of systematic falsification of the ideas of Marxism and the Russian Revolution. The very language of Marxism had been corrupted and reduced to emotion-bearing demagogic, arbitrary catch-cries.

It would be like that, with national variations, all through the 1930s, until war reshaped the world anew and for a whole epoch closed off the perspectives on which the Communist International of 1919 had organised itself.

2. BOLSHEVISM AT BAY: TROTSKY ON THE USSR

I: TROTSKY IN EXILE

IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIS expulsion from the USSR in February 1929, Trotsky, the Left Oppositionist reformer inside the USSR, was a hard-faced man of the regime to the outside world. When he wrote for the general public, his criticisms of the regime were selective, general and muted. Sharper criticism was reserved for his communist-oppositionist audience.

He split with the German Leninbund, the biggest organisation in the early international Left Opposition, because it would not support Stalin's policy of holding on to the Chinese Eastern Railway against the Chinese. (Stalin would cede it to Japan in 1935). Himself author of acute social analysis of that system (see the next section), and a critic of the lack of democracy in the USSR, one, moreover, whose comrades there were already being shot, Trotsky reacted violently, as late as 1934, against talk of general democracy in the USSR. “There is a tendency among our friends in Paris to deny the proletarian

nature of the USSR, to demand that there be complete democracy in the USSR, including the legalisation of the Mensheviks, etc.... We regard this tendency as treason which must be fought implacably”⁶.

By the end of the 1930s there would be a very telling inversion. Trotsky would become a strident critic of the Stalinist internal regime and Stalinist foreign policy when he addressed the general public, and write about “defence of the USSR” almost exclusively in the intra-Trotskyist literature. At the same time, after 1930, when Stalinist industrialisation seemed miraculously successful and capitalism spiralled into the great slump, many of the Social Democratic critics of Bolshevism would move towards a friendly attitude to Stalinism — friendlier, as Trotsky will note, ironically, than they ever were to Bolshevism. The leading theoretician of the Austro-Marxist school, Otto Bauer, and Mensheviks like Fyodor Dan were critical of Stalinism for its lack of democracy, but saw the USSR as representing one road to socialism, suitable for backward Russia but not for Western Europe. True to the docile philistine spirit of rationalising from hard “facts” and accommodating themselves to power, they were very impressed by the USSR’s economic achievements.

The peak performance in this spiritually and intellectually athletic journey by the Social Democrats to Stalin’s Moscow was the conversion of Sydney and Beatrice Webb — Lord and Lady Passfield, epitomes of the British Fabian type described by Frederick Engels as “middle-class reformers who think socialism is too good to be left to the workers” — to the conclusion that the USSR was “A New Civilisation”.

As the experience of Stalinism accumulated, Trotsky virtually swapped places with most of the social-democratic critics of the USSR. By the mid-1930s, the once implacable and unrepentant defender of the Bolshevik regime against Social-Democratic and vulgar-democratic critics was scornfully castigating the Bauerites and the “Brandlerite” Right Communists, for being apologists and rationalising defence lawyers for Stalin and Stalinism. In his root-and-branch opposition to Stalinism Trotsky after 1936 was close to Karl Kautsky. In his theoretical summaries, however, Trotsky remained tied to the idea that the Stalinist USSR was still a workers’ state of some sort. What follows is an attempt to trace the evolution of Trotsky’s ideas on the Stalinist USSR.

II. “A BUREAUCRATIC ECONOMY”

BY 1933 IT had become clear that Stalin’s “left turn” of 1929-30 was no mere zig-zag or temporary improvisation. The regime had survived the convulsive crisis of 1932-3. It had given a new shape to USSR society. Until his death in 1940, Trotsky would continue to call the USSR a “workers’ state” of sorts. Yet the basic trend of his detailed, concrete analyses of the USSR — and of most of his political conclusions — was, in my view, sharply and increasingly at odds with that summary description.

Trotsky gives his first comprehensive anatomy of Stalinist society in an article of April 1933, “The Theory of Degeneration and the Degeneration of Theory”. Trotsky discusses the question of why, if, as the Stalinists say, socialism has been realised, the state is not, as in Marxist theory it should be, with-

ering away, becoming less and less of a social force. In fact it has grown to unprecedented power and dominance. He links the state with a discussion of inflation and money: like the state, money has a necessary social function, as measure of value and means of exchange; like the state, its role will diminish with social development. It too will finally wither away.

As with two flashlights, one in each hand, playing from different angles on something obscured and darkly hidden, Trotsky examines the nature of Stalinist society from the two sides of state and economy. He lights up a picture which does not fit easily — or, indeed, fit at all — into the historical and theoretical framework that he insists on. The society he describes and anatomises is unmistakably a new form of class society, neither capitalism nor socialism, or in transition to socialism. It is what will at the end of the 30s be called bureaucratic collectivism.

“The soviets have lost the last remnants of independent significance and have ceased being soviets. The party does not exist”. Insisting that “the relative independence of the trade unions is a necessary and important corrective in the system of the soviet state... the workers must defend themselves, even in a workers’ state, through their trade-union organisations”, Trotsky observes that “the trade unions are completely crushed... under the cover of the struggle with the right deviation”.⁷

“The state not only does not wither away... but... becomes ever more openly the instrument of bureaucratic coercion... The apparatus of the trade unions themselves has become the weapon of an ever-growing pressure on the workers”.

Referring to the “regime of terror against the party and the proletariat”, Trotsky asks: “Where does such a terrible, monstrous, unbearable exercise of the political regime come from?”. He finally answers: “The intensification of repression is necessary for the defence of the privileged positions of the bureaucracy”.

He now draws out “an analogy between the role of money and the role of the state in the transitional epoch”. Money, Trotsky says, “a direct heritage of capitalism”, cannot simply be abolished. It will wither away as its functions as measure of value and means of exchange decline in a society of abundance. In the first period of working-class rule its role will grow rather than diminish: it is an essential tool of real planning and of real social knowledge. There will be an “extreme expansion” in the turnover of goods in the transition period. All branches of a growing economy “must determine their relation to each other qualitatively and quantitatively”.

“Money as the means of accounting evolved by capitalism is not thrown aside but socialised. Socialist construction is unthinkable without the inclusion in the planned system of the personal interest of the producer and consumer. And this interest can actively manifest itself only when it has at its disposal a trustful and flexible weapon: a stable monetary system”. That is what happens in a workers’ state developing towards socialism. And in the USSR? Trotsky describes the reality of bureaucratic arbitrariness and inflation. “Money regulated by administrative prices fixed for goods loses its ability to regulate plans. In this field as in others, ‘socialism’ for the bureaucracy consists of freeing its will from any control: party, Soviet, trade union or money ... Economic planning frees itself from value control as bureaucratic fancy frees itself from political control. The rejection of ‘objective causes’ ... repre-

6 *Writings Supplement 1934-40*, p.538.

sents the 'theoretical' ravings of bureaucratic subjectivism ... The Soviet economy today is neither a monetary nor a planned one. It is an almost purely bureaucratic economy. To support unreliable and disproportionate tempos, a further intensification of pressure on the proletariat became imperative. Industry, freed from the material control of the producer, took on a supersocial, that is, bureaucratic, character. As a result it lost the ability to satisfy human wants even to the degree to which it had been accomplished by the less-developed capitalist industry...

"From this and from this alone... flows the necessity for the introduction of coercion into all cells of economic life (strengthening of the power of [factory] managers, laws against absentees, death penalty for spoilation of collective-farm property by its members, war measures in sowing campaigns and harvest collections... the [internal] passport system, political departments in the villages, etc. etc.)... The dictatorship of the proletariat withers away in the form of bureaucratic inflation, that is, in the extreme swelling of coercion, persecutions, and violence. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not dissolved in a classless society, but degenerates into the omnipotence of bureaucracy over society".

By the time Trotsky writes his major study of the USSR, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1935-6), the acute monetary instability of the early 1930s has subsided. The "bureaucratic arbitrariness" — the regulation of economic and social life by the arbitrary exercise of unbridled state power more than any before known — has not. Stalinist autocracy has not. Trotsky poses the problem.

"If exploitation is "ended forever"... [as the Stalinists claim] then there remains nothing for society to do but to throw off at last the straitjacket of the state. In place of this — it is hard even to grasp this contrast with the mind! — the Soviet state has acquired a totalitarian-bureaucratic character... What social cause stands behind the stubborn virility of the state and especially behind its policification? The importance of this question is obvious. In dependence upon the answer, we must either radically revise our traditional views of the socialist society in general, or as radically reject the official estimates of the Soviet Union".

The programme of the Bolsheviks was: "A strong state, but without mandarins; armed power, but without the Samurai! The party programme demands a replacement of the standing army by an armed people. The regime of proletarian dictatorship from its very beginning thus ceases to be a 'state' in the old sense of the word — a special apparatus, that is, for holding in subjection the majority of the people. The material power, together with the weapons, goes over directly and immediately into the hands of the workers' organisations such as the soviets. The state as a bureaucratic apparatus begins to die away on the first day of the proletarian dictatorship. Such is the voice of the party program... Strange: it sounds like a spectral voice from the mausoleum."

The USSR regime has not begun to "die away" but "has grown into a hitherto unheard of apparatus of compulsion. The bureaucracy... has turned into an uncontrolled force dominating the masses. The army... has given birth to a privileged officers' caste, crowned with marshals, while the people, 'the armed bearers of the dictatorship', are now forbidden in the Soviet Union to

7. Tomsky, the main trade-union leader, had been a prominent Bukharinite.

carry even nonexplosive weapons.”.

Trotsky starkly sums up the contrast between the USSR and the workers' state: “With the utmost stretch of fancy it would be difficult to imagine a contrast more striking than that which exists between the scheme of the workers' state according to Marx, Engels and Lenin, and the actual state now headed by Stalin”.

“The regime became ‘totalitarian’ in character several years before this word arrived from Germany”. “From the first days of the soviet regime the counterweight to bureaucratism was the party. If the bureaucracy managed the state, still the party controlled the bureaucracy. Keenly vigilant lest inequality transcend the limits of what was necessary, the party was always in a state of open or disguised struggle with the bureaucracy. The historic role of Stalin's faction was to destroy this duplication, subjecting the party to its own officialdom and merging the latter in the officialdom of the state. Thus was created the present totalitarian regime”.

III. STATE PROPERTY AND SOCIALISM

STATE PROPERTY UNDER such a regime cannot be socialist. “The new constitution [of 1936] — wholly founded, as we shall see, upon an identification of the bureaucracy with the state, and the state with the people — says: ‘... the state property — that is, the possessions of the whole people.’ This identification is the fundamental sophism of the official doctrine.

It is perfectly true that Marxists, beginning with Marx himself, have employed in relation to the workers' state the terms state, national and socialist property as simple synonyms. On a large historic scale, such a mode of speech involves no special inconveniences. But it becomes the source of crude mistakes, and of downright deceit, when applied to the first and still unassured stages of the development of a new society, and one moreover isolated and economically lagging behind the capitalist countries.

In order to become social, private property must as inevitably pass through the state stage as the caterpillar in order to become a butterfly must pass through the pupal stage. But the pupa is not a butterfly... State property becomes the property of ‘the whole people’ only to the degree that social privilege and differentiation disappear, and therewith the necessity of the state. In other words: state property is converted into socialist property in proportion as it ceases to be state property. And the contrary is true: the higher the soviet state rises above the people... the more obviously does it testify against the socialist character of this state property.”.

“The transfer of the factories to the state changed the situation of the worker only juridically. In reality, he is compelled to live in want and work a definite number of hours for a definite wage... the new state resorted to the old methods of pressure upon the muscles and nerves of the worker. There grew up a corps of slave drivers. The management of industry became superbureaucratic. The workers lost all influence whatever upon the management of the factory. With piecework payment, hard conditions of material existence, lack of free movement, with terrible police repression penetrating the life of every factory, it is hard indeed for the worker to feel himself a ‘free workman.’ In the bureaucracy he sees the manager, in the state, the employer.”

IV. CATCHING UP WITH CAPITALISM

TROTSKY RECALLS THAT in 1846 Karl Marx defined the development of the productive forces as the prerequisite of communism. "Without it want is generalised, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means that all the old crap must revive." In the USSR the "struggle for necessities" has given rise to a monstrous autocracy. A system built for forced-march industrialisation in an isolated and backward economy can be defined as socialism only by disregarding the most basic ideas of Marxism.

By socialism Marx meant: "a society which from the very beginning stands higher in its economic development than the most advanced capitalism... on a world scale communism, even in its first incipient stage, means a higher level of development than that of bourgeois society... Russia was not the strongest, but the weakest link in the chain of capitalism. The present Soviet Union does not stand above the world level of economy, but is only trying to catch up to the capitalist countries. If Marx called that society which was to be formed upon the basis of a socialisation of the productive forces of the most advanced capitalism of its epoch the lowest stage of communism, then this designation obviously does not apply to the Soviet Union, which is still today considerably poorer in technique, culture and the good things of life than the capitalist countries... The soviet regime is passing through a preparatory stage, importing, borrowing and appropriating the technical and cultural conquests of the West... this preparatory stage is far from finished. Even under the improbable condition of a continuing complete capitalist standstill it must still occupy a whole historic period".

"Socialism, or the lowest stage of communism... assumes... more humane forms of control than those invented by the exploitative genius of capital. In the Soviet Union, however, there is now taking place a ruthlessly severe fitting in of backward human material to the technique borrowed from capitalism... state ownership of the means of production does not turn manure into gold, and does not surround with a halo of sanctity the sweatshop system...". Trotsky indicts the autocracy's use of "the classic methods of exploitation... in such naked and crude forms as would not be permitted even by reformist trade unions in bourgeois countries". In the interaction between bosses and workers — but not only there — "The relations between men... have not only not yet risen to socialism, but in many respects are still lagging behind a cultured capitalism".

And why? The programme of the Bolshevik Revolution "was based wholly upon an international perspective. 'The October revolution in Russia has realised the dictatorship of the proletariat... The era of world proletarian communist revolution has begun.' These were the introductory lines of the program." The Bolsheviks could not then imagine or analyse "what character the Soviet state would assume, if compelled for as long as two decades to solve in isolation those economic and cultural problems which advanced capitalism had solved so long ago." That has led to "the ultra-bureaucratic character of its state"; the delay of international revolution has also "led in the capitalist countries to fascism or the pre-fascist reaction".

"In the last analysis, Soviet Bonapartism owes its birth to the belatedness of

the world revolution. But in the capitalist countries the same cause gave rise to fascism... the crushing of soviet democracy by an all-powerful bureaucracy and the extermination of bourgeois democracy by fascism were produced by one and the same cause: the dilatoriness of the world proletariat in solving the problems set for it by history. Stalinism and fascism, in spite of a deep difference in social foundations, are symmetrical phenomena. In many of their features they show a deadly similarity."

V. THE NATURE OF THE STALINIST AUTOCRACY

IN "THESES" ON "The Fourth International and the Soviet Union", written in July 1936 as he finishes *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky declares that the economic successes of the USSR "are already proving adequate for the emergence of a broad privileged stratum". Social antagonisms are "enormously accentuated". Inequality "is growing by leaps and bounds". "The soviet bureaucracy has acquired an actual independence from the toilers"; it is "the most privileged of all the privileged strata". For its people soviet society "presents an enormous hierarchy: from vagabond children, prostitutes, slum proletarians — to the ruling 'ten thousand' who lead the life of Western European magnates of capital".

The bureaucracy is thus, so Trotsky writes, "something more than a bureaucracy". "In its intermediary and regulating function, its concern to maintain social ranks, and its exploitation of the state apparatus for personal goals, the Soviet bureaucracy is similar to every other bureaucracy, especially the fascist. But it is also in a vast way different. In no other regime has a bureaucracy ever achieved such a degree of independence from the dominating class". By "the dominating class" Trotsky here means the working class. Why, and in what sense, Trotsky believes that it "dominates", we shall see later.

The essential point here is the contrast with the bureaucracy in capitalist society, representing the interests of "a possessing and educated class" having "innumerable means of everyday control over" the bureaucracy. The fascist bureaucracy in power intertwines with the big bourgeoisie, but "the soviet bureaucracy takes on bourgeois customs without having beside it a national bourgeoisie. In this sense we cannot deny that it is something more than a bureaucracy. It is in the full sense of the word the sole privileged and commanding stratum in the Soviet society".

"The very fact of its appropriation of political power in a country where the principal means of production are in the hands of the state, creates a new and hitherto unknown relation between the bureaucracy and the riches of the nation. The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy... If these as yet wholly new relations should solidify, become the norm and be legalised, whether with or without resistance from the workers, they would, in the long run, lead to a complete liquidation of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution". [emphasis added]

Here, Trotsky falls into presenting the relations between people as relations between the bureaucracy on one side and things ("the riches of the nation"), not people, on the other. And, as we shall see, Trotsky will later make great play with the qualification "so to speak" — "the state, so to speak, belongs to

the bureaucracy". But the sociological picture of Stalinist society which Trotsky paints is clear and full in its outlines.

The straightforward implication is that the bureaucracy is the ruling class. It organises production in a way unique to itself. It appropriates the social surplus product on the basis of controlling the means of life. There is no other privileged elite. The entire population is at its disposal.

Many aspects of this society and this ruling class are new, mysterious and still unfolding, and its stability is not to be assumed, but the basic socio-economic relations fit the pattern of all previous class societies. Trotsky has described all this, explained the basic reasons for it, and connected it up to the whole history of class society. If the relations are not "solidified", normalised, and legalised, they do certainly exist. They are the pattern of Stalinist society as it has functioned through its industrial revolution of the last several years. In fact history will show those relations to be "solidified" enough that they survive the World War and expand and reproduce for over fifty years after 1936.

VI. "THE SYSTEM OF BONAPARTIST GANGSTERISM"

THE GREAT TERROR began in late 1934 and rose to a frenzy of unparalleled slaughter after August 1936, when Stalin organised the first of the three Moscow Trials in which almost all the surviving leaders of the 1917 revolution were forced to confess to having been "counter-revolutionaries" even while leading the October Revolution and then killed. On 1 May 1939 Trotsky wrote "The Bonapartist Philosophy of the State" (it appeared in *New International*, June 1939). Just four months before the great political dispute in the Trotskyist movement, in which he would insist on the description "workers' state", this article presents a stark picture of a distinct socio-economic formation, not of any possible sort of workers' state.

Trotsky depicts Stalinism as a system more akin to Dark Age feudalism or to the rigidifying Roman Empire of about 300 AD than to either socialism or capitalism, or anything in between.

By now Trotsky's analysis and descriptions of the USSR are in flat contradiction to his theoretical framework — it is a "degenerated workers' state" — and two distinct Trotskyisms exist in Trotsky himself. They will separate in 1939-40. Articles like this are educating those who, like Shachtman, will soon come out against Trotsky's political conclusion and then against his ossified theoretical paradigm.

"The realities of soviet life today can indeed be hardly reconciled even with the shreds of old theory. Workers are bound to the factories; peasants are bound to the collective farms. [Internal] Passports have been introduced. Freedom of movement has been completely restricted. It is a capital crime to come late to work. Punishable as treason is not only any criticism of Stalin but even the mere failure to fulfil the natural duty to get down on all fours before the 'Leader'. The frontiers are guarded by an impenetrable wall of border

patrols and police dogs on a scale heretofore unknown anywhere. To all intents and purposes no one can leave and no one may enter. Foreigners [in fact, communists, and especially communist refugees from capitalist police states] who had previously managed to get into the country are being systematically exterminated.

"The... soviet constitution, 'the most democratic in the world', amounts to this, that every citizen is required at an appointed time to cast his ballot for the one and only candidate handpicked by Stalin or his agents. The press, the radio, all the organs of propaganda, agitation and national education are completely in the hands of the ruling clique... How many have been shot, thrown into jails and concentration camps, or exiled to Siberia, we do not definitely know. But undoubtedly hundreds of thousands of party members have shared the fate of millions of non-party people". Though the "official edict" is that "socialism has been realised", Stalinism has "brought the state to a pitch of wild intensity unprecedented in the history of mankind".

In this "totalitarian state", "the party, the government, the army and the diplomatic corps have been bled white and beheaded". "The growth and strengthening of the military and civil caste signifies that society is moving not towards but away from the socialist ideal". The purges and "frame-ups" "must flow from the very structure of Soviet society... Inequality always requires a safeguard; privileges always demand protection; and the encroachments of the disinherited require punishment..."

Trotsky pictures the life of the "ruling caste". In addition to publicly acknowledged salaries, "they receive secret salaries from the treasuries of the Central Committee or local committees; they have at their disposal automobiles (there even exist special plants for the production of finest automobiles for the use of 'responsible workers'), excellent apartments, summer homes, sanatoria, and hospitals. To suit their needs or their vanity all sorts of 'soviet palaces' are erected". Trotsky shows that the bureaucrats can pass on to their children, if not property in the means of production, then status and future membership in the elite: the ruling caste "almost monopolise the highest institutions of learning".

Trotsky summarises: "The Bonapartist apparatus of the state is thus an organ for defending the bureaucratic thieves and plunderers of national wealth". In his capacity as the pontiff of lies, that is, chief liar in the state, and as the chief state terrorist, Stalin is "the spokesman of privileged parasites. In the land that has gone through the proletarian revolution, it is impossible to foster inequality, create an aristocracy, and accumulate privileges save by bringing down on the masses floods of lies and ever more monstrous repressions".

Is this strange social system, in which 170 millions of people live, which is neither capitalist nor socialist, a new form of society? Indisputably, this society exists, and therefore it is a new form of society. Trotsky, confining himself to analysis and description, here says nothing of this. He does not believe it has reached stability. He stresses, as an explanation for the social convulsions, that the bureaucrats' income is in large part sanctioned neither by "the principles of socialism" nor by "the laws of the country". "Embezzlement and theft, the bureaucracy's main sources of income, do not constitute a system of exploitation in the scientific sense of the term. But from the standpoint of the interests and position of the popular masses, it 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.

It is precisely the absence of crystallised class relations and their very impossibility on the social foundations of the October Revolution that invest the workings of the state machine with such a convulsive character. To perpetuate the systematic theft of the bureaucracy, its apparatus is compelled to resort to systematic acts of banditry. The sum total of all these things constitutes the system of Bonapartist gangsterism”.

VII. GANGSTER STATE AND WORKERS’ STATE?

FOR TROTSKY, AS we have seen, the Stalinist USSR, simultaneously with being a “system of Bonapartist gangsterism”, was also a “degenerated workers’ state”. In Trotsky’s mind this bizarre contradiction was possible only because the Stalinist USSR was a momentary concatenation of opposites, a freak socio-economic formation. Or so he thought. In fact he was faced with analysing and understanding and integrating into Marxist theory something entirely new in history. This new state and society were not working-class in any previously understood sense — as Trotsky himself put it, “the realities of soviet life [could] be hardly reconciled even with the shreds of old theory” — and not capitalist either. Almost to the very end — and then, in September-October 1939, he made only tentative moves to a rectification — Trotsky was like a man trying to find his way in unknown territory, using a map of another, radically different, terrain.

He saw Stalinism as in transition either to capitalism like that in, say, China, or Turkey, or to a regenerated workers’ state — but not as a distinct system viable, beyond maybe a few years, in its existing form. He refused to give it a ‘static’ label — or identify it as a distinct socio-economic formation. He described the “system of Bonapartist gangsterism” and developed a working-class programme to fight its rulers, but on the level of theory had not, so to speak, recognised its distinct character. The rupturing of the forms of nationalised economy would lead to the first alternative, capitalism; the rupturing of the political form, bureaucratic rule, to the second, regeneration of the workers’ state.

Stalinism in the Soviet Union would last six and a half decades. Trotsky’s work covered its first decade and a half. It is not surprising that he left the work of analysing a new and unexpected socio-economic formation uncompleted at his death. Contrast Trotsky’s situation as he analysed Stalinism with Marx’s as he analysed capitalism 90 years before. When Marx began to analyse capitalist society in the 1840s, capitalism had existed in varying forms and phases and in different countries for perhaps 400 years (Marx’s own dating, in *Capital*). Industrial capitalism was 70 years old. Capitalism had produced its own revolution in Holland (16th century), England (17th century), America and France (18th century). The class struggles within capitalism had a long history. Capitalism had a large body of political, social and economic theory; the working class had already created its first mass movement (Chartism, in Britain at the end of the 1830s and in the 1840s). In 1831 the silk-workers seized the city of Lyons, in France, and held it for a while.

Trotsky, however, faced a Stalinist system which came into being and developed in a short time — in all its unexpectedness, and operating by its adaptation to its own purposes of old ways and by the transmutation into their opposites of old forms, some bearing a formal resemblance to what the October Revolution had created. It had arisen within the working-class state of the October Revolution, heavily disguised and bearing its own form of nationalised economy which it established by way of conquest of the economic forms set up by the revolution. Scrupulously recording the facts of bureaucratic rule, Trotsky spent 17 years until his death wrestling with the contradictions between those facts and socialist norms and the perspectives of the October Revolution.

VIII: PROGRAMME AND ANALYSIS

TROTSKY DENOUNCED STALINISM with unequalled acuteness. He developed an adequate working-class programme of action against it. Why should the general theoretical definition — “degenerated workers’ state” or otherwise — matter?

Central to the power of the Russian bureaucracy in its international political operation was its credibility as the leadership of a still-alive Russian workers’ Revolution. Therefore analysis of Russia, as it evolved and mutated in the 1920s and ’30s, was central to the work of marginalised Bolshevism in rebuilding a mass revolutionary international. So long as the USSR’s “communist” credentials remained good with the revolutionary workers, the Trotskyists would not be a force in the labour movement. Their failure to grasp early the fact that a new class ruled — that despite appearances and despite the nationalised property, the USSR had nothing to do with working-class rule — was an immense weakness. It led to wholesale desertion from the ranks of the Russian Left Opposition in 1928-30, and it would make competition for the allegiance of revolutionary workers extraordinarily difficult for a Trotskyist movement which believed that despite everything it had a vast common ground with the Stalinists in defence of the Soviet Union. On the eve of Trotsky’s death a new twist, in response to a new stage of self-assertion by the new Stalinist ruling class — the beginning of Russian imperialist expansion, at first in alliance with Hitler’s Germany — would rip apart the Trotskyist movement, and set in motion a process that would change the meaning of words and symbols in a way that paralleled the changes that Stalinism had wrought in the vocabulary and perspectives of the 1917 revolution.

Revolutionary Marxism is more than a socialist programme: it is a series of broad historical perspectives based on analysis and research. On the accuracy of those analyses ultimately depends the intellectual validity of the revolutionary socialist programme. Without Marx’s analysis of capitalism, in which he uncovered the mechanisms of exploitation within relations of legal equality between capitalist and worker, socialism would still be only an inchoate yearning for a better world. Stalin’s “second revolution” of 1928-30 shaped the USSR for the next 60 years. Trotsky interpreted it as a continuation and development of 1917. This enormous error generated over a decade, and after Trotsky’s death five decades, of theoretical disorientation and historical misunderstanding. Much of it persists, long after the collapse of the USSR. It led

to an irresolvable contradiction between Trotsky's accurate and probing concrete descriptions of the USSR and his theoretical paradigm that the USSR was a degenerated workers' state.

From the 1920s to long after Trotsky's death, those who shared his view that the Stalin regime preserved the "gains" or "remains" of October found themselves ambivalent towards Stalinism. At root this was because of the nature of Stalinism itself. It was anti-capitalist: at the end of the 1920s it annihilated the pro-capitalist forces. In the 1940s and 1950s it wiped out capitalism in many countries. Stalinism's Trotskyist critics were driven into embodying two incongruous political personalities — that of the advocate and defender of the existing working class, in the USSR and outside, and that of the proponent of a broad historical perspective of anti-capitalist revolution, in which the Stalinist rulers were for now the custodians of the October Revolution, and later of other revolutions which created as much as was said to "remain" of October. The Stalinist rulers, who savagely oppressed and exploited the workers, were nonetheless, in their role of custodians or creators of nationalised property, part of the world revolution. Until the workers got rid of them, even they had to be "defended" against capitalism.

Trotsky saw the nationalised property as post-capitalist in form, less than advanced-capitalist in content, and shackled by the bureaucracy. At the heart of this contradictory system stood an ineradicable antagonism between the bureaucracy and the proletariat. Because of this contradiction, planning was vitiated. The bureaucrats ruled and planned "with all the lights out", in a system deprived of democratic self-monitoring and self-rule. The Stalinist terror functioned as a crude substitute instrument of control, dynamism and monitoring.

It was not enough to have a programme of action against the bureaucracy: the system needed to be explained, to have its real relationship to both capitalism and socialism, to the bourgeoisie and to the proletariat, and its place in historical evolution worked out and established. Nothing was what it was proclaimed to be.

The Stalinist system dressed up as the Russian workers' revolution departed most from the goals and purposes of old socialism where it seemed most to realise the methods and techniques — nationalisation for example — that socialism had advocated. Real Marxism needed to be starkly separated from the "Marxism" with which, confusingly, it seemed to share so much — the "official Marxism" of obfuscations and scholasticism purveyed by Stalinism. The Stalinist lies, and their systematic reversal of the meaning of all the terms in real Marxism, needed to be dissected and analysed. The precise points at which Stalinism parted company with unfalsified Marxism had to be clearly established; the joints at which interests alien to the working class had been grafted on to old Marxist anti-capitalist concepts located. Much of the work of Marxism was a matter of uncovering lies and falsifications and establishing on the level of plain fact the reality of the USSR, measured against Marxist theory, working-class programme and socialist purpose. The secret of how out of "common ownership" there came not socialism but this system of state tyranny had to be uncovered.

Trotsky was close to the end of his life before the problem as posed by history — the Stalinist USSR as a distinct system in its own right — was posed by him clearly: almost all his theoretical work on the Soviet Union took for granted the framework in which regression to capitalism was seen as the

alternative to a new socialist revolution. He did not adequately define and characterise the social mutation that actually existed.

Faced with a new social system in the USSR Trotsky pictured it, explored its oppressions and its real meaning for working people in their day-to-day lives. He opposed to Stalin's system a working-class programme: essentially, the 1917 programme of the Bolsheviks. He put down the elements of an analysis like pin-points on a board, but did not draw the lines between the points that would make an adequate theoretical outline of the Stalinist system. In fact, in articles like "The Theory of Degeneration" and "The Bonapartist Philosophy", and in his book *The Revolution Betrayed*, he portrayed the Stalinist USSR clearly as the new system it was; but he never, until the eve of his death and then only hypothetically, defined it as such⁸. In 1936 he depicted the real relationship between the "legal" owners of state property, the workers, and its political "owners", the bureaucrats who "owned" the state. But he drew back from the conclusion plainly indicated by what he wrote. He was not allowed to live long enough to draw that conclusion, though he unmistakably moved towards it.

At the end of his life he still saw Stalinism in terms of other social formations — capitalism, socialism — and only tentatively, and as if through a shifting mist, as what it really was, something distinct both from capitalism and from socialism: distinct from capitalism, although the bureaucracy was exploitative; and distinct from working-class socialism, although it was anti-capitalist and, in its own bureaucratic way, collectivist.

Much of Trotsky at the end is unclear and self-contradictory. This led to a split that would define two very different "Trotskyisms" in the years after Trotsky's death. The roots of that split lay in the conflicting elements that had accumulated to the point of unmanageable contradiction in Trotsky's view of the USSR. Russia's role at the outbreak of the Second World War brought it to a head. Trotsky's heirs, after his assassination in August 1940, inherited theoretical chaos in a world undergoing changes that would shape it to the end of the twentieth century.

One reason why Trotsky at the end is "difficult" and confusing on this question is, I think, that he sometime shifts from one framework to another, and does not always make it plain — if it was always clear to him — what framework he is using. He had changed his framework for viewing the USSR substantially several times — around 1929-30; around 1933; around 1936 — and at the end was tentatively proposing yet another framework.

Trotsky had responded to each new stage, each new event, each new horror and outrage, with protests, analysis, proposals for labour movement action. He advocated revolution. But until the Stalinist status quo was disrupted by bourgeois counter-revolution or a new workers' "political" revolution — until then, the USSR remained a degenerated workers' state. Even when Trotsky believed the autocracy had become an absolute brake on the economy, it remained the supervisor of the military defence of the USSR, for its own self-interested reasons and in its own way, and in that sense it remained relatively progressive against any capitalist forces.

Time after time in the 1930s, Trotsky expected that the Stalinist system simply could not go on. The system was not — and, he thought, could not be — stable. We know now that it would survive Trotsky for half a century, and spread nationalised property in various ways, or inspire its spread, to a further one-sixth of the globe, and to vastly greater populations than the USSR's.

Trotsky's position committed those who agreed with him to "defend" the USSR as it became an expansionary imperialist power and to defend the regimes it set up in Eastern Europe, first as a junior partner of Hitler (August 1939 to June 1941); then as a less junior partner of Britain and the USA (1941-45); and finally, after the fall of Hitler's Reich, as the greatest power in Europe and one of the two great powers of the world — a predatory, looting, savagely repressive, worker-enslaving, backward, ultra-reactionary empire. In fact, despite all that had changed, it was an empire strangely like the Tsarist empire, as Marx had known and loathed it, in its relationship to Europe.

Given Trotsky's baseline criteria for classifying the USSR, he was tied to that "workers' state", however degenerated, reactionary, or imperialistic it might be. To put it crudely, so long as the USSR was imperialist on the basis of nationalised property, it was not imperialist — or, anyway, not quite like reactionary capitalist imperialism. As the horrors piled up, culminating, with the Hitler-Stalin pact, in the eruption of Stalin's bureaucratic imperialism, the outlines of Trotsky's theory again and again were stretched out of shape to accommodate the dogma that this, whatever it was, remained a workers' state, and progressive so long as nationalised property was preserved. Trotsky, of course, did not think that system could last. Expecting, at point after point, the rupturing of the USSR, Trotsky was by the end disoriented — for example in his comments on the Stalinist invasion of Finland — and he must have known and felt it.

His followers, in the movement he founded to continue the work of the early Communist International, would be derailed by the survival of the Stalinist system — and its expansion as a revolutionary anti-capitalist force. If Trotsky's position on the USSR was correct, then "orthodox" neo-Trotskyism — with its ineradicable tendency to assume the role of loyal liberal critic to various Stalinist regimes — followed logically and necessarily. Who says A and B and so on to the 19th letter of the alphabet must then say the rest — or change the alphabet.

Trotsky was by the end reduced to defending his position with the argument that it would be "ridiculous" to append to the Stalinist bureaucracy and the system in which it ruled the designation of a new class society just a few years or months before its collapse.

But the system did last, and it did expand. The "orthodox" neo-Trotskyists arrived reluctantly — those who survived the ideological rocks and rapids of the strange voyage — at absurdities and ideological inversions that sometimes compounded the absurdities of Stalinism itself and, anyway, paralleled and "Trotskyised" them. They arrived at the idea of — "for now" — progressive Stalinism.

When history provided neither capitalist counter-revolution nor working-class "political" revolution, the only way out of this *reductio ad absurdum*, and the destruction by accommodation to Stalinism of the norms and parameters of socialism, was to find the original error in the calculations and to go back and learn to see the Stalinist system for what it was, a unique socio-economic formation — to reconceptualise the USSR.

IX. DISSOLVING BEING INTO BECOMING

8. In "The USSR in War" (September 1939) and "Again and once more..." (October 1939).

TROTSKY'S FIRST DETAILED attempt to square the fact of the USSR as a bureaucratic tyranny with the concept of it as a workers' state was in an article of October 1933, "The Class Nature of the Soviet State". In it he codified and developed all the main ideas that would inform his polemics on this issue up to his death; though, over the next six or seven years, he would radically shift the balance and meaning of many of the terms of the theory. At the end the content of what he said would be radically different, though the terms remained the same. Through the 1930s, Trotsky stretched the meaning of the old terms again and again until by the end his theory was very difficult to understand. He maintained an increasingly fictitious continuity by a method which resembled the medieval art of palimpsestry — writing new content into an old text.

Trotsky's starting-point in the October 1933 article is the fact that, since the German Communist Party's collapse without a fight after Hitler's coming to power in January 1933, he believes that the Communist International must now be written off as a potentially revolutionary working-class force. The genuine Bolsheviks must seek to build new parties. But the same Stalinist apparatus rules both the International and the USSR. It is "equally ruinous" in the USSR and in the Communist International. "Isn't it then necessary to recognise the simultaneous collapse of the Communist International and the liquidation of the proletarian dictatorship in the USSR?"

Recall that Trotsky has written only a few months before that the USSR "is an almost purely bureaucratic economy" in which industry has "lost the ability to satisfy human wants even to the degree to which it had been accomplished by the less-developed capitalist industry..." And when in the October 1933 article Trotsky discusses the idea that Stalinism is what would be called "bureaucratic collectivism", he does not try to show any immediate factual differences between the Stalinist USSR as it is from "bureaucratic collectivism".

The view of the Social Democrat and ex-Communist Lucien Laurat that the USSR is "neither proletarian nor bourgeois" but "represents an absolutely new type of class organisation, because the bureaucracy not only rules over the proletariat politically but also exploits it economically, devouring that surplus value that hitherto fell to the lot of the bourgeoisie" is, says Trotsky, a "superficial and purely descriptive 'sociology'". He does not deny that it is an accurate description. Contemptuously, Trotsky equates the Social Democratic "compiler" Laurat with "the Russo-Polish revolutionist Makhaisky" who "with much more fire and splendour" had over 30 years previously "define[d] 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' as a scaffold for the commanding posts of an exploiting bureaucracy". Makhaisky "only 'deepened' sociologically and economically the anarchistic prejudices against state socialism". Trotsky does not here distinguish between the USSR under Stalin and the so-called "state socialism" — the regime of a profoundly democratic workers' state — which is the substance of the dispute between Marxists and anarchists. The industrial growth has produced an "economic and cultural uplift of the labouring masses" — this is in fact not true — and that "must tend to undermine the very bases of bureaucratic domination". "In the light of this fortunate historical variant, the bureaucracy turns out to be only the instrument — a bad and expensive instrument — of the socialist state".

Trotsky does not think this will happen gradually. The bureaucracy must be tamed by working-class force, and the USSR working class will assemble the necessary force only under the impulse of working-class revolution in the West.

And in the meantime, the bureaucracy retards the economic and cultural growth of the country. "The further uninhibited growth of bureaucratism must lead inevitably to the cessation of economic and cultural growth, to a terrible social crisis and the downward plunge of the entire society". But bureaucratic domination would end with this collapse. "In place of the workers' state would come not 'social bureaucratic' but capitalist relations". In this way Trotsky defines away the problem of the USSR as it exists in the year 1933, conjuring it out of existence by logic-chopping with perspectives. Fundamentally, the USSR is a workers' state because it was one in 1917-21; it has not yet reverted to capitalism, and Trotsky is not yet ready to concede the existence in the modern era of a society outside the two main alternatives, bourgeois or workers' rule.

"Whether we take the variant of further successes for the Soviet regime or, contrariwise, the variant of its collapse, the bureaucracy in either case turns out not to be an independent class but an excrescence upon the proletariat".

The idea of the USSR as a product of development and degeneration from 1917, and as heading for either bourgeois counter-revolution or working-class regeneration, has replaced any definition of what it is. This will remain a central characteristic of Trotsky's thinking to the very end. Although in reality the USSR is already in its essentials a stable entity for a meaningful period by the scale of human life, in Trotsky's theory it is a mere moment of ever-changing historical flux. It is as if the moving film is counterposed to the "snapshots" that make it up; Trotsky replaces analysis of being by considerations of becoming and passing out of existence.

Trotsky argues with Laurat not about facts, but about the interpretation of agreed facts and of an agreed picture of the USSR. Laurat's argument about the bureaucracy's "uncontrolled appropriation of an absolutely disproportionate part of the national income" is based on "undubitable facts" but it "does not... change the social physiognomy of the bureaucracy". Decisive in Trotsky's view is the idea that "the bureaucracy derives its privileges not from any special property relations peculiar to it as a 'class', but from those property relations that have been created by the October Revolution and that are fundamentally adequate for the dictatorship of the proletariat". The bureaucracy practises "not... class exploitation, in the scientific sense of the word, but... social parasitism". The "necessity" or otherwise of the bureaucracy's role in the economy should be derived from an account of the society as it is; but Trotsky derives it from the general theory of previous societies, using that general theory against the facts of the USSR he himself has recorded.

X. "THE GATEKEEPER OF THE SOCIAL CONQUESTS"

IF FIRSTLY AND irreplaceably proletarian dictatorship means the political rule of the workers, then Trotsky's writing-off of the Communist International and his picture of the realities of the USSR must tell him that the

USSR is no longer a workers' state. He arrives at the opposite answer by changing the meaning of the terms and by postulating, on the basis of the experience of the USSR, that the question of working-class politics is posed after a successful revolution altogether differently from the way it is posed in the class struggle under capitalist rule.

The Communist Parties of the West, he writes, have nothing but themselves, "no inherited capital"; by contrast, "the soviet government represents an instrument for the preservation of conquests of an already accomplished overturn... Nine-tenths of the strength of the Stalinist apparatus lies not in itself but in the social changes wrought by the victorious revolution". This explains how the Stalinist apparatus could still "preserve a part of its progressive meaning as the gatekeeper of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution". By "social conquests" he means nationalised property.

Essentially Trotsky's position now is that the workers' revolution is, so to speak, congealed in the economic forms which Trotsky sees as its product, rather as living labour is congealed in capital.

Why? Trotsky knew the arguments of the Marxist classics against identifying nationalised economy with socialism or working-class rule. For example, Antonio Labriola: "It is better to use the expression 'democratic socialisation of the means of production' than that of 'collective property' because the latter implies a certain theoretical error in that, to begin with, it substitutes for the real economic fact a juridical expression and moreover in the mind of more than one it is confused with the increase of monopolies, with the increasing statisation of public utilities and with all the other fantasmagoria of the ever-recurring State socialism, the whole effect of which is to increase the economic means of oppression in the hands of the oppressing class".⁹

Or James Connolly: "State ownership and control is not necessarily socialist — if it were then the army and the navy, the police, the judges, the gaolers, the informers and the hangmen would all be socialist functionaries, as they are all state officials — but the ownership by the state of all the lands and material for labour, combined with the co-operative control by the workers of such land and materials, would be socialist... To the cry of the middle-class reformers, 'Make this or that the property of the government', we reply — 'Yes, in proportion as the workers are ready to make the government their property'.". This was commonplace Marxism.

Or Karl Kautsky: "The economic activity of the modern state is the natural starting point of the development that leads to the Co-operative Commonwealth. It does not, however, follow that every nationalisation of an economic function or an industry is a step towards the Co-operative Commonwealth, and that the latter could be the result of a general nationalisation of all industries without any change in the character of the state. The theory that this could be the case is that of the state Socialists. It arises from a misunderstanding of the state itself ... As an exploiter of labour, the state is superior to (i.e. worse than) any private capitalist. Besides the economic power of the capitalists, it can also bring to bear upon the exploited classes the political power which it already wields... The state will not cease to be a capitalist institution until the proletariat, the working class, has become the ruling class; not until then will it become possible to turn it into a Co-operative Commonwealth".¹⁰

At first, after 1928, Trotsky has seen Stalin's new command economy as a foredoomed desperate administrative attempt to flout the laws of economics

and society, certain to collapse quickly. It has not collapsed. Industry has grown. At the same time, western capitalism has spiralled into slump.

Instead of identifying the creation of the totalitarian command economy as the full social, as well as political, bureaucratic counter-revolution it was, Trotsky, extrapolating the logic of his view in 1923-8 that the neo-bourgeoisie was the main threat, and the Stalinist "centre" dangerous primarily because of its inadequate response to that threat, chooses to interpret the industrial growth of the USSR as an expression of the immanent force of the nationalised economy. He separates agency from means and begins to fetishise means, in a process that will end for Trotskyism in confusing means with ends.

Trotsky is swayed by the weight of the fact that, as he will write in *The Revolution Betrayed*, "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".

This nationalised economy is a working-class conquest, allowing unique progress. If the state is preserving that nationalised economy, however badly and with whatever overhead costs, it is a workers' state. For his bottom-line argument Trotsky is reduced to vicarious boasting about Stalin's economic achievements, which he attributes to "October". But this picture depends on not giving due weight in the analysis to the part played by the "corps of slave-drivers"¹¹ and by the driving down of the USSR workers' share of social produce to the subsistence level of ancient serfs and slaves, and, for the enslaved many millions, below that level. It also depends on forgetting or downplaying what Trotsky himself has written: that the USSR's industrial progress is limited to catching up with the advanced capitalist countries — or, rather, reducing the distance by which it lags behind them.

XI. THE END OF CAPITALIST PROGRESS?

TROTSKY'S "OVERESTIMATION" OF the forms of nationalised property is unintelligible unless it is understood as inextricably linked with and dependent on his parallel "underestimation" of capitalism. For Trotsky in the 1930s capitalism was a collapsing system at the end of its historical span.

Marx, in contrast to previous socialists, saw socialism not just as a negation of capitalism but also as something "springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes"¹². The working class, he wrote, "have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant"¹³. In Marx's view, capitalism did progressive work, by producing the elements for socialism — advanced technology, socialised production, an educated working class, able, as a rule, to organise, even if not in full legality.

After World War 1, the communist movement believed that those elements were sufficiently developed to make socialism a short-term possibility: capitalism had entered a period of decay. War and crises stopped it advancing and had even begun to destroy some of its previous progressive achievements. Nevertheless, as Lenin remarked, there is no situation without a way out for

the bourgeoisie. Capitalism had not reached a dead stop. If the workers failed to seize the opportunities to overthrow capitalism, then, eventually, out of blood, suffering and chaos, capitalism would revive.

Trotsky explained this as late as 1928: "Theoretically, to be sure, even a new chapter of a general capitalist progress in the most powerful, ruling and leading countries is not excluded. But for this, capitalism would first have to overcome enormous barriers of a class as well as of an inter-state character. It would have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time ... In the final analysis, this question will be settled in the struggle of international forces."¹⁴

In the 1930s, however, a blanket "negativism" in relation to capitalism became central to Trotsky's positive appreciation of nationalised economy in the USSR. In *The Transitional Programme* (1938) he would write: "The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate... The bourgeoisie itself sees no way out".

In "The USSR in War" (September 1939) he would assert: "The disintegration of capitalism has reached extreme limits, likewise the disintegration of the old ruling class. The further existence of this system is impossible".

The classic studies of Lenin and Bukharin on imperialism had foreseen a rapid development of capitalism in the less-developed countries accompanying crises in the more advanced countries. In the long run they were right, even for the 1930s, where some Third World countries started substantial "import-substitution industrialisation"; but in 1928 the Stalinists made it their official doctrine that imperialism forced total stagnation on those less-developed countries. Trotsky never took issue with the new teaching. If in the 1930s he had seen the industrial growth of countries such as Japan and Mexico as indicating an important and substantial pattern, though limited and on the margins of world capital, that would have put Stalin's economic successes into a more balanced and nuanced perspective; but he never did.

In his last period, this vision would push Trotsky into a sort of "sectarian" anti-capitalism, and later his neo-Trotskyist followers into "unconditional" support for anything — never mind what — that was anti-capitalist.

XII. A "LOCUM" FOR THE WORKING CLASS

THE USSR MUST still be a workers' state, Trotsky argues, because it was established by means of a "political overturn" and three years of civil war. Experience shows that peaceful proletarian revolution is impossible. "How, in that case, is the imperceptible, 'gradual', bourgeois counter-revolution conceivable?... He who asserts that the soviet government has been gradually changed from proletarian to bourgeois is only, so to speak, running backwards the film of reformism".

Although Trotsky will continue to use this argument to the end, and it will play an immense role in the politics of neo-Trotskyism, he answers it himself in "The Workers' State, Bonapartism, and the Question of Thermidor" (1935).

9. *In Memory of the Communist Manifesto*, 1895.

10. *Commentary of the Erfurt Programme*, 1891.

“The present-day domination of Stalin in no way resembles the soviet rule during the initial years of the revolution. The substitution of one regime for the other occurred not at a single stroke but through a series of measures, by means of a number of minor civil wars waged by the bureaucracy against the proletarian vanguard...”.

Trotsky asks: how can the dictatorship of the bureaucracy over the proletariat be a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat? The dictatorship of the proletariat is not a pristine norm, but a historical reality, born in backward Russia and evolving in history to what it is, in which can be seen elements of continuity and of rupture. There are no *a priori* recipes for the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is rooted in its own history.

Trotsky declares that the dictatorship of a class “does not mean by a long shot that its entire mass always participates in the management of the state”. He makes analogies with the rule of propertied classes — nobles ruling through monarchies, bourgeois ruling through political dictatorships, like fascism, that disenfranchise the bourgeois class. He anticipates the argument that “the bourgeoisie, as an exploiting minority, can also preserve its hegemony by means of a fascist dictatorship, the proletariat building a socialist society must manage its government itself, directly drawing ever-wider masses of the people into the task of government. In its general form this argument is undeniable”. But here, he says, it means only “the present soviet dictatorship is a sick dictatorship... the bureaucracy has expropriated the proletariat politically in order to guard its social conquests with its own methods.

The anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class”.

In fact the issue is not, as Trotsky states it, only one of involvement of large or small numbers in government. It is fundamentally whether with the existing bureaucratic regime, and the actual place of the working class in the system, the workers can rule at all. Or, to put it another way, whether the “forms of property” actually define the economic relations, or whether new economic relations, shaped by the nature of the political power that controls the socio-economic and political relations, have been created within the formalities of nationalised property.

The Bolsheviks’ idea in 1921 that they must act as a “gatekeeper”, “watchman” or “locum” for the enfeebled working class, entwined with the new “norms” created when the Bolsheviks made virtue out of the exigencies of the civil war and the economic collapse in 1921, still grips and distorts Trotsky’s vision even now that, on his own account: “The party does not exist” and anti-working class careerists and political turncoats rule.

He dismisses “dissertations upon ‘the dictatorship of the bureaucracy over the proletariat’ [which] without a much deeper analysis, that is, without a clear explanation of the social roots and the class limits of bureaucratic domination, boil down merely to high-faluting democratic phrases so extremely popular among the Mensheviks”. He goes on to assert that soviet workers, though they hate the bureaucracy, fail to resort to violent mass action not simply because of repression: “The workers fear that they will clear the field for

11. Trotsky: *The Revolution Betrayed*.

12. Marx: *The Communist Manifesto*.

13. Marx: *Civil War in France*.

the class enemy if they overthrow the bureaucracy". So long as revolution does not come in the West, "the proletariat with clenched teeth bears ('tolerates') the bureaucracy and, in this sense, recognises it as the bearer of the proletarian dictatorship... No soviet worker would be sparing of strong words addressed to the Stalinist bureaucracy. But not a single one of them [!] would admit that the counter-revolution has already taken place. The proletariat is the spine of the soviet state."

Here, quite fantastically, he argues from a reluctant acquiescence by the workers to Stalinism which is unknowable to him; which must seem highly spurious to us; and which anyway is not decisive. Many bourgeois-democratic regimes have been grudgingly tolerated, or even positively supported, by the majority of workers — without being workers' states. Trotsky's argument grossly and strangely minimises the power of the fierce Stalinist repression, undervalues the power of the state, and takes away the significance of the atomisation of the working class — *sans* party, *sans* soviets, *sans* unions — all of which he himself already records.

Trotsky will use this idea of the bureaucracy resting on the workers, and ideas of working-class opinion being a force in the Soviet Union, far into the 1930s, as the Stalinist system reveals its most terrible features in purges and Nazi-like mass terror. It will add an element of ideological consolation, giving a flickering aureole to his bedrock, all-else-stripped-away definition of the workers' state: nationalised property, plan, and monopoly of foreign trade, allegedly rooted in the October Revolution but in its present form the creation of Stalin's "second revolution" after 1928.

In July 1936 ("The Fourth International and the Soviet Union") he will write that "the soviet bureaucracy has acquired an actual independence from the toilers... the new constitution liquidates *de jure* the ruling position of the proletariat in the state, a position which, *de facto*, has long been liquidated"; yet in *The Revolution Betrayed*, written around the same time, he asserts that "the bureaucracy... continues to preserve state property only to the extent that it fears the proletariat".¹⁵ As late as 1938 he will write about how "the discontent of the masses produces different currents even in the bureaucracy... the pressure of the masses produces disintegration in the ruling caste"¹⁶; even in 1940 he will discuss the politics of the USSR's invasion of Finland in terms of the majority of the population disapproving of the invasion but "understanding" or at least "feeling" that "behind the Finnish question... stands the problem of the existence of the USSR", which they would want to defend.

In 1933, Trotsky insists that the autocracy is a bad locum for the working class. "The bureaucracy in all its manifestations is pulling apart the moral tie-rods of soviet society". If the Marxist party were in power, "it would renovate the entire political regime; it would shuffle and purge the bureaucracy and place it under the control of the masses; it would transform all of the administrative practices and inaugurate a series of capital reforms in the management of economy; but in no case would it have to undertake an overturn in the property relations, i.e., a new social revolution".

Considering the scope of the rectification, whose scale will have to be commensurate with the abuses Trotsky has repeatedly described, the question of whether the "property relations" would be the same afterwards arises. Trotsky means the forms of property: nationalised or private. The point is that

14. Trotsky: "Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch".

the class content of nationalised property would change with the changes he proposes. But Trotsky defuses the concrete questions concerning what is by discussing what will be. He will do it again and again throughout the 1930s.

Trotsky asserts that “the further development of the bureaucratic regime can lead to the inception of a new ruling class; not organically, through degeneration, but through counter-revolution”. This will be his perspective to the end of the 1930s, when he will expect the culmination of Stalin’s bloody work to be the “guillotining” of Stalin by the bourgeois counter-revolution he has incubated. “Today, when there is no longer a Marxist leadership, and none forthcoming as yet”, the Stalinist bureaucracy “defends the proletarian dictatorship with its own methods; but these methods are such as to facilitate the victory of the enemy tomorrow”. The Stalinist bureaucratic centre is a vile and destructive locum for the working class, but a locum it is and will remain so long as it preserves nationalised property and the working class has not overthrown it.

XIII. PROPERTY FORMS AND SOCIALIST NORMS

ONE CENTRAL ARGUMENT in the 1933 article — about “norms” — is developed more vigorously in “The Workers’ State, Bonapartism and the Question of Thermidor” (1935). There, Trotsky concedes: “There is no doubt that the USSR today bears very little resemblance to that type of soviet republic that Lenin depicted in 1917... The domination of the bureaucracy over the country, as well as Stalin’s domination over the bureaucracy, have well-nigh attained their absolute consummation”. Some say “that since the actual state that has emerged from the proletarian revolution does not correspond to ideal *a priori* norms, therefore they turn their backs on it. This is political snobbery, common to pacifist-democratic, libertarian, anarcho-syndicalist and, generally, ultra-left circles of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia”. Their mirror-images, Trotsky adds, consider criticism of the state coming out of the revolution to be “sacrilege and counter-revolution”; these are the hypocrites.

Why can only a slave to *a priori* norms, or a sniffy historical snob, balk at accepting as a workers’ state this USSR in which on Trotsky’s own account the working class is in a condition close to serfdom? Trotsky himself holds to the “norms” and will base his political conclusions on them. What is he doing? As on this entire question, Trotsky combines immense lucidity in close-up and detail with dark obfuscation in the broad picture. He is teaching to later Trotskyists a philistine spirit of accomodation to Stalinism and other malign social forms, which he himself does not have — because he has an immense background of experience and political culture, and because, as we shall see, he interprets the USSR not as a coherent system, still less in later neo-Trotskyist terms as in transition to socialism, but as a freakish combination of elements in rapid flux. The condemnation of “norms” will, alas, be a major element in what he bequeaths to followers who will have to define themselves politically in relation to a solid and expanding Stalinist system and who thus need the norms as a man drowning in a raging tide needs a life belt, and to whom he can bequeath neither his own breadth of vision and knowledge nor his skill at dialectical tightrope-walking. Trotsky thinks he is teaching historical perspective and objectivity and dialectics; he cannot con-

ceive of the Stalinist reality that his comrades after 1940 will encounter, because he cannot conceive of Stalinism surviving for decades.

In his denunciations of “normative” thinking, Trotsky begs the central question. Is it true that this USSR concretely expresses the essence which the old abstract socialist norms sought to describe? Does it render the old norms more real, more precise and more concrete to any degree at all, or does it shatter them and negate them and establish other norms? On Trotsky’s own account, “the realities of soviet life [can] be hardly reconciled even with the shreds of old theory”. The social relations — in the proper sense, that is, the relations between people — “in many respects are still lagging behind a cultured capitalism”. The old socialist norms are fully rounded social norms, norms of culture, manners, morals, intellect. They embody the achievements of civilisation and the historical contribution of capitalism, and not only economics. Trotsky here reduces the essential “norm” of a workers’ state to the purely economic, and within that to aridly abstract forms of property. He will show in *The Revolution Betrayed* that the concrete economic relations within those abstract forms are “a ruthlessly severe fitting in of backward human material to the technique borrowed from capitalism” and “the classic methods of exploitation... in such naked and crude forms as would not be permitted even by reformist trade unions in bourgeois countries”. The only possible point of contact between Marxian socialist norms and USSR reality is the nationalised property forms. But in the Stalinist USSR those forms do not arise organically from capitalist development — as they should, if they are to play the role ascribed to them in previous Marxist theory. With the exception of the 1917-18 takeover of big industry — which the Bolsheviks were pushed into by working-class direct action when the old owners sabotaged production or simply quit — they arise from the drive of the autocracy to grab the whole of the surplus product of society.

In the 1933 article Trotsky “asks” — and the proper “answer” is clear; it can be read off from the most obvious surface facts — whether the “distortions” from the programmatic norms “have extended to the economic foundation”. By “economic foundation” he means only the forms of nationalised property, considered in abstraction from the relations within them. Here Trotsky has elevated a caricature of one of the old socialist norms, nationalised property, out of the whole complex of other norms that give it its significance in Marxist theory.

The result is not a replacement of abstract and normative theorising by a more concrete approach. It is the opposite. In his polemics, Trotsky establishes a new norm — nationalised property — and argues “normatively” from that. He extrapolates the new norm from the experience of the USSR. There is here too, as on the question of the party, a dualism in Trotsky. For he holds these ideas about the USSR in parallel to the older socialist ideas about the rest of the world. The question is what it has to do with socialism. Trotsky complains that the “normative” thinkers want to turn their backs on reality and proceed according to ideal schemes in their heads. But Trotsky, too, wants

15. In part the flat meaning-of-words contradiction here is only apparent. Trotsky frequently talks of the relation of the autocracy to the nationalised property as its relation to the proletariat. The autocracy can be utterly independent from the actual living workers and simultaneously subordinated to the proletariat as a historical concept because it is tied to “proletarian” nationalised property.

16. *Writings 1937-8*, p.303

to escape the reality and “begin again” — begin with the fiction that there is something of workers’ rule left in the USSR, that the unspeakable tyranny is really something else deep down, in the form of its bureaucratic economy. Trotsky can only relate to the reality by way of constructing an ideal parallel of it in his head, and then defining the reality as a more-and-more distorted version of that ideal.

Though Trotsky still writes about the “roots” of the bureaucracy among the soviet workers, he has by now elaborated a baseline method of assessing the class character of the USSR that can only be called “totalitarian economism”. One “factor”, the nationalisation of the means of production, is valued for its “achievements”, its progressive potential and its ascribed place in history, in abstraction from all that in Marxist, socialist or Bolshevik theory had so far been understood to determine the class character of a state — the political regime and the social relations erected on the nationalised means of production.

As a working-class politician, Trotsky is concerned with the real socio-economic relations in his concrete programme. He paints painfully clear and true pictures of what they are in the USSR. When he makes his theoretical summaries, however, he leaves them aside. The two parts of the picture do not match. He thinks they will match up in the flux of events, in the near future. His theory thus rests heavily on the idea that the USSR in the 1930s is not any sort of coherent system, but only a temporary concatenation of conflicting elements moving rapidly in different directions.

In the 1933 article Trotsky also erects a dual conception of working-class politics, destroying previous Marxist norms on this question. For the task of making a working-class revolution against capitalism, clear ideas and a party organised around those ideas are essential. The proletariat does not gain power, property, wealth and culture bit by bit — as the bourgeoisie did in feudal society — but remains the basic slave class, the prime source of the social surplus product, of the society it must overturn.

The proletarian revolution is not a mechanical reflex or outgrowth of even the conditions most ripe for it. That is why ideas, consciousness, programme, politics and voluntary organisation are decisive for the working-class revolution, and are at the heart of Bolshevik-Marxist politics.

This is the keynote idea of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s Communist International and the guide to everything Trotsky did in the 1930s to rebuild a revolutionary movement. But — so Trotsky now argues — having once taken power, the working class can lose direct political power, and yet retain social power. If the “social conquests” of the revolution survive, then the working class rules in the broad historical sense, even when the living and producing working class is in thralldom to a dictatorship of parasitic, privileged and slave-driving bureaucrats. In this argument is the seed of the later neo-Trotskyist idea that “working-class” revolutions could be made in China or Eastern Europe by brutally anti-working-class forces.

XIV. “POLITICAL REVOLUTION”: FIRST APPROXIMATION

TRYING TO KEEP a balance between his recognition of the bureaucracy as a “locum” for the working class, and his condemnation of its tyranny and “par-

asitism", Trotsky spells out the political conclusions. "Is it possible to remove the bureaucracy 'peacefully'?... After the experience of the last few years it would be childish to suppose that the Stalin bureaucracy can be removed by means of a Party or soviet congress". The last real congress of the Bolshevik party, Trotsky writes, was the 12th at the beginning of 1923; by saying so, he seems to concede that with hindsight his present conclusions are overdue and should have been drawn soon after 1923.

No normal 'constitutional' ways to remove the ruling clique remain. The bureaucracy can be compelled to yield power into the hands of the proletarian vanguard only by force". Trotsky recalls that in 1927 Stalin had said that his "cadres" could be removed only by civil war. "Having concentrated all the levers in its hands, the bureaucracy proclaimed openly that it would not permit the proletariat to raise its head any longer".

But "the question of seizing power will arise as a practical question for [the Opposition] only when it will have consolidated around itself the majority of the working class". And the new revolution — Trotsky does not yet use the word "revolution" — will be "not an armed insurrection against the dictatorship of the proletariat but the removal of a malignant growth upon it. A real civil war could develop not between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the resurgent proletariat but between the proletariat and the active forces of the counter-revolution. In the event of an open clash between the two mass camps, there cannot even be talk of the bureaucracy playing an independent role. Its polar flanks would be flung to the different sides of the barricade". A new Bolshevik party is the essential condition for working-class victory.

This perspective, saturated with the idea of the bureaucracy as an insubstantial force, of no real substance in comparison to the "two mass camps" of bourgeois (peasant-based) counter-revolution and working-class revolution, is not very different from Trotsky's outlook when he stated his aim as reform. Then there would be crisis and a recomposition of the Bolshevik party, with the "return" of the Opposition; now, the Opposition is to be a separate party. All avenues via reform or self-recomposition of the dispersed and fragmented Bolshevik party are closed. But it still fears "spontaneity".

Struggle will decide whether a new party can be built in time to avert collapse brought on by the bureaucratic burrowing and "sapping" at the foundations of the regime. If there is a further decline of the world proletarian movement and further extension of fascist domination, "it is not possible to maintain the soviet power for any length of time by means of the internal forces alone. The fundamental condition for the only rock-bottom reform of the soviet state is the victorious spread of the world revolution". At this point, in 1933, Trotsky believes that the conditions outside the USSR are ripe for a large-scale regroupment of revolutionary forces in a Fourth International. The idea of the small forces of Trotskyism just proceeding to set up the Fourth International by themselves he sees now as absurd. He warns that no regeneration of the USSR will come from internal developments alone, without a big Fourth International being built in the West. Recalling the evidence in the Russian Stalinist press of Left Opposition activities there, Trotsky warns: "Illusions would be out of place here; the party of revolutionary internationalism will be able to free the workers from the decomposing influence of the national bureaucracy only in the event that the international proletarian vanguard will once again appear as a fighting force on the world arena". The Russian Bolshevik-Leninists cannot lead this revival. "The extremely difficult

conditions under which the Russian Bolshevik-Leninists work exclude them from the possibility of playing the leading role on an international scale. More than this, the Left Opposition group in the USSR can develop into a new party only as a result of the successful formation and growth of the new International. The revolutionary centre of gravity has shifted definitively to the West, where the immediate possibilities of building parties are immeasurably greater”.

XV. THE UNITED FRONT WITH STALIN

WHAT IF NO big Fourth International is built? In that case, Trotsky writes, working-class actions in the USSR — mass strikes — are likely to lead to counter-revolution rather than regeneration. “Under the conditions of the transitional epoch, the political superstructure” — even the Stalinist locum of the 1920s Bolshevik locum — “plays a decisive role. A developed and stable dictatorship of the proletariat presupposes that the party functions in the leading role as a self-acting vanguard, that the proletariat is welded together by means of trade unions, that the toilers are indissolubly bound up with the state through the system of soviets and, finally, that the workers’ state is aligned through the International into a fighting unit with the world proletariat. In the meantime, the bureaucracy has strangled the party and the trade unions and the soviets and the Communist International... The strangulation of the party, the soviets and the trade unions implies the political atomisation of the proletariat...

“The first social shock, external or internal, may throw the atomised soviet society into civil war. The workers, *having lost control over the state and economy* (emphasis added), may resort to mass strikes as weapons of self-defence. The discipline of the dictatorship would be broken. Under the onslaught of the workers and because of the pressure of economic difficulties, the trusts would be forced to disrupt the planned beginnings and enter into competition with one another... The socialist state would collapse, giving place to the capitalist regime or, more correctly, to capitalist chaos”. The proletariat, which can rule under Stalin, cannot take back full power without a proper Bolshevik Party...

Trotsky is cautious. Just as there was much of “revolution” in Trotsky’s calls for “reform” of the USSR, so too now that he is for a new party in the USSR and advocates an early version of “political revolution” (though the name is three years in the future), there are still large elements of the old “reformism”: “Today the rupture of the bureaucratic equilibrium in the USSR would almost surely serve in favour of the counter-revolutionary forces. However, given a genuine revolutionary International, the inevitable crisis of the Stalinist regime would open the possibility of revival in the USSR. This is our basic course”. This vision, common to Trotsky’s “reform” and to the early “political revolution” periods points up the enormity of the shift when Trotsky will call for a working class onslaught on that apparatus in conditions where its replacement is open-ended and problematic. This will be a call for full-scale revolution, the name “political revolution” notwithstanding.

“Correct evaluation of the world situation, including the class nature of the Soviet Union” is essential to the work of rebuilding the revolutionary move-

ment. The new International, "before it will be able to reform the soviet state... must take upon itself its defence... the tragic possibility is not excluded that the first workers' state, weakened by the bureaucracy, will fall under the joint blows of its internal and external enemies. But in the event of this worst possible variant, a tremendous significance for the subsequent course of the revolutionary struggle will be borne by the question: where are those guilty for the catastrophe? Not the slightest trace of guilt must fall upon the revolutionary internationalists. In the hour of mortal danger, they must remain on the last barricade". In "the inevitable crisis of the Stalinist regime... the new International will demonstrate to the Russian workers not in words but in action that it, and it alone, stands for the defence of the workers' state... The position of the Bolshevik-Leninists inside the Soviet Union will change within twenty-four hours. The new International will offer the Stalinist bureaucracy a united front against the common foe. And if our International represents a force, the bureaucracy will be unable to evade the united front in the moment of danger. What then will remain of the many years' encrustation of lies and slander?".

Examine the flux of Trotsky's reasonings, the patterns of his polemical swordplay, and it becomes plain that he is using the method of provisional estimation, empirical calculation matched — or for now not quite matched — to theory, dancing on the rolling, bobbing logs in the flow of politics and history. He has more than one concern in his head. It is plain that he sees and understands the arguments against his theoretical conclusions, that his rebuttals and rejections are provisional and conditional, subject to further experience and the test of the political line. His first preoccupation is always with living politics, grasping links in a chain of development, seeking openings and leverage points. In 1927, in the Politburo, Trotsky had proclaimed what became known as the "Clemenceau thesis". (The patriotic French imperialist Georges Clemenceau had bitterly opposed the French Government after 1914 in order to win control and prosecute the war more effectively, which he did.) For the socialist fatherland — Yes! For the Stalinist course — No!

Right up to his death, a variant of this perspective would remain his basic practical conclusion from the "degenerated workers' state" theory. Over the years he would hugely modify the proportions of different elements in this perspective, and implicitly concede that the 1933 version, of "the many years' encrustation of lies and slander" melting away within twenty-four hours, was unreal; but the basic line would remain. One way or another — whether by palace coups, invasion, peasant uprisings, or workers' strikes — the USSR would be thrown into a crisis, facing internal counter-revolution and, probably, foreign armies. The bureaucracy would fall apart. A new leadership, formed by allying the persecuted Bolshevik-Leninists with a fraction of the apparatus, would take the lead and simultaneously repel counter-revolution and, by breaking the old bureaucratic encrustation, regenerate the soviets and the workers' state, and recompose the international communist movement. The political line of "defence of the workers' state" would be essential because otherwise the Bolshevik-Leninists will be left on the sidelines in the crisis. As the years go on, Trotsky would accumulate doubts and qualifications about this perspective, but insist that it should not be renounced unless absolutely hard evidence — he thought the coming world war would, one way or another, provide it — made that necessary; for to renounce it would mean that definitively the Marxists were back at the stage of building a new

movement from scratch among the ruins of the old. Five years later, when his picture of the autocracy as having most of the features of a ruling class had become very much sharper, he would sum up the perspective in the founding programme of the Fourth International (September 1938).

“From this perspective [of a powerful section of the bureaucracy, as Trotsky saw it, desiring bourgeois restoration], impelling concreteness is imparted to the question of the ‘defence of the USSR’. If tomorrow the bourgeois-fascist grouping, the [fascistic] ‘faction of Butenko’, so to speak, should attempt the conquest of power, the [Trotskyist] ‘faction of Reiss’ inevitably would align itself on the opposite side of the barricades”. Butenko was a bureaucrat who had defected to fascist Italy; Reiss, a GPU officer who came out for Trotsky in 1937 and was very soon afterwards murdered, in Switzerland, by the Stalinists. “Although it [the “Reiss faction”] would find itself temporarily the ally of Stalin, it would nevertheless defend not the Bonapartist clique but the social base of the USSR... Any other course would be a betrayal... It is thus impermissible to deny in advance the possibility, in strictly defined instances, of a ‘united front’ with the Thermidorian section of the bureaucracy against open attack by capitalist counter-revolution.” (The “Thermidorian section” here means that section of the bureaucracy with origins in the Bolshevik party of 1917, by analogy with the “Thermidorians” in the French Revolution, Jacobins who overthrew Robespierre in July 1794 and then found themselves overtaken by open big-bourgeois reaction).

Here Trotsky is trying to prefigure mentally how to “grasp the links in the chain”. From it we can get a pretty firm indication that Trotsky would not have been an “orthodox” neo-Trotskyist — not a platonic revolutionary spinning “working class” fantasies around the expansion of Stalinist “revolution”. But, nonetheless, the united front he proposes here is in fact one between the enslaving class and its victims. For Trotsky it is a means of reducing the enslavers to nothing; but with the survival of the bureaucracy and the eruption of Stalinist imperialist expansion in 1939-40, as we shall see, it became a way of reducing independent working-class politics to nothing.

XVI. THE “WORKERS’ STATE” THEORY AND POLITICAL REVOLUTION

IN 1936, FROM his comprehensive denunciation of the Stalinist regime in *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky deduces an equally comprehensive programme. He now uses the term “political revolution”. “Bureaucratic autocracy must give place to soviet democracy. A restoration of the right of criticism, and a genuine freedom of elections, are necessary conditions for the further development of the country. This assumes a revival of freedom of soviet parties, beginning with the party of Bolsheviks, and a resurrection of the trade unions. The bringing of democracy into industry means a radical revision of plans in the interests of the toilers. Free discussion of economic problems will decrease the overhead expense of bureaucratic mistakes and zig-zags. Expensive playthings — palaces of the soviets, new theatres, show-off subways — will be crowded out in favour of workers’ dwellings. ‘Bourgeois norms of distribution’ will be confined within the limits of strict necessity, and, in step with the growth of social wealth, will give way to socialist equality. Ranks will be immediately abolished. The tinsel of decorations will go into the melting pot. The youth will receive the opportunity to breathe freely,

criticise, make mistakes, and grow up. Science and art will be freed of their chains. And, finally, foreign policy will return to the traditions of revolutionary internationalism.”

In substance here Trotsky is calling for full revolution. By doing so he shows, surely, that nationalised property characterises not just one social and economic system, but at least two — depending on the social-political context and on the political rulership. The revolution is “political” only in the sense that there will be continuity of nationalised property — but which nationalised property? Everything Trotsky proposes says it will not be the same nationalised property.

Moreover, Trotsky himself writes that “a bourgeois restoration would probably have to clean out fewer people than a revolutionary party”, while in the July 1936 “theses” on The Fourth International and the Soviet Union he has written that “The new constitution [of 1936] seals the dictatorship of the privileged strata of soviet society over the producing masses... [it] opens up for the bureaucracy ‘legal’ roads for the economic counter-revolution, that is, the restoration of capitalism by means of a ‘cold stroke’.”. Momentarily Trotsky has abandoned an argument he makes much of both earlier and later: that the idea of a cold-stroke restoration of capitalism is “rolling the film of reformism backwards”. In short, the “political revolution” he advocates is a much more deep-going affair than the “social counter-revolution” he fears. Trotsky’s strength here was that on the concrete political issues he was adequate, theoretical frame and names notwithstanding. To left-wing critics (and maybe to himself) he could say: “what do you want to add, concretely?”. But the programmatic adequacy also disarmed Trotsky and his comrades. It disguised the theoretical inadequacy and “for now” seemed to render it less than pressingly important. The accumulating contradictions in the realm of the general theory of the nature of the USSR would in time take their terrible political toll.

In 1935 (“The Question of Thermidor”) Trotsky had written: “the inevitable collapse of Stalinist Bonapartism would immediately call into question the character of the USSR as a workers’ state. A socialist economy cannot be constructed without a socialist power... the replacement of a workers’ government by a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois government would inevitably lead to... [bourgeois] restoration”. The notion of Stalin’s regime as any sort of “socialist power” or “workers’ government” had been strained enough then. Now Trotsky has recognised (in “The Fourth International and the Soviet Union”, 1936) that “Control over all fields of economic and cultural life [is] in the hands of the Stalinist ‘party’, which is independent both of the people and of its own members and which represents a political machine of the ruling caste... The constitution liquidates *de jure* the ruling position of the proletariat in the state, a position which, *de facto*, has long been liquidated”. How could this possibly be a workers’ state in any sense at all?

Trotsky’s answers, in *The Revolution Betrayed*, are all indirect. He argues that the bureaucracy lacks essential features of a ruling class; then, if the bureaucracy is not the ruling class, and bourgeois power has not been restored, it must follow by elimination of the other possibilities that the workers are still the ruling class. “The bureaucracy enjoys its privileges under the form of an abuse of power... It... pretends that as a special social group it does not even exist... All this makes the position of the commanding soviet stratum in the highest degree contradictory, equivocal and undignified, notwithstanding the completeness of its power and the smoke screen of flattery that conceals it”.

Yet Trotsky has written that the new constitution formalises the identification of the bureaucracy with the state.

“The attempt to represent the sSoviet bureaucracy as a class of ‘state capitalists’ will obviously not withstand criticism. The bureaucracy has neither stocks nor bonds. It is recruited, supplemented and renewed in the manner of an administrative hierarchy, independently of any special property relations of its own... The individual bureaucrat cannot transmit to his heirs his rights in the exploitation of the state apparatus”. In fact, the bureaucrats can, through education, contacts, access to “party” nepotism, etc., transmit a great deal. Moreover, at any given time the parasitic autocracy as a whole, as a collective, confronts the working class as a political, social, economic, moral and intellectual force monopolising the social place of a ruling class, and excluding the working class from it. Bourgeois ideologists argue that under modern capitalism social mobility — and there is social mobility, though not quite as they say — means there is no distinct ruling class. Individuals of the proletariat can “rise”. Some do; petty bourgeois can rise higher; some new people join the big bourgeoisie; and there is a downward movement too. Yet the bourgeoisie, at any given moment, exists for the working class. Even if social mobility were far greater than in fact it is, that would not negate the fundamental class relations of capitalism. Why would not the same principle apply to the Stalinist autocracy?

XVII. NATIONALISED ECONOMY AND FLUX

ALL SUCH ARGUMENTS of Trotsky’s, however, are secondary to the basic idea that the bureaucracy has no “special property relations of its own”. “The nationalisation of the land, the means of industrial production, transport and exchange, together with the monopoly of foreign trade, constitute the basis of the soviet social structure. Through these relations, established by the proletarian revolution, the nature of the Soviet Union as a proletarian state is for us basically defined”.

Under capitalism, “in general the productive forces, upon a basis of private property and competition, have been working out their own destiny. In contrast to this, the property relations which issued from the socialist revolution are indivisibly bound up with the new state as their repository”. But this is the Stalinist state, the state in which the bureaucracy is “the sole privileged and commanding stratum”! Here the nationalised property defines the class character of the state — and the state in turn gives the nationalised property its class character. This is a vicious circle; nationalised property defines the class character of the state which defines the class character of the nationalised property... Trotsky’s answer to this objection, that the system originates in the October Revolution and could not have originated otherwise, cannot wipe out the social facts of bureaucratic rule; and in fact it is not true. Between October and the system he is studying came the Stalinist revolution after 1928.

Trotsky admits that: “The means of production belong to the state. But the

state, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy. If these as yet wholly new relations should solidify, become the norm and be legalised, whether with or without resistance from the workers, they would, in the long run, lead to a complete liquidation of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution". Then he pulls back: "But to speak of that now is at least premature. The proletariat has not yet said its last word. The bureaucracy has not yet created social supports for its dominion in the form of special types of property. It is compelled to defend state property as the source of its power and its income. In this aspect of its activity it still remains a weapon of proletarian dictatorship".

At the end of this passage Trotsky comes back to his starting point: the USSR is a workers' state because it retains nationalised property. But he has had to go through two stages to get there. At first, when he talks about the "wholly new relations" solidifying, he seems to have in mind the existing collectivised property — state property where the state "so to speak" belongs to the bureaucracy. He then imperceptibly slips into discussing not this continuing system but possible future destinies. In the last sentence — when Trotsky tells us that because the bureaucracy defends state property it remains "a weapon of proletarian dictatorship" — we realise that in the course of the paragraph Trotsky has slid into discussing something else. He winds up offering as reason for seeing the system as proletarian dictatorship that same nationalised property which at the beginning of the paragraph he looked at in a fresh and new way — and whose character is precisely the problem he is unravelling. The movement is circular. We wind up back where we started. Trotsky poses a problem — bureaucratic nationalised economy — then substitutes another — the danger of bourgeois restoration for it. The first problem — the fact that a nationalised economy exists and that the bureaucracy defends it — becomes the solution to the problem he has substituted for it (bourgeois restoration)! Here again, the theory depends on dissolving the USSR as it is into the flux of the process — from workers' revolution to bourgeois restoration or socialist regeneration — it is deemed to be part of.

XVIII. PROGRESSIVE TYRANNY?

IT IS NOT SURPRISING that some of Trotsky's comrades — Joseph Carter and James Burnham in the USA — conclude after *The Revolution Betrayed* that the idea that the USSR remains a workers' state makes no sense and should be formally repudiated. Yvan Craipeau in France had held that view for some time already.

On 4 November 1937 Trotsky replies to Craipeau. "This terminological radicalism does not advance things very much", he writes. If the bureaucracy is a class "in the sense of Marxist sociology", then we "have a new form of class society which is identical neither with feudal society nor with capitalist society, and which never was foreseen by Marxist theoreticians"¹⁷.

Capitalism, writes Trotsky, is in "a blind alley" because it is no longer capable of developing the productive forces, "either in the advanced countries or in the backward countries". "The world imperialist chain was broken at its weakest link, Russia. Now we learn that in place of bourgeois society there has been established a new class society". Suppose that is so. Then clearly

“the new society is progressive in comparison with capitalism”. Why? With nationalised property — and, though Trotsky fades this out, with a state slave-driving, starving and working the population to death — the “new possessing ‘class’ has assured a development of productive forces never equalled in the history of the world”. “Marxism teaches us... that the productive forces are the fundamental factor of historic progress”. Capitalism surpassed feudalism because capitalism “opened up new and grandiose possibilities for the... 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!”

The core of fact here — the USSR’s industrial growth — is the axis around which Trotsky’s analysis oscillates throughout the 1930s. Except through reasoning based on slotting the USSR into a prior historical scheme — that the economically progressive sequel to capitalism, when it falls into decay, is a workers’ state — the assessment of the USSR as progressive because of its industrial growth is entirely separable from any idea of it being a workers’ state. From now on Trotsky will often separate them in his polemics. The method of setting aside the question of whether the USSR is a workers’ state, arguing that the USSR is in any case progressive, and identifying it as a workers’ state only secondarily and by abstract deduction from the historical scheme, will come to be a central feature of Trotsky’s polemics. Already, in his theses, “The Fourth International and the Soviet Union”, of July 1936, Trotsky has developed all his political positions without reference to the claim that the USSR was a workers’ state, which is asserted only in the 18th and last of the theses. The “workers’ state” idea is now just a matter of the supposed historical roots in 1917 of the USSR; the historical progressiveness of the nationalised economy; and the general Marxist scheme that says that the progressive successor to capitalism is a workers’ state. Trotsky makes no substantial argument for it based on the actual, empirical relations between the Stalinist state and the real, living workers.

Now Trotsky himself will explain that: “Economic progress is not identical with socialism. America, [the] United States, had in its history more grandiose economic progress on a capitalistic basis. Socialism signifies the progressive equality and the progressive abolition of the state”¹⁸. Trotsky’s honesty, his real understanding of social and political relations in the real USSR, make it impossible for him not to see that the USSR’s “economic progress” is isolated entirely from all the social, intellectual, and political prerequisites assumed in the Marxist shorthand that says “socialism grows out of advanced capitalism” and “is created by capitalism’s gravediggers, the working class”. In order to replace capitalism, the proletariat must be able to organise itself and grow in culture and understanding.

Even for Trotsky’s backstop argument on the progressiveness of the USSR, much depends on the idea of capitalism being at a dead end. He complains that Craipeau wishes “not to distinguish between a society which is absolutely reactionary, since it fetters and even destroys the productive forces, and a society which is relatively progressive, since it has assured a great upsurge in economy”. “Relatively” embodies Trotsky’s awareness of what Stalinism is — and his false picture of capitalism. Trotsky makes an utterly false and impermissible exaggeration of the decrepitude of capitalism and its effect on working-class perspectives, including the prospective end of bourgeois

democracy everywhere, to “relativise” what Stalinism does to the working class. He is forced to exaggerate the hopelessness of capitalism to sustain his line on the USSR. Even Stalinism is better than dead-end capitalism. In fact, from a working-class point of view, an advanced capitalism that still allows labour movements is better than this barbaric collectivism. Its socialist potential is greater. But Trotsky is an economic fetishist by now. He makes judgments that were shared by many, even anti-socialists, in the 1930s, but which now cannot but seem bizarre .

“The nationalised and planned economy of the USSR is the greatest school for all humanity aspiring to a better future. One must be blind not to see the difference!”. All this depends on the USSR being seen on split levels. On an inner, deeper level it is a “nationalised and planned economy” that exists in Trotsky’s head; the empirical reality combines that deep reality with a more superficial, temporary, freakish level of reality, namely Stalinism. This is an aberration, out of kilter with the true logic and the true needs of “proper” nationalised and planned economy. There is in fact a huge gulf — so great that a revolution will be needed to cross it — between the actuality of Stalinist nationalised economy and the working-class nationalised-economy model from which Trotsky draws the justification, by analogy, for the real USSR.

By expounding a case for “defence of USSR” separate from the idea that it is a workers’ state, Trotsky provisionally and conditionally propounds some of the bases of the later neo-Trotskyist idea of progressive Stalinism — the “deformed workers’ state” created by a peasant army (China, Yugoslavia) or Russian invasion.

In the reply to Craipeau he also elaborates the first of a series of auxiliary arguments for defence. “In the war between Japan and Germany on one side, and the USSR on the other, there would be involved not a question of equality in distribution, or of proletarian democracy, or of Vyshinsky’s justice, but the fate of the nationalised property and planned economy”. Imperialist victory would mean “the collapse not only of the new exploiting ‘class’ in the USSR, but also of the new forms of production — the lowering of the whole Soviet economy to the level of a backward and semi-colonial capitalism”. Trotsky puts it starkly: “Faced with the struggle between two states which are — let us admit it — both class states, but one of which represents imperialist stagnation and the other tremendous economic progress, do we not have to support the progressive state against the reactionary state? Yes or no?” Now even on Trotsky’s own account the Stalinist USSR — the empirical USSR, as distinct from the USSR in Trotsky’s head — has very limited possibilities of further progress even on the narrowest economic measures.

In *The Revolution Betrayed* he has written: “The progressive role of the soviet bureaucracy coincides with the period devoted to introducing into the Soviet Union the most important elements of capitalist technique. The rough work of borrowing, imitating, transplanting and grafting, was accomplished on the bases laid down by the revolution... It is possible to build gigantic factories according to a ready-made Western pattern by bureaucratic command — although, to be sure, at triple the normal cost. But the farther you go, the more the economy runs into the problem of quality... Under a nationalised economy, quality demands a democracy of producers and consumers, freedom of criticism and initiative — conditions incompatible with a totalitarian regime of fear, lies and flattery. Behind the question of quality stands a more complicated and grandiose problem which may be comprised of the concept of inde-

pendent, technical and cultural creation. The ancient philosopher said that strife is the father of all things. No new values can be created where a free conflict of ideas is impossible.”

Worse, progress here is too narrowly defined. This USSR is a slave state, a state that has experienced an enormous regression on every level above that of abstract economic forms. The idea that socialist politics should be defined by choosing the side of “progress” in abstraction from class definitions and immediate class conflicts — remember, in this polemic Trotsky is still conceding for the sake of argument that the autocracy is a new exploiting class — is logically, and would be in history for the neo-Trotskyists, entirely destructive of working-class socialism. The revolutionary socialists would logically attach themselves to the progressive forms, quite apart from class rule, working-class conditions and socialism.

Socialism and the proletariat ultimately express the progressive social tendencies of capitalist economy; but in real history the really progressive real labour movement, the proletariat, fights the bourgeois, slows down accumulation, hinders adoption of labour-saving devices on capitalist terms. Despite our historic overview, we are not partisans of economic development before all else, nor inspectors general of economy. We are the warlike working-class party concerned for the class at the expense, where necessary, of “progressive” economic development. Here Trotsky lays the basis for collapsing the class viewpoint into the view of an administrator, a developmentalist or an inspector general of history and economic development.

There is another innovation, and an even worse one. From now on Trotsky’s argument for defence of the USSR does not rest on its alleged working-class character or on the superiority of the “new forms of production” alone, but on the idea that defeat will reduce the USSR to a semi-colony. This reflects the fragility and “immaturity” which Trotsky sees in the real USSR. Yet it is an argument entirely distinct from any idea of the USSR being a workers’ state or even economically progressive. As we will see below, Trotsky will soon indicate that the USSR is itself a Great Russian empire (he will not use this term) because it oppresses many of the USSR’s component peoples in the world war. Any imperial power may be dismembered after defeat. In fact, Germany will be defeated and half of it will, after barbarous plunder, be turned into a colony of the USSR. Marxists will not therefore conclude that they must defend Germany! Trotsky’s defence of the USSR is of course rooted in his position that it is a workers’ state, with a progressive system of production (though the two have become separable); the bringing in of the “anti-colonial argument” indicates only how shaky he now feels his position to be. But it has its implications... and they are not little ones — as we will see when, in 1939-40, Trotsky will “support” the Soviet Union expanding into the former Russian imperial provinces of Finland and Poland.¹⁹

XIX. POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

TROTSKY DATED THE article “Not a bourgeois and not a workers’ state”, a reply to the opinion of two US Trotskyists, James Burnham and Joseph Carter,

17. *Writings 1937-8*, p.34.

exactly three weeks after his argument against Craipeau.²⁰ Burnham and Carter still thought the USSR progressive as against contemporary capitalism. They were for its defence against “imperialist attacks”. Drawing out the logic of Trotsky’s own writings — the disintegration of Trotsky’s position into discrete and incongruent elements — they separated those questions from the “class character” of the USSR.

Plainly it was not a capitalist state; but they could see no sense in Trotsky’s arguments for its working-class character. They could not, like Trotsky, draw a working-class identity from negative arguments — from what the USSR was not — and Marxist historical perspectives and Trotsky’s prolonged sense of walking a tightrope across an interregnum. They represented the positive print-out from Trotsky’s own position, a positive as distinct from a negative picture of the Stalinist phenomenon as Trotsky himself portrayed it, a plain, flat picture of what was. They wanted downright, categorical statements, and they offered some. Neither bourgeois, nor proletarian — what was it, then? They “admit that ‘the economic structure as established by the October Revolution remains basically unchanged’”, and Burnham and Carter “do not forget that the main difference between the USSR and the contemporary bourgeois state finds its expression in the powerful development of the productive forces as a result of a change in the form of ownership”.

Burnham and Carter think that while the working class has ceased being the ruling class, the “economic structure [which] still remains basically unchanged” means that it is not bourgeois either. They “deny... that the bureaucracy is an independent class”. Trotsky says that they conclude that the soviet state “is not an organisation of class domination”ⁿ. Burnham and Carter accept that the rule of the proletariat can take different forms but, they argue, a workers’ state must have some form of workers’ political rule. “The concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat is not primarily an economic but predominantly a political category... All forms, organs, and institutions of the class rule of the proletariat are now destroyed, which is to say that the class rule of the proletariat is destroyed”.

Trotsky replies: “Of course, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not only ‘predominantly’ but wholly and fully a ‘political category’. However, this very politics is only concentrated economics... The regime which guards the expropriated and nationalised property from the imperialists is, independent of political forms, the dictatorship of the proletariat”. Even if it also “guards the expropriated property” from the workers. Trotsky takes refuge in an assertion based on the identification of nationalised property with working-class rule. He merely restates what Burnham and Carter have challenged, by asserting that though the proletariat does not rule politically, it does nonetheless rule “politically”, if not through politics, because the USSR’s economy is nationalised. To the question of how the proletariat can rule where clearly it rules not, Trotsky answers that the nationalised economy coming out of the October Revolution is the rule of the proletariat. In the degenerated workers’ state, the formula which Trotsky quotes from Lenin — “politics is concentrated economics” — is more true the other way round: economics is congealed and concentrated bureaucratic politics. Working-class economic rule can operate only through politics, because the economic and political are fused in a way quite unlike politics and economics in a self-regulating or largely self-

18. *Writings 1939-40*, p.23

regulating economy. In the USSR, both politics and economics are concentrated in the hands of the autocracy and its totalitarian state.

XX. THE UKRAINE AND USSR IMPERIALISM

ON 23 AUGUST 1939 Stalin reversed his diplomatic orientation of the previous four years — which had been based on an alliance with the democratic imperialist powers, France and Britain — and signed a pact with Hitler. On 1 September Hitler seized western Poland. Britain and France stood by their treaty obligations to Poland, and declared war on Germany. On 17 September — in line with secret clauses in his pact with Hitler — Stalin invaded eastern Poland. On 30 November the USSR invaded Finland. It met fierce resistance, and had to settle (on 13 March 1940) for minor territorial gains. In April-June the German army swept through most of western Europe — Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, France. In June 1940 the USSR seized the Rumanian provinces of Bukovina and Bessarabia; in July, it annexed the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), which it had brought under its effective control in late 1939. These events, the beginning of the USSR's imperialist expansion, divided Trotskyism into two clearly distinct strands. Formally, Trotsky was heavily on one side; politically, as we will see, he was on both.

In the eastern part of the Polish state, seized by Stalin, Poles were a minority. According to the national composition of the population, it was more accurately described as western Ukraine and western Byelorussia. The greater portions of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian peoples lived in the USSR. There were also smaller areas of Ukrainian population in Rumania, and, after March 1939, Hungary.

Well before these events Hitler had called for a "Greater Ukraine", and early in 1939 the Nazis had allowed a conference of Ukrainian nationalists to be held in Berlin in obvious preparation for war. Trotsky responded with great urgency. The Ukrainian national question was now so explosive, he argued, that communist oppositionists in the USSR must be armed with the slogan: for the independence of the Ukraine. Otherwise the revolutionaries in the Ukraine would be disarmed and reactionaries, including Nazi invaders when they came, would be able to exploit Ukrainian national disaffection. In fact, when the Nazis eventually did invade, in June 1941, many Ukrainians did at first welcome them, though the Nazis' anti-Slav racism soon turned the people against them and drove them back to support for Stalin's state.

On 22 April 1939, Trotsky wrote "The Ukrainian Question", which was published in the *Socialist Appeal*, in New York, on 9 May. Trotsky realistically sums up how things stand for the Ukrainians outside the USSR. "Not a trace remains of the former confidence and sympathy of the Western Ukrainian masses for the Kremlin. Since the latest murderous 'purge' in the Ukraine no one in the West wants to become part of the Kremlin satrapy which continues to bear the name of the Soviet Ukraine". Now: "The question of the fate of the Ukraine has been posed in its full scope. A clear and definite slogan is necessary that corresponds to the new situation. In my opinion there can be at the present time only one such slogan: A united, free and independent workers' and peasants' Soviet Ukraine".

Anticipating objections from the "friends" of the USSR, Trotsky replies: "The

fervid worship of state boundaries is alien to us. We do not hold the position of a 'united and indivisible' whole. After all, even the [1936] constitution of the USSR acknowledges the right of its component federated peoples to self-determination, that is, to separation". To raise the slogan of Ukrainian independence in the USSR would bring immediate shooting for treason. "It is precisely this ruthless hounding of all free national thought that 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... It is naturally impossible even to talk of Western Ukraine voluntarily joining the USSR as it is at present constituted. Consequently the unification of the Ukraine presupposes freeing the so-called Soviet Ukraine from the Stalinist boot".

Wouldn't this weaken the USSR militarily? The weakening is caused by the "ever-growing centrifugal tendencies generated by the Bonapartist dictatorship... In the event of war the hatred of the masses for the ruling clique can lead to the collapse of all the social conquests of October". Trotsky's new slogan is directed against Hitler — but also against Stalin. "An independent workers' and peasants' Ukraine might subsequently join the Soviet federation; but voluntarily, on conditions that it itself considers acceptable, which in turn presupposes a revolutionary regeneration of the USSR". Genuine Ukrainian independence is impossible without revolution in Western Europe. The Ukraine would join a Soviet United States of Europe. Trotsky may now even be contemplating a European working-class revolutionary war, if necessary, against Stalinism. "The proletarian revolution in Europe, in turn, would not leave one stone standing of the revolting structure of Stalinist Bonapartism".

This Trotsky, faced with real political questions, is the opposite of the Trotsky who thinks that the preservation of the forms of property is all-important. Here he advocates deliberate fomentation of a revolutionary maelstrom against both Hitler and "the rapist clique in the Kremlin". This sort of violent language, expressing all-out hostility to the Stalinist regime as to a particularly monstrous class enemy, is by now Trotsky's only public tone. It is very close to the mid-19th century tone of Karl Marx against Tsarist Russia. Trotsky's "orientation" articles on the "working-class" character of the USSR, and for its defence, are for the narrower circles of his comrades. The balance is close to being the very opposite of what it was in the early 1930s.

On 30 July Trotsky returned to the Ukrainian question, writing "Independence of the Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads" (published in *Socialist Appeal*, 15 and 18 September 1939) in reply to critics of his earlier article. In this polemical article against a rigid group of "Trotskyists" (those associated with Hugo Oehler) Trotsky confronts a caricature of himself on the question of defence of the USSR — the issue that will split the Fourth

19. It is curious that Trotsky's argument here is the same argument used by G. Plekhanov, the "Father of Russian Marxism", for turning patriot in 1914: defeat would make Russia a German colony and destroy the progress of decades, and the progressive potential thus created.

20. Burnham responded: "Is this a 'no-class' state? Of course not. It is simply not, primarily, the instrument of either of the two major classes in contemporary society. But it is the instrument of the 'new middle class' striving to become a consolidated bourgeois class within the Soviet Union..." [James Burnham: "From Formula to Reality", in E.Haber Kern and A.Lipow (eds.), *Neither Capitalism nor Socialism: Theories of Bureaucratic Collectivism*, p.17).]

International within a very short time. Trotsky's critic denounces the slogan, among other reasons, because it "completely negates the position of the defence of the Soviet Union". How, asks Trotsky in reply, "can a socialist demand that a hostile Ukraine be retained within the framework of the USSR?"

Oehler does, Trotsky believes, support the political revolution against "the Bonapartist bureaucracy". But this "like every revolution, will undoubtedly present a certain danger from the standpoint of defence... Such a danger is an inescapable historical risk which cannot be evaded, for under the rule of the Bonapartist bureaucracy the USSR is doomed". "The revolutionary national uprising... *represents nothing else but a single segment of the political revolution*"²¹. This is not only full revolution but national struggle against an imperial power. And the logic of the argument for the Ukraine applies also to the USSR's other oppressed nationalities — who comprise, between them, the majority of the state's population.

What if "the separation of the Ukraine threatens to break down the plan and to lower the productive forces"? "This argument, too, is not decisive. An economic plan is not the holy of holies... [After Ukrainian independence] insofar as the plan is advantageous for the Ukraine she will herself desire and know how to reach the necessary economic agreement with the Soviet Union, just as she will be able to conclude the necessary military alliance". Here Trotsky steps outside the fetish of the planned economy, to which elsewhere all else is subordinate. He will soon split the Fourth International by championing an opposite position.

"It is impermissible to forget that the plunder and arbitrary rule of the bureaucracy constitute an important integral part of the current economic plan, and exact a heavy toll from the Ukraine... The outlived ruling caste is systematically destroying the country's economy, the army and its culture; it is annihilating the flower of the population and preparing the ground for a catastrophe. The heritage of the revolution can be saved only by an overturn" (emphasis added).

Trotsky sees the championing of self-determination as a matter of arming the Left Opposition with a full revolutionary programme... "The bolder and more resolute is the policy of the proletarian vanguard on the national question among others, all the more successful will be the revolutionary overturn, all the lower its overhead expenses".

"The barb of the slogan of an independent Ukraine is aimed directly against the Moscow bureaucracy and enables the proletarian vanguard to rally the peasant masses... the same slogan opens up for the proletarian party the opportunity of playing a leading role in the national Ukrainian movement in Poland, Rumania and Hungary. Both of these political processes will drive the revolutionary movement forward and increase the specific weight of the proletarian vanguard".

Trotsky is advocating full-scale proletarian and anti-imperialist revolution — implicitly for the majority of the peoples of the USSR where the Great Russians are the minority. The call for an independent Ukraine implied a clear-cut characterisation of Stalin's USSR, even before it started to expand, as an imperialist state. Trotsky and his comrades characterised pre-war Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland as imperialist states because they contained minorities held against their will and variously ill-treated and discriminated against — in Czechoslovakia, for example, three million Sudeten

Germans as well as Slovaks and Hungarians. "Even irrespective of its international ties, Czechoslovakia is an absolutely imperialist state"²². There was no logical way to exclude the USSR from the same category.

At that time, and up to the end of 1939, the US Trotskyist newspaper, the *Socialist Appeal*, summed up its politics as a call for "the Third Camp". Trotsky expounded it like this: "The attempt of the bourgeoisie during its internecine conflict to oblige humanity to divide up into only two camps is motivated by a desire to prohibit the proletariat from having its own independent ideas. This method is as old as bourgeois society, or more exactly, as class society in general. No one is obligated to become a Marxist; no one is obligated to swear by Lenin's name. But the whole of the politics of these two titans of revolutionary thought was directed towards this, that the fetishism of two camps would give way to a third, independent, sovereign camp of the proletariat, that camp upon which, in point of fact, the future of humanity depends"²³. In the politics Trotsky developed on the Ukraine in the months leading up to World War 2 he applied the same approach, in essence, to conflict between the two camps of Hitler and Stalin on one side and the Allies on the other. "The question of first order is the revolutionary guarantee of the unity and independence of a workers' and peasants' Ukraine in the struggle against imperialism on the one hand, and against Moscow Bonapartism on the other".

XXI. THE PARTITION OF POLAND

TROTSKY'S RESPONSE TO the partition of Poland by Hitler and Stalin in September 1939 is in line with those politics. Ever since 1933, Trotsky and the Trotskyist press have explained from time to time that fundamentally Stalin wanted an alliance with Hitler as the best way to keep out of war; but he bitterly denounces the Hitler-Stalin pact. It is "a military alliance in the full sense of the word, for it serves the aims of aggressive imperialist war", writes Trotsky on 2 September 1939, the day after the Nazis attack Poland²⁴. The German-Soviet pact "is a military alliance with a division of roles: Hitler conducts the military operations, Stalin acts as his quartermaster...". Thinking in terms of years of European war — though in fact it will be only ten months before Hitler is master of the continent — Trotsky predicts that if Hitler, with Stalin's help, wins the war, then "that will signify mortal danger for the Soviet Union". The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union was then 22 months in the future.

Believing that Stalin's rule is too unstable for him to risk war, Trotsky does not expect the USSR invasion of eastern Poland. When it comes, he responds in high indignation. He scorns the Moscow story that its concern was to "liberate" and "unify" the Ukrainian and White Russian people. "In reality, the Soviet Ukraine, more than any part of the Soviet Union, is bound by the ferocious chains of the Moscow bureaucracy". Ukrainian aspirations for liberation and independence are legitimate and intense. "But these aspirations are directed also against the Kremlin". The Ukrainian people "will find itself 'unified', not in national liberty, but in bureaucratic enslavement... 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".

“It is true”, concedes Trotsky, “that in the occupied regions the Kremlin is proceeding to expropriate the large proprietors. But this is not a revolution accomplished by the masses, but an administrative reform, designed to extend the regime of the USSR into the new territories. Tomorrow” — in fact, it is simultaneously — “in the ‘liberated’ regions, the Kremlin will pitilessly crush the workers and peasants in order to bring them into subjection to the totalitarian bureaucracy”²⁵.

XXII. TROTSKYISM IN 1939

BY LATE 1939, in short, the balance of Trotsky’s politics has shifted heavily towards the advocacy of revolution by the workers and oppressed nationalities against the USSR autocracy; “defence of the USSR against imperialism”, though not at all renounced, has become very secondary. Moreover, Trotsky sees that “defence” not as an alignment with Stalin but as a revolutionary mass slogan against the autocracy, deemed to be bound on the bourgeois road. “It is our task to call upon the working class to oppose its own strength to the pressure of the bureaucracy — for the defence of the great conquests of October”²⁶. Trotsky is unsure about the theoretical definition. He does not know. That is why he oscillates between different “defencisms”. He can only operate politically on what he has known, while questioning and developing and trying to hold together the possibility of revolutionary action by the Fourth International. But the exigencies of politics are wreaking havoc with “science”. Trotsky’s metaphysics of the nationalised economy under the Stalinist locum has separated political and international affairs from, and in the last analysis subordinated everything else to, the nationalised economy seen as the legacy of October 1917 and the polar contrast to world capitalist decline. In this conception nothing that the autocracy can do, killing millions, deporting nations, destroying labour movements, or even, after 1944-5, conquering and pillaging a large part of eastern and central Europe — nothing but denationalising the economy — can stop the USSR being a workers’ state. (Nor, once Stalinism begins its vast expansion after 1944, can any crime cancel out the logical implication that Stalinism is both progressive and revolutionary.)

Trotsky has already written, in his reply to Craipeau, that the autocracy can and does do worse than any ruling class in history, and yet is still the custodian of the workers’ state. “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.)”. Tied by his fetish of nationalised property to USSR “socialism” and after 1928 again and again adapting to it, Trotsky has created an immensely elastic system of ideologising around Stalinism as workers’ state.

Trotsky has insisted that: “Only dialectical materialism, which teaches us to view all existence in its process of development and in the conflict of internal forces, can impart the necessary stability to thought or action”. In contrast, “a superficial idealistic mode of thinking that operates with ready-made norms, mechanically fitting living processes of development to them” “easily leads one from enthusiasm to prostration”. In fact, this is not a bad description of Trotsky himself, except that for the “idealistic norms” of Marxian socialism,

derived from socialist extrapolation from advanced capitalism, Trotsky has, as we saw, erected a norm-fetish extrapolated from the experience of one backward country.

Trotsky's strength is that he does not let this "norm" shape his picture of the "living processes" or blur his viewpoint — that of the working class. He lets his vision split into two parallel pictures of the same world, two not-properly-integrated views of the same thing. A duality runs through it all — between the "legitimate" — norm-sustaining — nationalised economy, the one that really fits the underlying historic processes of the October Revolution and its goals and will re-emerge at the other side of a new working-class revolution, and the actually-existing autocratic nationalised economy, that is the very opposite of nationalisation that serves socialist goals.

For Trotsky's structure of a finely tuned and balanced series of conditional positions erected above his conscientious concrete analysis, his own image for Bonapartism will also do: it is a weight finely balanced on the top of a pyramid — finely balanced between his "old communist" politics and analyses on one side, and on the other the encroaching totalitarian-economist logic of his theories about the progressive nationalised economy in which the bureaucracy is locum for an enslaved working class and creates seeming economic miracles in part by driving living standards down to subsistence level and, for millions, below. Trotskyism must roll down on one side of the pyramid or the other; and, as we shall see, it starts to do so in 1939-40.

Trotsky has invoked the basic Marxist scheme of the succession so far of class societies in history to caution Craipeau and all like him and expand on the concerns that inhibit Trotsky's own thinking. Trotsky's way of keeping to it is to be unable to see the USSR as a whole ... and mentally oscillate between seeing it as bourgeois or proletarian or both. Of Craipeau Trotsky had said that he did not deal with the questions of historical perspective raised by his description of Stalinism as a class society — "if this new society is an inevitable stage between capitalism and socialism or if it is merely a historic 'accident'."

From the point of view "of our general historical perspective as it is formulated in the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels, the sociological definition of the bureaucracy assumes capital importance". The retardation of the world revolution produced soviet degeneration. It is "the result of political and 'conjunctural' causes... Can one speak of a new... 'conjunctural' class? I really doubt that... From the point of view of the historic succession of social regimes... to give the bureaucracy the name of a possessing class is not only an abuse of terminology, but moreover a great political danger which can lead to the complete derailment of our historical perspective".

There is more than a little in this of special pleading, of an invitation to conclude in a conspiracy of silence and of the incantatory, ideologically prophylactic repetition of increasingly doubtful "official truths" lest the furies escape and chaos follows. This sort of consideration — if this, then that, and we must think of the implications — is inimical to the task Trotsky is ostensibly engaged in, of thinking the problems through to the end. Trotsky's concern, let us repeat, is that of a revolutionary politician. He could truly claim to have kept the terrible chronicles of Stalinist rule and Stalinist crimes with match-

21. *Writings 1939-40*, p.51, my emphasis.

22. *Writings 1938-9*, p.62

less strictness, scrupulosity and objectivity. He is right to approach the question cautiously and in wishing to err rather on the side of belatedness than to rush needlessly to conclusions that will bring theoretical disarray to a movement whose morale and capacity for action at decisive moments may shape the future. Yet the art is to know when quantity passes to quality. From 1936 onwards, at least, when he comes as near as makes no difference to defining the USSR as a new form of class society and then unconvincingly retreats, Trotsky is fighting a rearguard action — and fighting it in such a way as to suggest that he knows that is what he does. His motive is honourable and understandable. Trotsky is a revolutionary politician, not an academic or backwards-focused historian. His focus and prime, proper concern is the future and the preparation of action. The cost of his theoretical tardiness for the future of his movement will be higher than he could ever have imagined.

Trotsky is teaching his followers to live on a political tightrope; he is teaching “convenience” and “implications” as a legitimate factor in political-theoretical calculations and “not yet” as a pseudo-answer to avoid an indicated but unwanted answer. Others after him will be less able to keep the balance than Trotsky is. And, on a certain level, Trotsky has revised Marxism. In the interests of a preconceived perspective and of dogmatism he is using Marxism as a narrowly conceived and defined political artefact that is as only a servant of political expediency — he has impermissibly stretched the terms and concepts so out of shape that they begin to look like the thing they supposedly encompass, the USSR.

Essentially, as we have seen, he uses the technique of palimpsestry: writing new meanings into old “texts” and concepts. The idea that the theory either solves or evades the theoretical problems posed by Stalinism is illusory: he only takes them out of rational assessment by corrupting the very language of old Marxism. Fighting Stalinism, he does, under the pressure of Stalinism, what for different reasons the Stalinist bureaucracy has done to Marxism.

By his tardiness, he has destructured his doctrine and introduced into it a disabling incoherence and many destabilising elements, including something akin to Russian patriotism (Russia will be reduced to a colony).

Trotsky believes the USSR bureaucracy cannot risk war and will collapse if war is forced on the USSR. In 1939-40 it will be the Fourth International and Trotsky who find that war throws them into chaos and political collapse.

XXIII. THE TWO SOULS OF TROTSKYISM

AT THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE of the American Trotskyist group, the SWP, on 5 September 1939, James Burnham put down a set of theses on the USSR and the war. Burnham has already, in 1937, said that the USSR is neither a fully bourgeois nor a proletarian state, and that it is reverting to capitalism. He shares Trotsky’s basic framework — there are only two alternatives, capitalism or workers’ power — but thinks restoration has gone very far already. He now re-raises the question and calls for a clear denunciation of the USSR as imperialist. Contrary to myth, Burnham did not argue that the USSR is “bureaucratic-collectivist”. He will later write “The Managerial Revolution”

23. *Writings Supplement 1934-40*, p.868-9.

24. *Writings 1939-40*, p.77

with a different thesis: here he is still arguing for the perspective of capitalist restoration.

In the subsequent arguments, the only person²⁷ to advance the idea of bureaucratic collectivism will be Trotsky, who expounds it tentatively and defends it from the charge of “revisionism”, but — for now — rejects it. Trotsky’s main antagonists in the faction fight that would develop, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern, share Trotsky’s basic position that the USSR is a degenerated workers’ state. Shachtman has doubts and reservations — but does not propose, or indeed have, an alternative to Trotsky’s formal position. Shachtman will never adopt the position of Burnham; he will adopt the position Trotsky, wearing the mask of Bruno Rizzi, puts forward. The split that develops is one in Trotsky’s own camp. The dispute is not about theories of the USSR, but about political responses to the USSR’s invasions of Poland and Finland, and to the beginning of the imperialist expansion of the USSR. *The essential innovators are not Shachtman and his friends. Trotsky is the innovator, on the one hand inserting new substance into the old formula of “defence of the USSR” in response to the new imperialist phase of Stalinism, and on the other provisionally sketching out a new theory of Stalinism.*

Trotsky’s public comments on the invasion of Poland are such as might be a manifesto stating the views of Max Shachtman and his allies. The US Trotskyist leaders with whom he will be allied in that faction fight respond very differently: Albert Goldman initially wants to support the USSR invasion of Poland as a “lesser evil”, and James P Cannon says that it is a matter of the USSR’s military business rather than political right or wrong²⁸. As events unfold, however, Trotsky is drawn along by the logic of “holding the line” for the theoretical system he is not yet ready to discard — and in fact into holding the line for the birth of a new, regressive “Trotskyism”.

There are differences over Poland, but they are a matter of commentaries on an accomplished fact. They do not have the explosive power of differences over the four-month war in Finland that will start on 30 November. Cannon and Trotsky will say that defence of the USSR obliges them to be “Soviet partisans”; Shachtman and the opposition will oppose Stalinist conquest. They grasp that a new situation has emergedⁿ. The faction fight will sharpen. Trotsky will write an article, “A Petty Bourgeois Opposition in the SWP” (15 December 1939) which pours raging scorn and contempt on the heads of Burnham, Shachtman and Abern — and on much that was “Trotskyism” in September 1939. He will savage Shachtman for advocating the “Third Camp”, “oppose both sides”, position he himself propounded for the Ukraine a few weeks earlier. In April 1940 the Trotskyist movement will split.

XXV. USSR IMPERIALISM? “AGAIN AND ONCE MORE...”

IN “AGAIN AND once more on the Nature of the USSR” (18 October 1939), Trotsky replies to Albert Goldman’s idea that the Stalinist occupation of eastern Poland was “a ‘lesser evil’”. Yes, German occupation would have been worse for the people involved. (The enslaving and exterminating genocidal Nazis in Eastern Europe have a horror all their own, and that — not nation-

25. “The US will participate in the war”, 1 October 1939; *New York Times* 4 October 1939; *Writings 1939-40* p.94.

26. “The Fourth International and the Soviet Union”, July 1936.

alised property — is what Trotsky means here.) But the 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 afterwards 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”. If Stalin, the “firebug”, deserves “credit”, he also deserves hanging. (In fact the population ratio was two for Hitler’s slavery and one for Stalin’s semi-slavery)²⁹.

Trotsky responds sympathetically to the alarm of some of his comrades about “unconditional defence of the USSR”. In doing so he lays the basis of the policy adopted by Shachtman in the Finnish war — “conjunctural defeatism”. Trotsky defines “‘unconditional’ defence of the USSR” to mean “that independently of the motives and causes of the war we defend the social basis of the USSR, if it is menaced by danger on the part of imperialism”. He cannot, without embracing a terrible logic, interpret that to mean: we must back the USSR whenever the USSR is at war, even a war to subjugate a small neighbouring people, because imperialism may get drawn in and any military defeat will encourage the larger enemies of the USSR.

No, Trotsky says that we do not, of course, support the “Red” Army in an occupied territory — an invasion of India by the USSR in alliance with Hitler is being hypothetically discussed — any more than we support it in the USSR. “If the Red Army menaces workers’ strikes or peasant protests against the bureaucracy in the USSR shall we support it? Foreign policy is the continuation of the internal. 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 fact, in war the USSR and the “Red” Army are a single entity, indivisible. But here Trotsky labels “adroit casuistry” arguments he will shortly use or imply: “If the Red Army... is beaten by the insurgent masses in India, this will weaken the USSR”. He replies: “The crushing of a revolutionary movement in India, with the cooperation of the Red Army, would signify an incomparably greater danger to the social basis of the USSR *than an episodic defeat of counter-revolutionary detachments of the Red Army in India*” (emphasis added). Are not all the detachments counter-revolutionary? In any case, this is “conjunctural defeatism”. When the Red Army is sent to suppress, annex and crush the Finnish nation, why are the “Red” Army detachments there not counter-revolutionary?

Trotsky adds: “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”. It is a question of judgment — of whether the Fourth International judges the “social basis” to be at stake, and other circumstances. This will be the basis of the opposition case on Finland. But when the Finnish war erupts, Trotsky’s own arguments will be improvised in line with a rooted determination to stick with his theoretical, “totalitarian-economistic”, basics and the “Clemenceau thesis”.

In “Again and once more...”, Trotsky also discusses the argument of some of his US comrades that the USSR must now be called “imperialist”. In substance he gives a pretty plain “yes” to the existence of Russian imperialism, but he refuses to use the word. We must, writes Trotsky, first establish what social content is included. History has known the imperialism of ancient

slave society, of feudal lords, of commercial and then industrial capital, of the Tsarist monarch, etc. The train of thought, plainly, is that history now knows the imperialism of the Stalinist bureaucracy. "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" — and now plainly of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Having admitted this and thus opened the door to the development of a rational "Trotskyist" understanding of the enormous explosion of Russian Stalinist imperialism that the next half decade would experience, Trotsky closes it: "in... Marxist literature, imperialism is understood to mean the expansionist policy of finance capital". Trotsky keeps the facts under review with stringent honesty — as in the assimilation of Russian expansion to the many and varied experiences and types of imperialism in history — but, as on the question of class and exploitation posed by the Stalinist experience, Trotsky's essential position is: our theory does not know of this phenomenon, and our perspectives exclude it. Where the point of this discussion is what is new — what current Marxist literature, like Trotsky's, should deal with — Trotsky points to the fact that Marxist literature has not done it so far... He systematically — in the wake of and in parallel to Stalinist "dialectics" — destructures and paralyses with sophistic relativism the proper socialist and democratic response. "To employ the term 'imperialism' for the foreign policy of the Kremlin — without elucidating exactly what this signifies — means simply to identify the policy of the Bonapartist bureaucracy with the policy of monopolistic capitalism on the basis that both one and the other utilise military force for expansion".

All that is conveyed by the outrage at the impermissible abstraction involved in equating finance capital and the USSR on the basis of expansion is that these are different systems. The facts are not denied; Trotsky has put them with admirable clarity. He won't call the autocracy a class or what it does exploitation and imperialism — but he is sharp and clear about what it is they are in life and what they do — and on what a proper socialist response is, including on the national question in the USSR (Ukraine). Yet here, at the birth of expansionary Russian bureaucratic imperialism, he begins to fail to be himself.

On Finland he will fail utterly and completely to maintain his consistently Bolshevik politics. For the first time since he came out for "political revolution" in the USSR he cannot respond to a critic who wants to define the autocracy as a new exploiting class by retorting: what do you want to add to the political conclusions?

When Trotsky says the identification of USSR expansion and the imperialism of expansionary finance capital can sow "only confusion" and that "it is much more proper to petty bourgeois democrats than to Marxists", he puts out the eyes of his surviving comrades, of the Fourth Internationalist movement.

XXVI. THE INVASION OF FINLAND

TROTSKY'S RESPONSE FOR the general public to the invasion of Finland was "The Twin Stars: Hitler-Stalin", written on 4 December 1939³⁰, four days after Stalin invaded Finland on 30 November. He had not to the last moment expected the USSR to go to war against Finland, any more than he had expected Stalin's initial expansion, which he had said was impossible. He still argues that Stalin cannot wage an offensive war with any hope of victory. War will provoke revolution against Stalinism. In war, "the whole fraud of the official regime, its outrages and violence, will inevitably provoke a profound reaction on the part of the people, who have already carried out three revolutions in this century". The USSR is capable of being a reactive force only. Germany, to draw the USSR into the war, "obviously pushed Moscow against Finland". Trotsky seems to expect an easy USSR victory. "But the sovietising of the Western Ukraine and White Russia (Eastern Poland), like the present attempt to sovietise Finland — are they not acts of socialist revolution? Yes and no. More no than yes.

When the Red Army occupies a new province, the Moscow bureaucracy establishes a regime which guarantees its domination. The population has no choice but voting yes to the effected reforms in a totalitarian plebiscite. A 'revolution' of this kind is feasible only on army-occupied territory with a scattered or backward population... This 'revolution' can indeed be accepted by the Kremlin. And Hitler has no fear of it". After this article is published in *Liberty* magazine (27 January 1940) a member of the SWP minority, Dwight MacDonald, will comment that in *Liberty* Trotsky is "'in reality' a... Shachtmanite" and pro-USSR only in the Trotskyists' private discussion bulletins. In fact the "two Trotskys" phenomenon that now emerges is remarkable. It is as if the two Trotskys don't even communicate with each other very well. In his public writings, including those in the Trotskyist press, Trotsky responds as a working-class socialist to the USSR that actually exists and to what it really does; in his "internal", orienting, "esoteric" writings he deals with the USSR of his theory, with a USSR that does not exist except in Trotsky's map of history — that exists in his imagination and in his hopes.

Trotsky's first contribution to the SWP's internal debate after the invasion of Finland is "The Petty Bourgeois Opposition in the SWP" (15 December 1939), a roar of anger and alarm, an attempt to beat down the opposition, which, he claims, "is leading a typical petty-bourgeois tendency". Trotsky presents James Burnham as the central leader of the opposition, and focuses on Burnham's views on dialectics, on the nature of the USSR, and on how the SWP should be organised, more than Finland. These are all issues on which Burnham has had longstanding and well-known differences with Trotsky — but on which the other leaders of the SWP opposition, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern, share Trotsky's views.

A month later Trotsky will sum up his picture of the opposition: "The relationship of forces within the bloc is completely against Shachtman. Abern has his own faction. Burnham with Shachtman's assistance can create the semblance of a faction constituting intellectuals disillusioned with Bolshevism. Shachtman has no independent programme, no independent method, no

27. Joseph Carter had a distinct position, according to Max Shachtman, but did not put it on paper.

28. Cannon would have a *reductio ad absurdum* of this position as late as 1944, and on that basis he defended the USSR's treachery to the insurgents of Warsaw (see *The Bureaucratic Jungle*, in this volume)

independent faction”³¹.

Trotsky and Cannon fear that Burnham will dominate the opposition. But he did not dominate. After Burnham’s defection from Shachtman’s Workers’ Party, soon after the April 1940 split, perhaps a dozen youth — no more — would join the Socialist Party. Abern would never play an independent political role in the Workers’ Party. The idea of Burnham’s dominance was pretty spurious in 1939-40. By 1942, when Trotsky’s polemics from 1939-40 were published by the SWP as a book (*In Defence of Marxism*) and since, it had become plain, matter-of-fact libel on the Workers’ Party. The spuriousness of it is displayed in an eloquent passage where Trotsky develops the idea of a parallel between dialectics and the Russian question in Burnham and Shachtman. “Burnham... possesses a method — pragmatism. Shachtman has no method. He adapts himself to Burnham”. But Shachtman has a conscious method — and it is the same as Trotsky’s.

If it is true that Shachtman on the USSR “gravitates” towards Burnham, an explanation for this may be sought in the difficulties and contradictions and inadequacies of the conclusions that Trotsky — and Shachtman — have, with their “dialectical” method, reached so far. The opposition asserts that their position does not depend on Burnham’s thesis on the USSR; Shachtman and Abern have reasons of their own: neither of them will ever come to share Burnham’s position of 1939. Trotsky’s insistence that Burnham is central is a way of insisting on Trotsky’s own method as he uses it and with his conclusions as the only legitimate ones — or, in other words, a refusal to admit Shachtman’s and Abern’s conclusions as possible from the standpoint they held in common with him. It is denial of a split in his own camp. But both on the rights of small nations against the USSR, and on “conjunctural defeatism” he has broken their ground for them. The opposition are developing the entire trend of Trotsky’s thought since 1936/7 and the Workers’ Party they found will continue to do it.

In “The Petty Bourgeois Opposition” when he deals with Finland, Trotsky comes out more “for” Russia than in any previous writings for many years. To punish the Stalinists “for their unquestionable crimes”, Trotsky says, the opposition resolution does not mention “by so much as a word that the Red Army in Finland expropriates large landowners and introduces workers’ control while preparing for the expropriation of the capitalists”. Trotsky hoped for class struggle in the interstices and maybe for the Red Army catching alight, and the revolutionary blaze spreading back to the USSR. He has explained that if, hypothetically, the Russian Army invades India: “We will teach the Indian workers to fraternise with the rank and file soldiers and denounce the repressive measures of their commanders and so on”³². This is Trotsky’s full revolutionary attitude to the “Red” Army: we “fraternise” to disrupt it.

Yet Trotsky’s disorientation here is palpable; and not only in that the entire picture he conjures up of War-Revolution is without basis in fact and contradicts the long considered and true picture he has painted only a few months back of the attitude of peoples bordering the USSR, like the Ukrainians and Finns — “no-one in the West wants to become part of the Kremlin satrapy which continues to bear the name of the Soviet Ukraine”.

29. Of the 15 million people in the territory Stalin annexed, 6 million were Poles. Of these one and a half million were killed or deported to slave labour.

But even if, in December, Trotsky thinks the Red Army is introducing workers' control, how can he evaluate it as positive, as other than the Stalinist equivalent of fascist social demagoguery and manipulation? Trotsky goes on: "Tomorrow the Stalinists will strangle the Finnish workers. But now they are giving — they are compelled to give — a tremendous impulse to the class struggle in its sharpest form". This "class struggle" — if it were real — would be only an auxiliary to the Russian Army, a "quisling" helpmeet of the totalitarian imperialist invaders. Anything that might "in itself" be good, like sparks of class struggle and workers' control, would "tomorrow" be stifled together with the Finnish workers. Trotsky will compare support for the USSR in Finland with support for the Republic in the Spanish civil war, but if there is a greater and a lesser evil here, an enemy using a machine gun and one dripping slow poison, then Finland is the analogue of the Spanish Republic and the Red Army of the Franco fascists.

Why, even on Trotsky's own account of things, should socialists call on the Finnish workers to be "Soviet partisans" — traitors not only to Finland but to their own labour movement? The only possible answer is that nationalised property is more important than the survival of Finland's labour movement or Finnish national rights. In Finland the dogma of defence of the USSR as part of the workers' revolution comes starkly up against defence of the Finnish labour movement — of the workers, the subjects of history in Marxist understanding. If nationalised property is, so to speak, congealed dead revolutionary activity, here it confronts a living working-class movement, whose existence the USSR threatens. The fetish of nationalised property, raised above society, politics and history, now acts as a social, political, military, historical hallucinogen. The US Trotskyist press skirmished on behalf of Stalin, making propaganda against bourgeois-democratic Finland of a shameful sort that presented it as if it were a military dictatorship identical with the regime that 20 years before massacred the Finnish Bolshevik workers.

XXVII. TROTSKY WARS ON HIS OWN POLITICS

TROTSKY WRITES AN open letter to Burnham on 7 January 1940. Civil war in Finland did not unfold, say the SWP opposition. "Your predictions did not materialise". Trotsky replies: "With the defeat and retreat of the Red Army, I reply, the civil war in Finland cannot, of course, unfold under the bayonets of Mannerheim". Carl Mannerheim commanded counter-revolutionary forces which killed thousands of communist workers in civil war in Finland in 1918-9. After twenty years in retirement, he has been recalled as Commander in Chief for the war with the USSR. Finland is a parliamentary democracy with a coalition government of Social Democrats and the Agrarian Party. But what sort of civil war can unfold under the bayonets of Stalin?

Trotsky continues: "We did not foresee the defeats of the first detachments of the Red Army", but such "a military episode... cannot determine our political line. Should Moscow... refrain from any further offensive against Finland, then the very question which today obscures the entire world situation to the eyes of the opposition would be removed from the order of the day. But there

is little chance for this. On the other hand, if England, France and the United States... were to aid Finland with military force, then the Finnish question would be submerged in a war between the USSR and the imperialist countries. In this case, we must assume that even a majority of the oppositionists would remind themselves of the programme of the Fourth International". Doesn't Trotsky here admit that the actual Finnish-USSR conflict is not covered by the Fourth International programme? Or not quite? Or will be only if imperialist powers like Britain and France intervene?

Trotsky proposes a policy, determined by considerations of defending the USSR from imperialist attack - which will not in fact come by this route. Why does Trotsky not wait for this, keep separate defence of the USSR against western imperialism - as Shachtman wants - from support for USSR imperialism against Finland? Why merge defence of the USSR with half-hatched ideas of expanding bureaucratic revolution? Trotsky concedes that the notional "civil war" in Finland "is introduced on bayonets from without. It is controlled by the Moscow bureaucracy. Nevertheless", Trotsky continues, having shown it to be a very unusual, indeed an oxymoronic, sort of civil war, "it is precisely a question of civil war, of an appeal to the lowly, to the poor, a call to them to expropriate the rich, drive them out, arrest them, etc. I know of no other name for those actions except civil war".

In fact it is a call by a would-be conquering and subjugating imperialist state to the oppressed classes of invaded Finland to help them overrun the country and overthrow the old rulers whose position in society the invaders' ruling class — or as Trotsky would prefer, ruling autocracy and caste — will replace. They will not only add national oppression but a uniquely intense and all-encompassing new social oppression too. Trotsky's approach here is palimpsestry, writing new content into old terms. Workers' states that are slave states, civil wars that are invasions, appeals against the rich to the poor by worse slavemasters who want their help.

On the same level of fantasy, Trotsky constructs a policy which, he says, socialists should have followed in eastern Poland when the USSR invaded. They should "conduct a struggle against the landlords and the capitalists" (does he imagine this is somehow separate from the occupying army of the USSR?) "Do not tear yourself away from the masses" who have "naive hopes in Moscow" — "fight in their camp, try to extend and deepen their struggle, and to give it the greatest possible independence. Only in this way will you prepare the coming insurrection against Stalin".

Here, though, his picture of reality is radically false. Trotsky continues the tradition of being specific and concrete about revolutionary tasks. In principle that is correct. It does not demand calling the USSR a workers' state, being for its defence, or anything other than tact.

However, the idea that Marxists should decide what they say about the USSR's imperialism — and five thousand miles away in New York, which is where the actual dispute and Trotsky's main audience is — according not to the facts but to what they think will bring the best results implies the death of Marxism. It depends on half-truth telling, half-picture painting, opportunistically or even mimetically suspending disbelief.

The politics of fantasy here is essentially passive, manipulating ideas and images in imagination rather than grasping and changing realities. It is linked

30. *Writings 1939-40*, p.113.

in Trotsky and neo-Trotskyism to the loss of a credible working-class agency for the immediate socialist struggle they urgently desire. Mimicry, pretence, and suspension of disbelief will be a big part of “orthodox” neo-Trotskyism and the mainstay of its relation to Stalinism. In Trotsky’s scenario about revolution as an aureole around the Red Army there is more than confusion and amnesia, there is a quality of delirium. In May 1940, in a manifesto for the Fourth International, he will sum it up: the seizure of Eastern Poland, he writes, “was accompanied by the nationalisation of semi-feudal and capitalist property”. Without nationalisation, he says, the new territories could not have been incorporated into the USSR. “The strangled and desecrated October Revolution served notice that it was still alive”. This is King Lear at the end, drained and expiring, who thinks he sees his dead daughter Cordelia, who has been hanged, smiling at him!

Faced with new events, Trotsky has since 1927 preferred to cram and stretch old terminology and old concepts as if that can tidy up unruly reality and ward off theoretical problems. In fact it only destructures meaning and erodes and corrupts words. It was one of the historic roles of Stalinism to erode and corrupt the vocabulary, the perspectives, the goals and the models of revolutionary socialism. Here, on a different plane but accommodating to the “historical fact” of Stalinism, Trotsky is, for what he thinks are good revolutionary reasons, doing the same.

Trotsky denounces Burnham for writing about “experimental”, “critical” and “scientific” — rather than “Marxist” — politics. Burnham “culled the label imperialist to describe the foreign policy of the Kremlin”; this “innovation” creates “less ‘sectarian’, less ‘religious’, less rigorous formulas, common to you and — oh happy coincidence! — bourgeois democracy”. Trotsky is trying to imprison and freeze thought by freezing terminology. He asserts that: “Terminology is one of the elements of the class struggle”. It can be — but not always on the real Marxist side of it.

Fixed terminology can become a substitute for thought; the living method of Marxist analysis can be and often is smothered under it like fire under ashes. Unless we reconquer the meaning of the terminology again and again, it becomes dead matter learned by rote, with unclear, imprecise and receding meanings. And this attitude to terminology would make much that neo-Trotskyism said incomprehensible to outsiders - a series of self-hypnotising mantras. The idea of insisting on a fixed and rigid terminology in, for example, journalism, is the mark and to a considerable extent the substance of a fundamentalist sect. In some neo-Trotskyist groups it would eventually lead to a uniformity of phrasing even about current events. Terminological “orthodoxy” is the enemy of thought and of effective politics if it is imposed as a rigid uniformity or cracked up as a necessary tribute of fealty to Marxism.

In this Open Letter Trotsky turns on his own politics and begins to pull them down, striking at himself. He claims that the opposition showed glaring “impotence in the face of great events” on Poland, the Baltic states and Finland. “Shachtman began by discovering a philosopher’s stone: the achievement of a simultaneous insurrection against Hitler and Stalin in occupied Poland. The idea was splendid; it is only too bad that Shachtman was deprived of the opportunity of putting it into practice. The advanced workers in eastern Poland could justifiably say: ‘A simultaneous insurrection

31. “From a Scratch to the Danger of Gangrene”.

against Hitler and Stalin in a country occupied by troops might perhaps be arranged very conveniently from the Bronx; but here, locally, it is more difficult. We should like to hear Burnham's and Shachtman's answer to a "concrete political question": What shall we do between now and the coming insurrection?."

What is Trotsky saying? To "tell the truth" and point to twin tyrannies (slavery and semi-slavery, on Trotsky's own account) is not possible until we can organise insurrection, and simultaneous insurrection? What did Trotsky advocate for the Ukraine six months before? "The struggle against imperialism on the one hand, and against Moscow Bonapartism on the other". The sarcasm about simultaneous risings amounts to jeering at the weakness of the proletariat and of the Trotskyist movement. Trotsky was wont to quote Lassalle: Every great movement begins with the statement of what is. When, here, he reduces his own idea of "Third Camp" politics to the nonsense of simultaneous insurrection, Trotsky is being pushed into one of two camps — Stalin's.

XXVIII. BUREAUCRATIC REVOLUTION?

TWO WEEKS LATER, following his Open Letter to Burnham with another long polemic, Trotsky wrote "From a Scratch — to the Danger of Gangrene" (24 January 1940). Charging that "the petty-bourgeois tendency reveals its confusion in its attempt to reduce the programme of the party to the small coin of 'concrete' questions", Trotsky excises Finnish national self-determination and the right to life of the Finnish labour movement from his programme in deference to Russian nationalised property — that is, he counterposes the supposed dead residue of the Russian workers' revolution to the living workers' movement of Finland.

In contrast to the small-coin petty bourgeois, "the proletarian tendency... strives to correlate all the partial questions into theoretical unity". Aye, but do they unify when you "correlate" them?

The system-building of Trotsky increasingly traps him in absurdity. This too is dialectical; because the errors in Trotsky's system are now all-devouring, his striving for wholeness and virtue is transformed dialectically into a ragged and politically vicious travesty. Fear that the whole intricate Chinese-box theoretical structure he has built on the USSR will collapse (probably) and belief in the likelihood of immediate clashes between the USSR and Britain or France in Finland (certainly) push Trotsky to "abstract" everything except nationalised property from the situation. It is nationalised-property fetishism pushed to the point of an absolute and flat contradiction with the working class — immediately, with the Finnish working class.

Invoking basic Marxist ideas on the ultimately fundamental role of economics, Trotsky complains: "Our attempt to reduce the politics of the Kremlin to nationalised economy, refracted through the interests of the bureaucracy, provokes frantic resistance from Shachtman". But what do you get if you try to see the USSR economy as crudely expressed in Stalin's foreign policy? Economic pillage, a slave hunt and confiscation of the surplus product for the

32. *Writings 1939-40*, p.108.

autocracy. Even if nationalised property forms can give a boost to production, how does the spread from a backward society of this property form, coupled with national oppression and “semi-slavery”, constitute progress? Take it as a whole — nationalised property and “semi-slavery” — and what kind of economic form superior to capitalism is this? Trotsky is, of course, impelled by the seeming hopeless collapse of capitalism and the scenario of a succession of world wars rapidly digging “the grave of civilisation”. But the idea of Stalinist “bureaucratic revolution” would become the dominant operational element in neo-Trotskyism, and serve to obfuscate and disguise the class realities of the new Stalinist states of the 1940s and after, seemingly assimilating them to the October Revolution.

What Trotsky says on this in “Gangrene...” is a fantastic tissue of contradictions. Trotsky accuses Shachtman: “My remarks that the Kremlin with its bureaucratic methods” — police-state methods, totalitarian conquest — “gave an impulse to the socialist revolution” — what revolution? — “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 a question of ‘bureaucratic revolution’ but only a bureaucratic impulse”. Impulse to what? And what is the result now, which we must defend in the annexed territories as we defend the nationalised property in the USSR?

“The popular masses in western Ukraine and Byelo Russia, in any event, felt this impulse, understood its meaning and used it to accomplish a drastic overturn in property relations”. What has happened, then, was the result of a fleeting moment of workers’ revolution? In backward east Poland, where there is very little industry and most of the people are peasants? The idea of deformed workers’ states encapsulating a fleeting moment of real revolution would become common in neo-Trotskyism.

But what did the Red Army and the GPU do? Who had control at the end? What property relations replaced the ones overturned? Whose is the property now, after the “drastic overturn”? “This impulse in the direction of socialist revolution was possible only because the bureaucracy of the USSR straddles and has its roots in the economy of a workers’ state. The revolutionary utilisation of this ‘impulse’ by the Ukrainian Byelo Russians [sic] was possible only through the class struggle in the occupied territories and through the power of the example of the October Revolution. Finally, the swift strangulation or semi-strangulation of this revolutionary mass movement was made possible through the isolation of this movement and the might of the Moscow bureaucracy”.

Trotsky is repairing the theoretical fabric — with assertions, “deductions”, and fantasies. Mocking “Shachtman’s” Third Camp policy as tantamount to a “rising on two fronts organised from the Bronx”, Trotsky winds up with something far more awkward, especially for those doing it not from the Bronx or Coyoacan but on the spot — organising a proletarian revolution, in a largely agrarian society, under the guns and the military-political surveillance of a totalitarian invader!

When he goes on to discuss Poland, Trotsky starts with a coherent account of the call by the puppet “People’s Government” for workers’ control — “nothing more than crowding out the native bourgeoisie, whose place the bureaucracy proposes to take”. Exactly! “Furthermore... of greatest urgency to the Kremlin is the extraction of a new administrative apparatus from

among the toiling population of the occupied areas” — that is the cooption of workers and peasants into the new ruling class as quislings. Then, once again, as with the “Third Camp”, Trotsky turns to mock his own politics.

Shachtman asked Trotsky why he placed significance in the manifesto of “the idiot” Kuusinen, head of Stalin’s stooge “government” for Finland. Trotsky replies: “The ‘idiot’ Kuusinen acting on the ukase of the Kremlin and with the support of the Red Army represents a far more serious political factor than scores of superficial wise-acres who refuse to think through the internal logic (dialectics) of events”. And how many battalions does the Fourth International have?

Imagine Trotsky writing in response to such a thing six months earlier; nameless seriousness and classless politics! No: the difference in Trotsky’s approach has to be that things are on the move. “The strangled and desecrated October Revolution served notice that it was still alive”. This is the revolution, for now. The politics here are of two camps (back Stalin against Hitler) and two stages (Stalin-controlled bureaucratic revolution first, working-class revolution later). And Trotsky adds a further devastating twist: “The programme of the Kuusinen government, even if approached from a ‘formal’ point of view does not differ from the programme of the Bolsheviks in November 1917”. As Trotsky, after Lenin, said to the Left Opposition “administrators” who capitulated in 1929-30, the decisive question is “who? whom?” The “1917 programme” — or shards of it, *sans* internationalism, *sans* workers’ democracy — is now in the hands of an oligarchic elite.

Trotsky’s great mistake in 1939-40 is that he deepens the confusion on Stalinism that has reigned since, after 1928, he interpreted the Stalinist autocracy’s move against the kulaks and Nepmen as a deformed working-class response rather than the consolidation of a new exploiting class. When the autocracy moves out on to the world arena, challenging capitalists and destroying capitalist classes - not “defending” or “deepening” what the 1917 revolution had achieved, but acting plainly as an independent anti-bourgeois and simultaneously anti-working-class force — that is the point when Trotsky’s theory comes into irreconcilable conflict with international working-class politics and becomes a satellite of expansionary Stalinism.

Essentially, Trotsky says “wait”; it is too early to identify the autocracy as a new exploiting class; it is absurd to imagine Stalinist conquest reaching beyond small border states. “It is fantastic to imagine that Germany could be sovietised from Moscow as was small and backward Galicia” (i.e. eastern Poland: Outline of Hitler-Stalin twin star article. 15 November 1939). James P Cannon would put this even more clearly: “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...”³³.

By the time the USSR does conquer half of Germany, Cannon and his comrades will be too walled off by Trotsky’s fierce polemics of this period, and by their own factional elaborations and party competition with the Shachtmanites, to rethink. A logic will unfold which relegates the proletarian socialist programme to something for the future: a quasi-private set of glosses on the horrors unfolding in the world in the “first stage” of “the revolution”. The parallel with the destruction of norms after 1917 is important; the continuity, blurring, merging with what Stalin did — the Trotskyist pro-

gramme relegated to the future; “centuries of deformed workers’ states” — all that is there implicitly in Trotsky, seeds waiting to sprout.

XXIX. BALANCE SHEET OF THE FINNISH EVENTS

“GANGRENE...” IS TROTSKY’S last writing for the SWP faction fight, followed only by a “Balance Sheet of the Finnish Events” written (25 April 1940) after the end of the Finnish war and after the Trotskyists have split. “The attempt of the conjunctural defeatists, i.e. the adventurers in defeatism, to extricate themselves from their difficulty” — the Trotskyists’ common difficulty — “by promising that in the event the Allies intervene they will change their defeatist policy to a defencist one is a contemptible evasion. It is in general not easy to determine one’s policies according to a stopwatch, especially under wartime conditions”. It is known now, Trotsky writes, that the Allied general staffs discussed bombing the Murmansk railway to aid Finland. Intervention “hung by a hair. From the same hair, apparently, the principled position of the ‘third camp’ also dangled. But... we considered that it was necessary to determine one’s position in accordance with the basic class camps in the war. This is much more reliable”.

Why was it not sufficient to switch if Murmansk was bombed? And in fact it wasn’t bombed. Here Trotsky justifies a monolithic position, unnuanced, making no distinction between defence against imperialism and support for the USSR in a predatory war, by what might but did not happen. It was a policy of eyes closed and steering with Stalin’s politics and army as lode star — because Stalin is the custodian of nationalised property.

Why does Stalin represent the working-class “camp”? Trotsky restates his reasons for “defence of the USSR”. “First, the defeat of the USSR would supply imperialism with new colossal resources and could prolong for many years the death agony of capitalist society. Secondly, the social foundations of the USSR, cleansed of the parasitic bureaucracy, are capable of assuring unbounded economic and cultural progress, while the capitalist foundations disclose no possibilities except further decay”.

Yet, subject to conditions — a workers’ revolution, essentially identical to what “cleansing” the USSR involves — the capitalist “foundations” in a wealthy country like Germany can do what Trotsky says the USSR can do, “on condition”, and greatly more so. In every respect advanced capitalism is more progressive than the USSR. Trotsky implies a concession to the Stalinist utopia of “Socialism in One Country” here, by placing the USSR (after revolution) above advanced capitalism (after revolution). But if socialism must grow out of advanced capitalism, then the idea that imperialism is “the main enemy of the world working class” — and that it would be decisively worse for Germany or Britain to feed off a defeated USSR than for the USSR to feed off a defeated Germany — is nonsensical from an international socialist point of view, when the alternative is the triumph and expansion of the non-capitalist, backward USSR (which is also imperialist).

The basic question here is as old as the *Communist Manifesto*’s arguments against reactionary socialists and Lenin’s argument against the petty bourgeois anti-imperialists. One descendant of these ideas will be neo-Trotskyist support for many varieties of Third World barbarism in the name of “World

XXX. THE OTHER TROTSKY

AFTER “GANGRENE” (JANUARY 1940), Trotsky, however, continues to develop another strand of his politics in his public writings. In a press interview on 14 February 1940, he explains again what he knew and said before the invasion of Poland: “The strangling of the peoples of the USSR, particularly of the national minorities, by police methods, repelled the majority of the toiling masses of the neighbouring countries from Moscow. The invasion of the Red Army is seen by the populations not as an act of liberation but as an act of violence”.

After the end of the Finnish war, he sums it up like this (13 March 1940): “Under Hitler’s cover Stalin attempted to apply Hitler’s methods in foreign policy... Not capable of evaluating the tradition of the long Finnish struggle for independence, Stalin expected to break the Helsinki government by mere diplomatic pressure. He was badly mistaken... So began a shameful war without a clear perspective, without moral and material preparation...”. The bureaucratic revolution is there only as a flimsy speculation on what might have been. For Stalin “to reconcile the peoples of the USSR to the senseless invasion of Finland, would be possible only in one way — namely, by winning the sympathy of at least part of the Finnish peasants and workers by means of a social upheaval”. Trotsky insists that: “I stand completely for the defence of the Soviet Union”, but it is very strange defence.

Trotsky does not want the USSR overrun, but his “defence” is such bitter condemnation of policy and government that it must seem either hypocrisy or self-contradictory to those who do not grasp the “secret doctrine”. “All this does not lead me to defend the foreign policy of the Kremlin”. An open struggle against “Stalin and the oligarchy headed by him... in the view of world public opinion, is inseparably connected for me with the defence of the USSR”. There is as little left of substance, as distinct from claim, in Trotsky’s “defence” as there is of a real workers’ state in the name of workers’ state.

In a “Letter to the Workers of the USSR” (23 April 1940)³⁴ Trotsky gives a very different picture of the Finnish war than that of a bureaucratically-impelled socialistic revolution stalled only by the “bayonets of Mannerheim”. “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 submits the workers of nearby Leningrad and the whole of the USSR”. Trotsky calls for defence of the USSR, but says this can only be promoted by overthrowing the autocracy. “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”. And who exactly will the “conquests of October” serve otherwise?

The whole idea of “defending October” is now displaced by the imperative to fight the existing bureaucratic system. All that is left is the hope that this will be done by the USSR people and not by Germany and Britain.

Trotsky’s last major writing on the USSR before he was murdered (20/21

August 1940) by a Stalinist agent is "The Comintern and the GPU" (17 August 1940)³⁵. Here he definitely revises the conclusion he has reached from the Spanish Civil War and his notion of the Stalinist autocracy as too inorganic to have any substantial international programme of its own.

"As organisations, the GPU [the Stalinist secret police] and the Comintern are not identical but they are indissoluble... the GPU... completely dominates the Comintern". The Comintern is the obedient tool of the Kremlin. The Comintern's "leading tier... comprises people who did not join the October Revolution but the triumphant oligarchy, the fountainhead of high political titles and material boons. The predominating type among the present 'communist' bureaucrats is the political careerist, and in consequence the polar opposite of the revolutionist. Their ideal is to attain in their own countries the same position that the Kremlin oligarchy gained in the USSR. They are not the revolutionary leaders of the proletariat but aspirants to totalitarian rule. They dream of gaining success with the aid of this same Soviet bureaucracy and its GPU. They view with admiration and envy the invasion of Poland, Finland, the Baltic states, Bessarabia by the Red Army, because these invasions immediately bring about the transfer of power into the hands of the local Stalinist candidates for totalitarian rule".

The word "immediately" implies also a revision of Trotsky's previous scheme of bureaucratically-impelled workers' revolution followed by suppression. And it is accurate. It is an enormous comment on the recent dispute in the Fourth International. Trotsky plainly comes down on the side of the most "extreme" of his factional opponents.

Finally, in his unfinished book on Stalin, Trotsky radically revised his old view and the fundamental mistake from which so much confusion and self-contradiction grew and will grow long after Trotsky is no more — that Stalin's turn in 1928-30 reflected working-class pressure, and reclassified it as driven by the autocracy's drive to grab the fruits of exploitation. "The kulak, jointly with the petty industrialist, worked for the complete restoration of capitalism. Thus opened the irreconcilable struggle over the surplus product of national labour. Who will dispose of it in the nearest future — the new bourgeoisie or the Soviet bureaucracy? — that became the next issue. He who disposes of the surplus product has the power of the state at his disposal. It was this that opened the struggle between the petty-bourgeoisie, which had helped the bureaucracy to crush the resistance of the labouring masses and of their spokesman the Left Opposition, and the Thermidorian bureaucracy... for the surplus product and for power"³⁶.

If we take Trotsky's final assessment of the Comintern and of Stalinist expansion in 1939-40 together with this summation of the class content of the 1928-30 struggle in the USSR, they add up to an enormous step towards the idea that the bureaucracy is a new ruling class.

XXXI. TROTSKY ON BUREAUCRATIC COLLECTIVISM

IN THE SWP faction fight the minority were in revolt — like Romantics against Enlightenment rationalism or women against an insensitive "male" consensus — against a worked-out all-embracing system, which none of them could fully see through, not even Burnham and Carter, who had start-

ed to criticise Trotsky's system three years earlier. The further development of a sound theoretical basis for working-class politics could only come through backing out of the common theoretical frame which, despite all their bitter and brave indignation, yoked Trotsky and his comrades to Stalinism, the idea that the statised property of the USSR defined it as a workers' state. In two articles at the beginning of the 1939-40 dispute Trotsky tentatively suggested ideas — soon sidelined as the faction fight escalated — which pointed to the way out. Taken together with his reassessment of 1928-30 in Trotsky's unfinished biography of Stalin, it pointed to a radically different post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" than the one Trotsky's "best disciples" developed. In 1939-40 Trotsky was very near — waiting for the war to put the final stamp on events — to developing the logic of his trajectory since 1936. Unless the factional polemics represented a great shift by Trotsky towards a quite different political trajectory — and the evidence of his writings after "Gangrene..." suggests the opposite — they were only a "blip" or zig-zag.

In "The USSR in War" (25 September 1939), as we have already seen, Trotsky writes: "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". Later in the faction fight, and even in the same article, he would repeat his old idea, that the nationalised property was progressive even with the bureaucracy. This sentence, however, seems to close off one of the main strands of Trotsky's thinking since 1936: that the USSR's nationalised economy is progressive as it is, and can be "genuinely progressive" without being "socialist".

We have seen how, in reply to Craipeau for example, Trotsky dealt with all the political issues in dispute on the basis of the claim that the economy was progressive, while conceding for the sake of argument Craipeau's claim that the autocracy was a new exploiting class. In "The USSR in War" Trotsky draws this strand in his thought — the idea that the USSR represents a new form of class exploitation, more progressive than capitalism — out into a theory, and discusses it head-on. In "The USSR in War" Trotsky focuses his polemic against one Bruno Rizzi — though at that point no-one in the USA had heard of Rizzi, or read his book — because he wants to discuss, not Burnham's version of Trotsky's own restorationist idea, but the more radical notion that the Stalinist autocracy is a new sort of ruling class. Evidently he thinks it is the logical and necessary conclusion that must follow if one abandons Trotsky's own position that Stalin's USSR is an untenable temporary combination of incompatible elements. Trotsky is, as it were, wearing Rizzi as a mask of convenience: creating a dialogue about what he thinks are the issues.

Let us, Trotsky writes, concede "for the moment" that the autocracy is a new class and that the USSR is "a special system of class exploitation". Then, he asks, "what new political conclusions follow for us from these definitions? The Fourth International long ago recognised 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'.". The goal is to overthrow the bureaucracy and re-establish the rule of the soviets. "Nothing different can be proposed or is proposed by the leftist critics".

33. *Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, p.104.

For Trotsky, “inasmuch as the question of overthrowing the parasitic oligarchy still remains linked with that of preserving the nationalised (state) property, we call the future revolution political”. Some “want, come what may, to call the future revolution social. Let us grant this definition. What does it alter in essence? To those tasks of the revolution which we have enumerated it adds nothing whatsoever”. Grant the critics their “terminology” — not a workers’ state; a ruling class; a social, not a political, revolution — and they “would not know what to do with their purely verbal victory”. Therefore it would, Trotsky proclaims, “be a piece of monstrous nonsense to split with comrades who on the question of the sociological nature of the USSR have an opinion different from ours, insofar as they solidarise with us in regard to the political tasks”.

Trotsky has come a long way since the first half of the decade, when he wrote that “denying the proletarian character of the USSR is incompatible with membership in the Bolshevik-Leninists” (11 November 1934)³⁷.

He has not even included “defence of the USSR” in the political tasks, so far. “I hope that... we shall succeed by means of simply rendering our own ideas more precise to preserve unanimity on the basis of the programme of the Fourth International... despite the attempt of some comrades to uncover differences on the question of the ‘defence of the USSR’”. Scientifically and politically, as distinct from terminologically, “the question poses itself as follows: does the bureaucracy represent a temporary growth on a social organism or has this growth already been transformed into a historically indispensable organ?”.

Trotsky responds to this question by sketching out a hypothetical future within which subsequent development will prove that the Stalinist autocracy has indeed “already been transformed” into a new exploiting class. The whole discussion depends on one stark assertion: “The disintegration of capitalism has reached extreme limits, likewise the disintegration of the old ruling class. The further existence of this system is impossible. The productive forces must be organised in accordance with a plan. But who will accomplish this task — the proletariat or a new ruling class of ‘commissars’ — politicians, administrators and technicians?” “If... it is conceded that the present war will provoke not revolution but” — the “but” is not a straight link but a sharp corner turn; what follows is a restatement that capitalism is in irrevocable decline - “but a decline of the proletariat, then” — then what? - “there remains another alternative: the further decay of monopoly capitalism, its further fusion with the state and the replacement of democracy wherever it still exists by a totalitarian regime”.

Then, capitalism having played out its historic role and the proletariat being shown congenitally incapable, “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”. “The historic alternative, carried to the end, is as follows: either the Stalin regime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin regime is the first stage of a new exploiting society. “If the second prognosis proves to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new exploiting class”.

What is impossible is not the (fantastic) scenario of the Stalinist USSR showing the shape of their future to all other countries, but the idea of admitting that it is so. But in the possible-but-not-yet-to-be-admitted scenario the

bureaucracy will, as part of a new world system, do exactly as it does now in the USSR. It will have exactly the same relationship with the people and the proletariat as it has now. If it will be a new exploiting class then, worldwide, it is a new exploiting class now, in the USSR! If the bureaucracy, essentially unchanged, can “become” an exploiting class, then it is that already.

XXXII. ONCE AGAIN, BEING DISSOLVED INTO BECOMING

TROTSKY, OF COURSE, is talking about the conditions in which Marxists would have to recognise “bureaucratic collectivism” as such. But the idea that it can be recognised and identified in the USSR, the only place it now exists, only if it spread into a world system, is arbitrary and plainly false.

The other alternative, that the Stalinist autocracy is only “a parasitic growth on a workers’ state”, Trotsky likewise tests by sketching a future that will confirm it. “If this war provokes, as we firmly believe, a proletarian revolution”, then the bureaucracy will be overthrown and soviet democracy regenerated “on a far higher economic and cultural basis than 1918. In that case the question of whether the Stalinist bureaucracy was a ‘class’ or a growth on the workers’ state will be automatically solved”.

Having sketched the alternatives — the actual outcome, revival and spread of capitalism and of the working class, is not dismissed as improbable, as it might reasonably have been, but as inconceivable — Trotsky concludes that what seem to be “terminological experiments” imply “a new historic conception... in an absolute contradiction with our programme, strategy and tactics”. To adopt them would be an “adventuristic jump”, and “doubly criminal now” when in the world war “the perspective of socialist revolution becomes an imminent reality and when the case of the USSR will appear to everybody as a transitorial episode in the process of world socialist revolution”. Trotsky writes that we have not “the slightest right” — as revolutionaries, concerned with action in the new situation — to throw the theory on which we must act, and which we cannot quickly mend or replace, into disarray.

The alternatives are exaggerated fantastically. Trotsky states that “if... the October Revolution fails during the course of the present war, or immediately thereafter, to find its continuation in any of the advanced countries”, then we must revise our concept of the socialist potential of the working class. This ultimatum to history is unwarranted by the facts and could only lead to despair — or the hysterical fighting-off of incipient despair.

Later in the article, Trotsky puts it as an ultimatum to the activists: “in the process of this war and those profound shocks which it must engender, will a genuine revolutionary leadership be formed capable of leading the proletariat to the conquest of power?”. The urgency comes from Trotsky’s picture of capitalism and the prospects for civilisation, and part of his purpose is to stiffen and galvanise the cadres; yet it is a form of political adventurism to pose it like this.

34. *Writings 1939-40*, p.165

35. *Writings 1939-40*, p.348

With the defeat of his mid-30s attempts at broad revolutionary regroupment, in the later 1930s Trotsky has shifted towards expecting revolutionary benefits from the war, a drive towards revolution generated as a mechanical product of the worsening crisis of capitalism. "The harsh and tragic dialectic of our epoch is working in our favour. Brought to the extreme pitch of exasperation and indignation, the masses will find no other leadership than that offered to them by the Fourth International"³⁸.

The notion of "leadership" here, abstracted from any perspective for transforming the existing labour movement and starkly juxtaposed to an expected sudden mass upsurge of raw working-class rage, can very easily lead to the disruption of Marxist politics by the towering need to "build the party" and therefore to adopt whatever policies will speed that work, even if they make no Marxist sense. It can lead to the concept of building an elite sect, an "alternative" leadership, to do single combat with the incumbents: to the typical mix of spontaneism and sect-ism in neo-Trotskyism...

Nor does Trotsky give any reason why, if workers' revolution is delayed, the future of human society can or should be extrapolated from a mutation in a backward country. Inverting Marx, Trotsky seems to say that the backward country shows their future to the advanced ones. The perspective is a derivative form of the Stalinist idea of USSR "Socialism in One Country" showing the world's future. World revolution is neatly inverted.

What evidence from the present does Trotsky offer for the idea that the autocracy has not yet destroyed the workers' state? Only the violence of the Stalinist purges. "The historical justification for every ruling class consisted in this — that the system of exploitation it heads raised the development of the productive forces to a new level. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the soviet regime gave a mighty impulse to economy". Therefore the autocracy which, in its own brutal way, organised this "impulse to economy", is both a ruling class and progressive? No. "The source of this impulse was the nationalisation of the means of production and the planned beginnings, and by no means the fact that the bureaucracy usurped command over the economy". As the economy rose higher, its needs grew more complex and the bureaucratic regime became "unbearable". The "constantly sharpening contradiction between them leads to uninterrupted political convulsions, to systematic annihilation of the most outstanding creative elements in all spheres of activity. Thus, before the bureaucracy could succeed in exuding from itself a 'ruling class', it came into irreconcilable contradiction with the demands of development". This shows that "the bureaucracy is not the bearer of a new system of economy peculiar to itself and impossible without itself, but is a parasitic growth on a workers' state". Trotsky's argument here depends entirely on his dual system, his split-level view of the USSR. The "deep" reality is Trotsky's ghostly version of what might have happened, rooted in October 1917; the empirical reality is that essence distorted and corrupted by what Trotsky dubs "'accidental' (i.e. temporary and extraordinary) enmeshing of historical circumstances", namely, the bureaucratic counter-revolution against October. Trotsky uses it to insist that "being" — the autocratic system which has been a fact for 12 years or more — is still only a flickering moment in a different "becoming", to dissolve being into becoming, to argue that what is and long has been is less than real because, he believes, it does not exist

36. *Stalin*, pp.221, 236.

“stably”. Always the “snapshot” is abolished in favour of projecting the moving film into the future. This is the dialectic here, and there is nothing artificial in Trotsky using it in his polemics against Burnham and Shachtman. For Trotsky it has become everything.

Method is splitting from its application to become the last auxiliary argument — and here, it is sophism.

XXXIII. REVISIONISM?

IN A SUPPLEMENTARY article discussing reactions to “The USSR in War” (“Again and Once More...”) Trotsky adds: “Some comrades evidently were surprised that I spoke in my article (“The USSR in 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”.

In later years, Cannon and others will nevertheless go on flinging this nonsense about “revisionism” at those, like Max Shachtman, who develop Trotsky’s ideas. They will feel bolstered because of Trotsky’s frequent use in the SWP faction fight of the charge “revisionist”, aimed against elements of the opposition. In fact what Trotsky considered “revisionist” on the USSR was Burnham and Carter’s theory, which he took as claiming that there was no ruling class in the USSR. He defined “bureaucratic collectivism” not as “revisionist” but as the proper Marxist alternative to the “revisionist” view if one were to abandon his “degenerated workers’ state” theory — which he was not yet ready to do.

Trotsky certified “bureaucratic collectivism” as both Marxist and as the conclusion that must follow rejection of the workers’ state theory if the USSR neither reverted to capitalism nor was transformed by a workers’ revolution.

In the second article Trotsky sets out the idea that should have been at the heart of post-Trotsky Trotskyism when it ceased to be even residually reasonable to continue what was in Trotsky already culpably wrong, the theoretical policy of “wait”. “The Marxist comprehension of historical necessity has nothing in common with fatalism. Socialism is not realisable ‘by itself’, but as a result of the struggle of living forces, classes and their parties”.

Trotsky believes the working class will conquer. “But we have full right to ask ourselves: What character will society take if the forces of reaction conquer?” Trotsky is talking about world-wide alternatives. Yet his thought plainly applies to the USSR now. In the USSR, in the struggle of living forces, the bureaucracy has conquered and Trotsky is not remiss in describing its barbaric character. Without first, as Trotsky did in “The USSR in War”, running up the ladder of grand historic generalities, apply what Trotsky says to the USSR and both the conclusion and the inner logic of Trotsky’s thinking on the USSR are clear and unavoidable.

Trotsky goes on: Marxists have formulated the broad historical alternatives as socialism or barbarism. After Mussolini’s victory — communism or fascism. Shachtman and the Workers’ Party will develop this train of thought in the face of expanding Stalinism: socialism or Stalinist barbarism. Events, Trotsky continues, have shown that the delay of the socialist revolution engenders barbarism — “chronic unemployment, pauperisation of the petty bourgeoisie, fascism, finally wars of extermination which do not open up any new road... We have the possibility of expressing ourselves on [barbarism]

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. An alternative of this kind — socialism or totalitarian servitude — has not only theoretical interest, but also enormous importance in agitation, because in its light the necessity for socialist revolution appears most graphically”.

However much this is attached in Trotsky’s article to speculations about the future, it applies also to the present: Stalinism is barbarism. The *reductio ad absurdum* of Trotsky’s final position in that what Trotsky, expecting that it will soon be overthrown, calls a political, social, and economic system in one country, or one empire, becomes outright barbarism in the prototype of threatening world barbarism if it spreads to the world at large and is consolidated. It spread only to a further large part mainly of the backward parts of the world, but it was consolidated there — and it was barbarism.

"It is self-evident that owing to the needs of the 'system' he [Hegel] very often had to resort to those forced constructions about which his pigmy opponents make such a terrible fuss even today. But... even though unconsciously, he showed us the way out of the labyrinth of systems to real positive knowledge of the world". Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*

THERE WERE THUS two distinct, and by the end sharply contradictory, strands in Trotsky's political legacy. The one that would dominate in "orthodox" neo-Trotskyism, however, was the strand developed around the idea of the Stalinist autocracy being a "watchman", "gatekeeper", or locum for the working class. Let me recapitulate.

The end of the civil war, in November 1920, brought stalemate. The Bolsheviks had won, but the Russian Revolution could not thrive or indefinitely survive unless it spread; the counter-revolution could not triumph unless and until it smashed the apparatus of state power sustained by the Bolsheviks; and it had failed definitively to do that. The Bolsheviks could not at will spread the revolution; but they could "hold on" until it spread: from this situation grew the policy that the Bolshevik party would act "*in loco proletariis*", as stand-in or "watchman" (Trotsky) for the Russian working class — for the class which had been massacred by the Whites, dispersed by great dislocation of industry, or absorbed into the state bureaucracy and the Red Army, and which was only in the process of being recomposed in the NEP.

This was the situation that Lenin at the 10th Party Congress described as a "workers' state with bureaucratic deformations". From this practice and this policy came the idea that governed Trotsky's understanding of the USSR for the next two decades, namely that something other than the proletariat could act historically for the proletariat.

It started as the rational and limited idea that an association of the most determined and educated working-class activists (the Bolshevik Old Guard) could guard and develop the gains of a broader working class that had temporarily been diminished, dispersed and exhausted. It grew into the notion that the post-Civil-War Russian bureaucracy and then the totalitarian Stalinist autocracy acted as locums for the working class, and represented the working class in power so long as they still defended the nationalised economy — for this nationalised economy was the settled residue of the expropriation of the bourgeoisie in 1917.

Despite all the qualifications which Trotsky added to it, and which led him to a programme of a new full-scale workers' revolution against the Stalinist autocracy, in its fully-extended form the doctrine of the "locum" implied that the workers could rule as abstract historical subjects, in "high theory", even where as living people, in practice, they were beasts of burden exploited by a privileged autocracy.

The metaphysics of nationalised economy and the idea of the locum intertwined with and mutually conditioned and sustained each other.

From this idea, embedded in Trotsky's defence of the proposition that the Stalinist USSR remained a workers' state, neo-Trotskyists developed a series of extensions and extrapolations to embrace Titoites, Maoists, Castroites, Ho-ists, etc. etc. etc. The locums too could have locums and then again locums. Thus the post-Trotsky "Trotskyists" solved the "crisis of working class leadership" that Trotsky defined by discovering that the "socialist" revolution could be made (distortedly, unsatisfactorily, and only in a preliminary way, to be sure) without either the proletariat or a revolutionary socialist party.

In Trotsky, the idea was over the years modified and qualified by intense loathing, resentment, condemnation and hatred for the Stalinist bureaucracy and its crimes. By the end of his life, so the evidence suggests, Trotsky was close to breaking with it entirely. But he never did break with the notion that the survival of nationalised economy made the USSR still working-class and progressive or — according to Trotsky at the end — poten-

38. "A Great Achievement", 1938.

tially progressive, even under what he himself denounced as the totalitarian rule of an autocracy with all the vices of history's ruling classes, differing from pre-Holocaust Nazism (so he wrote in *The Transitional Programme*, 1938) "only in more unbridled savagery".

That notion was, for Trotsky and Trotskyism, the shirt of Nessus, which once put on seeped poison and corrosion into the tissues of its doomed wearer. It was a garment that could not be removed a piece at a time. So long as the basic notion was upheld, no crime by the totalitarian rulers could destroy their credentials as a residually progressive locum for the proletariat and guardian of the economy and social system coming from October — no crime at all, not destruction of the labour movement, not industrial enslavement of the workers, not the murder of millions of workers and revolutionaries, not the creation of huge privileges and social inequalities while workers starved — no crime, that is, except dismantling the nationalised economy. So long as nationalised economy existed, defined and assessed as Trotsky continued to assess it, as the solid residue of the workers' expropriation of the bourgeoisie in 1917-18, there was no limit. It was all-defining.

Thus, out of the reasonable and unavoidable Bolshevik solution to the dilemma of the Russian working-class revolution at the end of the civil war had grown the root idea of a totalitarian economic "socialism" subversive of every key notion that had defined Marxism from the *Communist Manifesto* onwards.

Trotsky thought that he was formulating provisional theorisations for a very brief historical aberration. The Stalinist regime — a "workers' state" with a regime more savagely anti-worker than any bourgeois state — could not last for long. The USSR would break down, either through bourgeois counter-revolution or through a new workers' revolution. In fact it would last 50 years after Trotsky. Ideas Trotsky juggled with as interim, short-term solutions took on a life of their own, drawing their strength from the survival and expansion of Stalinism.

Despite enormous shifts, in reality and in Trotsky's thinking, there is continuity in this idea from the end of the civil war to Trotsky's death and way beyond.

In Lenin's time, when the party was a party of working-class revolutionaries, whose selfless loyalty to socialism had been proved again and again, the idea was rational and true. In the circumstances, what else could they do? Then, the ruling group periodically purged itself of self-seekers and careerists. By 1924 Stalin's bureaucracy was harvesting careerists and promoting self-seekers, while persecuting revolutionaries. In 1927 it expelled the authentic Bolsheviks, and in December 1929, with the shooting of Jacob Blumkin, a Soviet official who had dared to visit Trotsky in Turkey, it started to kill them. After 1928 the bureaucracy destroyed the Russian labour movement and began to reduce the working class and the whole people to slavery and semi-slavery.

It could now be seen as locum for the working class only if the autocratically collectivised socio-economic system could be defined as a conquest and residue of the workers' revolution. In fact, that system, as it was shaped after 1928, was a system erected by an autocracy which seized the institutions and forms created by the working class in 1917-21 and perverted them for its own use on ground cleared by the revolution. Except for the eruption of Russian imperialism and the beginning of the expansion of this system a decade or so later nothing fundamental changed for 60 years. The distinction made in some of the texts in this book, that before 1928-30 Trotsky defined the working-class character of the regime only by the political regime and its alleged reformability, is, though valid, far too sharply drawn. Already in the mid-1920s Trotsky used the "social conquests" as central to his idea of the USSR as a workers' state; as late as the early 1930s he cited the possibility of the workers regaining power by "reform" as crucial to the "proletarian" character of the state; even in 1938, his perception of the Stalinist leadership was conditioned by the idea that it (unlike the newer elements of the bureaucracy, surrounding it) was closely tied to the nationalised economy and would be in a "united front" with the workers against the bourgeois counter-revolution he saw as an imminent danger.

In the 1920s, Trotsky had called for "reform" in the USSR. He publicly changed his position only in October 1933, adopting then a somewhat understated early variant of what he would from July 1936 call "political revolution". Yet Trotsky's own word for his policy before 1933, "reform", is radically misleading. How could the exiled, jailed, hounded and murdered Opposition have expected to reform the Stalinist regime? Was this "reform" in the usual sense of peaceful and gradual change? Trotsky himself explained:

"The Democratic-Centralists ... criticize our road of reform in a very "Left" manner — a road which, I hope, we have shown by deeds is not at all the road of Stalinist legality; but they do not show the working masses any other road. They content themselves with sectarian mutterings against us, and count meanwhile on spontaneous movements."

In fact all Trotsky's perspectives for "reform" were centred on the eruption of a radical crisis, towards which Trotsky thought all the regime's policies — positive actions and derelictions alike — were inexorably building. In this crisis, the apparatus would fragment; the scattered forces of the Bolshevik party would regroup and reorganise themselves; the Left Opposition, with its clarity, programme, far-sightedness and tempering would, overtly or implicitly, assume the leadership. Most likely this crisis would include civil war, or elements of civil war. Not between the bureaucracy and the working class, but between the regime and bourgeois counter-revolution, whose mass forces would be the peasantry. In this the Opposition would ally with the regime and support it as the Bolsheviks supported Kerensky against the attempted army coup of Kornilov in 1917 — in Lenin's phrase "as the rope supports the hanged man". They grew in strength and soon dealt with Kerensky. Reform was displacement of the Stalinist regime in the civil war against the counter-revolution.

The policy was "reform" only to the extent that it included the retention of the reformed — politically, revolutionised — apparatus. In this process the workers would reconquer power from the bureaucracy. The apparatus which, despite everything, preserved structures created in the revolution and civil war against what Trotsky saw as the urgent threat of fascistic peasant-based bourgeois counter-revolution, would be cleansed, purged, deprived of its Stalinist-bureaucratic technique of domination over the people, and subordinated to a newly reconstituted Bolshevik party.

This was "reform" in the midst of revolutionary convulsion. There was much of revolution in it. And, likewise, the idea of the bureaucratic locum underlies and interweaves with Trotsky's policy at every point, lending to it an ambivalence that is there even in his strongest condemnations of bureaucratic rule and most ardent and vehement advocacy of working-class action to overthrow the bureaucracy. He will name it, variously, bureaucratic centrist; Bonapartist; absolutist; totalitarian; a ruling caste; a new aristocracy. He accuses it of concentrating in itself all the vices of all the ruling classes of history and, though he avoids the word, of imperialism. In all of these phases, though the criticism and hatred intensify, as do the negative evaluations of the elite, there is always something left: nationalised property, mixed in Trotsky with increasingly tenuous but always present degrees of ideologising and fantasising about its connections to the working class.

Trotsky continues to see the autocracy, despite everything, as in some essential ways still a reflective, mechanical, passive agency of the workers' revolution, as if the "soul" of the dead party and the murdered working-class revolution has passed to the nationalised economy and from that to the state and the autocracy.

The working class does not hold power (or not "direct" power). The autocratic locum rules, and rules savagely, over the workers. But the social conquests of the dead and defeated working class revolution remain because the bureaucracy has a dual role.

Trotsky is forced to insist that the key idea that the working class, unlike the bourgeoisie, can only rule politically, that is democratically, is operational only on a higher stage and in other situations. The USSR is different. History, Trotsky, insists, is richer than socialist norms. Where, he asks, has a degenerated workers' state been observed before?

Trotsky is a scientist — genuinely so, but also in a self-disabling "abstracted" sense, forcing himself into the pose of a "disinterested observer". "Objectivity", caution and restraint work against drawing "hasty" conclusions about the class character of the Stalinist USSR — conclusions that in fact would have been not at all hasty. The socialist norms get progressively battered out of shape and are relegated to the background, rather as the 17th century British empirical scientists pushed God to the margin of their concerns, as the distant "first cause", while they explored material reality beyond the first cause.

The consequence was the disorientation of generations of revolutionary socialists. With neither Trotsky's political balance nor his historical perspective, the post-Trotsky Trotskyists reduced Trotsky's idea to arid totalitarian economism: a state like Mao's China, which as a political system was fascistic and as a socio-economic formation was nearer to oriental despotism than to the capitalist society which for Marxism prepares the economic, social and cultural pre-requisite for the emergence of socialism, was defined by nation-

alised economy as working-class and in transition to socialism.

Trotsky describes the autocracy accurately as having all the vices of a ruling class, and yet continues to reject the idea that it is a ruling class because of the fatal combination of the two ideas: totalitarian economism and the locum. So long as the view that there could be a locum was held, and so long as nationalised property defined the USSR as working-class, Trotsky's was an impregnable ideological system. So long as the Stalinist autocracy's post-1928 bureaucratic revolution remained shrouded in myth and was not properly separated out from the working-class October Revolution the "defence of the nationalised economy" could be logically extended into defence of a full-blown Stalinist empire.

If nationalised property defines a totalitarian socio-political system as a workers' state — and if you do not recognise or become inhibited by *reductio ad absurdum* — then the extension of the system has infinite possibilities. The ideology can and did develop in parallel with the development of the Russian empire and the spread of Stalinism. In principle, you can recognise the "progressive" aspects of new workers' states formed by peasant armies such as Mao's or Pol Pot's, or by Stalin's conquering army; and simultaneously advocate self-determination for the component parts of the Russian Empire, and 'political' revolution against the bureaucratic locum.

One pre-requisite of this ideological system is a fetish of the economic form of nationalised property. Another is a pre-Marxian form of nihilistic negation of capitalism or "sectarianism towards capitalism" — substituting a fixed stance of desiring what is anti-capitalist, regardless of what it may represent positively, for the Marxian notion of a socialism built on the progressive achievements of capitalism.

This system puts the definition of "workers' states" essentially outside all political judgement. If the fetish — nationalised property — exists, or is coming into existence in China or Cuba, then the regime is by definition a working-class "locum", no matter what atrocities it commits against living workers. The ideology is a closed system defined entirely by its own inner points of reference. Large areas of political judgement are pre-empted and killed off. Within such a system, unconditional defence of the USSR, conceived of by Trotsky as a policy to maximise the chances of working-class regeneration of the USSR and forestall its full collapse into the fascist capitalist barbarism which was engulfing much of the world in the 1930s, becomes socialist *hara-kiri* in the service of the "progressive" system and vicarious Russian imperialism.

Trotsky should have drawn the indicated Marxist conclusions when the bureaucracy crushed both bourgeois and proletarians and made itself "sole master of the surplus product". That was the point at which the idea of the Bolshevik Party acting as locum turned into support for a collectivised class of exploiters ruling over the working class. The Bolshevik Party was genuinely the locum for the working class. The Stalinist "locum" for this locum was a new, exploiting, counter-revolutionary ruling class.

While holding to the idea of the Stalinist locum that remained at least residually progressive as custodian of nationalised property, Trotsky did not think that it could go on indefinitely and evolve into socialism. This is of fundamental importance. Trotsky finally put a term to it and indicated empirical tests for reassessing the USSR. In September-October 1939 he put a question mark over the whole idea and indicated that if the Stalinist USSR should survive the convulsions of world war, then it must be reassessed even if it retained nationalised property. Had he been allowed to hold these tests, the experience of the next few years after August 1940 would, on Trotsky's published reasoning, have compelled him to break with the idea that the bureaucracy was a locum for working-class rule, and the USSR still a workers' state.

Trotsky's disciples would continue to see the autocracy — and other bureaucracies modelled on Stalin's — as locums until 1991. This idea led to very strange things.

The Trotskyists, unlike the ignorant honest CP members or fellow travellers, knew the main facts. From Trotsky's idea that the "what" of a working-class essence contained in the socio-economic formation, supposedly defined by the nationalised-economy residue from 1917-21, could develop autonomously from the "who" of the working class, flowed the possibility of mentally "lifting out" the idea of working-class revolution above the actuality of the working class.

With these ideological spectacles, the neo-Trotskyists could see working-class revolutions being made by "locums" which reduced the working class itself to semi-slavery. Stalin's Russia could spread revolution by its "Red" Armies (World War 2). "Workers'"

revolutions could be made by peasant armies. This vision contained the seeds of religion. For a while in the early 1950s, the Fourth International was dominated by an idea closer to medieval millenarianism — the idea of social transformation through the miracle-working second coming of Christ — than to a Marxist view of socialism being made by the agency of the working class and through the opportunities created by the contradictions and achievements of capitalism.

The neo-Trotskyists looked to a “War-Revolution” in which a hidden logic of history, operating from above and beyond all particular human agency, would transform a Third World War between the USSR and the USA into socialist revolution. The little literary apparatus that called itself the leadership of the Fourth International could work literary wonders, make fantastic compounds and combinations in their heads, and project fantasies on to the activities of the Stalinist movements, as they did for decades, only because the notion of the *locum* had become central to neo-Trotskyism.

Considering the pressures on them, the true heroism of the post-Trotsky Trotskyists is seen in their stubborn resistance to the logic of the theories which they accepted, of the “*locum*” and of “totalitarian economism”, and their presentation in however battered a form of a Marxist critique of Stalinism, together with a programme for transforming the Stalinist societies. Sometimes, as we shall see, they were bent out of shape under the pressure, but they remained — or returned to — what they fundamentally were. By doing so they kept alive a revolutionary socialist movement which today can renew itself by rediscovering and building on the other thread in Trotsky’s ideas on the USSR, the thread represented by the concrete and detailed analyses in *The Degeneration of Theory*, *The Revolution Betrayed* and *The Bonapartist Philosophy*, by the indications for reconceptualisation given in “The USSR in War”, and by Trotsky’s increasingly militant advocacy of workers’ revolution against the Stalinist autocracy and an independent proletarian “Third Camp” against both capitalism and Stalinism.

3. THE NEO-TROTSKYISTS AND STALINIST EXPANSION

I. PROVISIONAL FORMULA ERECTED INTO WORLD-HISTORIC INTERPRETATION

“The leadership oriented itself without any synthesised understanding of our epoch and its inner tendencies, only by groping (Stalin) and by supplementing the fragmentary conclusions thus obtained with scholastic schema renovated for each occasion (Bukharin). The political line as a whole, therefore, represents a chain of zig-zags. The ideological line is a kaleidoscope of schemas tending to push to absurdity every segment of the Stalinist zigzags. The Sixth Congress would act correctly if it decided to elect a special commission in order to compile all the theories created by Bukharin and intended by him to serve as a basis, say, for all the stages of the Anglo-Russian Committee; these theories would have to be compiled chronologically and arranged systematically so as to draw a fever chart of the ideas contained in them. It would be a most instructive strategical diagram. The same also holds for the Chinese revolution, the economic development of the USSR, and all other less important questions. Blind empiricism multiplied by scholasticism”. Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*.

TROTSKY REJECTED THE idea that the Russian system at the end of the 1930s was even minimally solid and coherent: it lacked “crystallised class relations”. Only because of this did Trotsky reject the idea that the bureaucracy was a ruling class. The bureaucracy was, he thought, a parasitic growth on the continuously degenerating forms of collectivised economy rooted in the 1917 revolution. By the end, the time span Trotsky projected was very short. “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?”, he wrote in “The USSR in War”.

His refusal to conclude that the ruling bureaucracy was a ruling class was fundamentally and explicitly tied to and dependent on that time scale. In that sense only, and for that reason only, did Trotsky deny that the bureaucracy was a ruling class. Far from his refusal to call it a ruling class expressing softness towards the bureaucracy, Trotsky, as we saw, compared it unfavourably with Nazism.

The policy of “unconditional defence of the USSR” was part of this complex of ideas expressing the concept of an “interregnum economy”. Degenerating from the revolution, but not yet overthrown by bourgeois forces, it retained the potential of regeneration by way of a new working-class ‘political revolution’. It was not, in Trotsky’s view, a degenerated workers’ state in stable equilibrium, but continually degenerating. Else — he had said it only tentatively — it was a new form of class society, whose features were its own norm, not a degeneration of something else.

Yet, though this gave unmistakable signs of direction, it left the theoretical questions at Trotsky’s death in a state of chaos and flux. Nothing could be more unsatisfactory than a political legacy which argued passionately for political conclusions that flowed from the bureaucratically-statised economy

when seen in one framework (degenerated workers' state) while at the same time its proponents accepted that an alternative framework (new ruling class) — from which other conclusions would follow — might prove to be better: and would, moreover, have to be adopted if the phenomenon lasted much longer in its present form! Yet that is how things stood when Stalin's assassin Mercador struck Trotsky down.

The USSR did last, coming out of the world war intact and in occupation of vast tracts of eastern and central Europe. However, the conclusions drawn then by Trotsky's most loyal "disciples", his partisans of 1939-40, were not those that Trotsky indicated for such an eventuality, but their very opposite — views akin to those Trotsky had long ago been forced to jettison. What was to be "official" Trotskyism by the mid-1950s had been called Brandlerism and Bauerism in Trotsky's lifetime. On the class nature of the Soviet Union the theoretical identity of the Trotskyists had not been disentangled from that of the Stalinists, who also "defended the Soviet Union". Political conditions existed for the international Trotskyist movement, after Trotsky's subtleties died with him, to repeat the political collapse of the Left Opposition in 1928-30. Continuing to criticise, they nevertheless accepted as "progressive", despite everything, the expansion of Stalinism. They translated Trotsky's defence of the Soviet Union into partisanship for the USSR empire. This pattern would last as long as the USSR did, and longer.

The neo-Trotskyist solution to the problem of the post-war Russian empire — restricting the word empire to mean monopoly-capitalist empire — obfuscated but could not resolve the problem. Without being defined, it would be one of the issues that split the forces of orthodox neo-Trotskyism in 1953 at the time of the East German workers' uprising.

Trotsky's failures to understand Stalinism fully are not difficult to understand. Faced with nineteenth century industrial capitalism, for generations the critics and rebels against the bourgeois system had not fully understood it. Some tended to understand capitalism and the exploitation of the working class as a mere extension of landlordism and age-old land-based robbery. Myths about exploitation originating in the Norman Conquest did widespread service as general explanations well into Chartist times. It is no cause for wonder that in the first years of the new phenomenon of Stalinism, there was not instant clarity. Columbus tried to sail to the Indies and found an unexpected, unknown continent rising out of the sea before him. He died without ever understanding or accepting that it was not the Indies but a "New World" he had found. So with Trotsky and the unexpected social system that was Stalinism.

Trotsky too had a false map of history. Though he understood so much about Stalinism, he postponed defining it as the distinct socio-economic formation it was. Much of the difficulty was to cease seeing it in terms of either capitalism or socialism and to examine it as something new, having a "finished", settled character. It was strange, new and evolving.

At the end of his life he would talk of the USSR as a counter-revolutionary workers' state displaying "elements" of imperialism. But he still saw it in terms of other formations — capitalism, socialism — and only tentatively, and as if through a shifting mist, as what it really was, a socio-economic formation distinct both from capitalism and socialism: distinct from capitalism, although the bureaucracy was not a mere parasitic growth on a backward workers' state, but a formed exploitative class which, as Trotsky put it

towards the end, seized and disposed of all the social surplus product; and distinct from working-class socialism, although it was anti-capitalist and, in its own bureaucratic way, “collectivist” and a “planned” economy.

II. “IN DEFENCE OF MARXISM”

IN SEPTEMBER AND October 1939 Trotsky, as we have noted, tentatively accepted that the USSR as it was could be seen in a radically different theoretical framework — “bureaucratic collectivism”. He said it was too early actually to reach such a conclusion; but irrevocably he had accepted it in principle. Then, close on this radical theoretical break with the past — hypothetical, conditional as it was, but a fundamental departure nonetheless — Trotsky engaged in a bitter political struggle against Burnham and Shachtman. His polemics then for “unconditional defence of the USSR”, against Max Shachtman, Martin Abern, James Burnham, and about half of his American comrades, had the catastrophic effect after his death of half-burying what was new in his final position and obscuring the direction of his thought. His “orthodox” disciples would erect and freeze as “Trotskyism” ideas and attitudes with which Trotsky was, probably, breaking, and add for good measure ideas he (see below) had spent his last 17 years fighting.

The drama of the 1939-40 faction fight and split would be both the Nativity and the Easter Resurrection story for post-Trotsky Trotskyism. Its literature, by Cannon and Trotsky — kept “authoritative” by non-publication of Trotsky’s other, vehemently anti-Stalinist, articles on the USSR of the same time — would educate and miseducate generations, and be the cultural medium of a tendency whose perspectives of workers’ revolution were elaborations (not without criticism, to be sure, and, for the Soviet Union, calls for political revolution) on hopes for the success of Stalinism.

Trotsky’s polemics from the faction fight were collected in a book, *In Defence of Marxism*, first published in December 1942. “The USSR in War”, wherein for the first time he accepted the possibility that the USSR, as it was, without any transformation, might have to be reconceptualised, is the first major item in the 1942 collection. It is followed by a large collection of polemics against those who questioned unconditional defence of the USSR when Stalin was Hitler’s partner in carving up Poland, and then invaded bourgeois-democratic Finland, and against those who said, or implied, that the USSR was already to be defined as a bureaucratic-collectivist (or state-capitalist) state.

In *In Defence of Marxism*, the heavy emphasis is on the idea that the Soviet Union is not, or not yet, to be given up. This book, and a companion volume by James P Cannon from the same factional struggle, came to embody “orthodox Trotskyism”. Around *In Defence of Marxism* was built the alleged continuity with Trotsky’s movement of the politically reconstructed and radically changed post-war “Trotskyism”. From 1942 to 1969-70, when the first “scrapbook” versions of Trotsky’s collected writings from the 1930s began to appear, working backwards from 1940, *In Defence of Marxism* was the main account of Trotsky’s views on the Soviet Union known to English-language readers, apart from *The Revolution Betrayed*, written before the Moscow Trials.

If you take the articles on Stalinism from Trotsky’s last 18 months and read them in sequence, putting the pieces in *In Defence of Marxism* in their proper

place in the series, you get a very different picture of what Trotsky was saying and where he was going, and a radically different balance. You could, carefully picking through "The USSR in War", get an idea of what Trotsky was saying, or half-saying "for now", and where he might be going; but the countering, numbing, neutralising effect of the rest of the unbalanced collection, with its harsh denunciation of the "petty-bourgeois opposition" of Shachtman and the others, weighed massively, and for most people decisively, against doing that. By contrast, had "The USSR in War" been published in its proper place in the sequence, it would have been hard not to get Trotsky's drift, and hard to see his rather wild polemical sallies as the last word. And harder to take the road the official Trotskyists did take. But the selection in *In Defence of Marxism* was itself the result of decisions about which road to take.

What was put and kept in circulation embodied political selection and political alignment. From the death of Trotsky onwards his works were picked over and used instead of living theory, to garnish empirical political responses and never-again-coherent policies arrived at by means of adaptation to other forces.

In Defence of Marxism appeared in December 1942, as the SWP entered into a white heat of soviet patriotism — which was very popular in all the lands allied with Stalin, including the USA; in most people's minds it would have merged with the local patriotism, which the SWP of course rejected and repudiated. The publication of *In Defence of Marxism* and its slant reflected that wartime pro-sovietism and perpetuated it.

It was a time when *The Militant* was inclined to deny, or half-deny, that the Soviet-Nazi alliance had ever occurred, and when it was admitted, they argued that such an alliance was unnatural anyway, the place of the Soviet Union being, it was implied, naturally with the good guys. The book, with its extremely violent and unqualified condemnation of the "petty-bourgeois" opposition, appeared at a time when, one year after the USA's entry into World War 2, that condemnation had already been proven in life to be nonsensical at every level.

Shachtman's "petty-bourgeois" opposition had been accused of recoiling against the Hitler-Stalin pact because they were capitulating to American bourgeois democracy. In 1942, that opposition, organised in the Workers Party, stood before the American working class as defenders of neither the newly popular Soviet Union nor of the USA. The Shachtmanites preached stark opposition to the USA's war. Their young people had systematically gone into industry, where they would consistently have a higher profile than the SWP, whose trade unionists were told to "preserve the cadre" in industry during the war by keeping their heads down.

Faction fights generate exaggeration, suspicion, wild extrapolation. Events had shown by December 1942 what had been what in the old polemics. To publish these comments from late 1939 and early 1940, comments which flew in the face of the subsequent developments, was an act of wilful and heedless factional libel. It is impossible to think that Trotsky would have approved.

And yet the story is worse still. If you read the reprinted records of the 1939-40 fight you are led to assume that the SWP in the war was always ardently for defence of the Soviet Union. *The Militant* and the SWP were for defence of the Soviet Union. But they became the passionate upfront public defenders of the USSR only after the tide of the war had turned in Stalin's favour at Stalingrad late in 1942. They were part of what CPers knew as "the Stalingrad

draft". Before that, for a whole year, defence of the Soviet Union had had low priority in the pages of the paper.

Such is the origin of the compilation that shaped post-Trotsky Trotskyism for over 30 years, and still does so now that Trotsky's other writings of the time are in print. It was both symptomatic and central to the shaping of "orthodox" neo-Trotskyism. The element of accommodation to Stalinism's success is central and massive.

III. FREEZING "TROTSKY" INTO DOGMA

IN 1929, MANY members and leaders of the Left Opposition in the USSR surrendered to Stalin because, in erecting the totalitarian power of the new bureaucratic class and destroying what was left of the labour movement, he also kicked the feeble NEP bourgeoisie into its grave. Trotsky did not. Trotsky had had an independent axis, which his partially false conceptions of Stalinism twisted but did not uproot. So too at Trotsky's end. The neo-Trotskyists had no such axis. Nor had they Trotsky's political and theoretical culture. They made of Trotsky's "unconditional defence" of the "workers' state" a dogma which had less and less grip on the reality of Stalinism, and combined that blind incomprehension on the level of theory with opportunist adaptations. They did remain critics of Stalinism and advocates of working-class democracy — while supporting Stalinism "against capitalism". This combination of eyeless dogmatism and sometimes exuberant opportunist adaptation to successful and "victorious" Stalinism produced very bizarre results within two years of Trotsky's death, and would continue to do so for almost half a century.

By erecting Trotsky's conclusions of a particular time against his method, the official Trotskyists both expressed their own unwillingness to think, and sealed off the propensity to think of newcomers — for generations. Mummery displaced Marxism as a living thing.

Theoretical poverty, together with a religiosity rooted in fear to try to think along Trotsky's lines and face the real world, fear to look uncongenial reality in the eye, fear of "disillusionment", fear of not being "objective", fear of not being with the real "revolutions of our time", led to a hardening of the heart and of the mind. This produced a view of the world in the early forties, and then in the early fifties, akin to millenarian religion. It is not surprising to find the long-time British adherents of this sort of neo-Trotskyism, the Healyites — albeit in the 1970s after they had gone seriously mad — engaging in public ceremonies structured around Trotsky's death-mask.

Trotsky's tentative and questioning posing of an alternative to the workers' state framework unavoidably also implied a questioning, *pro tem* attitude to the old position. But the old position was frozen by his ardent disciples. They cut away Trotsky's last qualifications and questionings and hypothetical conclusions, and chose in due time to interpret the survival and expansion of Stalinism as proof that nothing in the USSR's "working-class character" had changed or required reconsideration. Trotsky had in anticipation said plainly that opposite conclusions would be indicated if the Stalinist system survived and had to be considered as stabilised. Trotsky had, at the end, set empirical and temporal tests for deciding that Stalinism was a new form of class soci-

ety. Those who insisted they were the “orthodox” Trotskyists ignored and implicitly rejected these tests.

The events after Trotsky’s death — when the Soviet Union survived, conquered great territories, became the second power in the world, and was replicated in foreign countries — were entirely outside what was even conceivable to him; but they pointed all the more forcefully to the conclusions Trotsky had indicated in the event that the USSR proved more stable than he had thought.

Having in the course of the faction struggle, which continued as rivalry between the two parties that resulted from it — the WP and the SWP — declared the alternative bureaucratic-collectivist framework which Trotsky had tentatively posed in September 1939 as the greatest heresy and “revision” of the “programme of the Fourth International”, the neo-Trotskyists had boxed themselves off from resuming Trotsky’s train of thought when time and experience of the USSR’s survival in war made it imperative.

Whereas Trotsky had in anticipation said plainly that new conclusions would be indicated if the Stalinist system survived, his disciples, ignoring Trotsky’s thought while using his words, still held that so long as nationalised property remained, and was being spread, nothing had changed or required reconsideration. Trotsky had broken with that position in September-October 1939. They were taken in tow by the Stalinist empire of countries which they soon discovered were “in transition to socialism”.

IV. STALINIST SOCIETY IN TRANSITION TO SOCIALISM?

FACED WITH THE survival and expansion of Stalinism, Trotsky’s real and evolving idea of Stalinism was destroyed amongst his followers even while they held to the letter of his pre-September 1939 reasoning. The new bureaucratic formations in China, etc. could not be understood, as Trotsky had said the USSR bureaucracy was, to be in conflict and contradiction with the collectivist property they created: bureaucratically collectivised property could not now be identified even obliquely with a form of working class property. James Connolly’s mordant joke, “if state ownership is socialism, then the jailer and the hangman are socialist functionaries” had taken on a grim new meaning in the face of Stalinism. The old basic notion of socialism, that political power was decisive, logically came into its own, even if the confusions engendered by Trotsky’s attempts to account for the USSR had been justified.

The neo-Trotskyists, who chose instead to hold to the letter of Trotsky’s ideas, did so because of the seeming resemblance of Stalinist society to socialist forms — nationalised economy and the elimination both of the capitalist mode of economic activity and of the bourgeoisie which personified it. And because attempts to analyse the world afresh threatened to collapse what they understood as the whole Marxist system. Within the verbiage of Trotsky, which they turned into a sacerdotal language, they radically altered Trotsky’s ideas.

In substance, despite the forms of property, the USSR for Trotsky was not post-capitalist in the sense of being ahead of world capitalism. It could not be: the most basic ideas of Marxism on socialism’s necessary relationship to capitalism in history ruled it out.

With its expansion, Stalinism had, said Trotsky's epigones, miraculously changed the direction of its social and class evolution, as Trotsky had seen them: where the USSR had inexorably been moving towards a convulsive restoration of capitalism, Stalinism in the USSR and its clones across an additional sixth of the world were now post-capitalist societies "in transition to socialism". Where socialism in one country had been in Marxist terms, as understood by the Communist International and the Trotskyist movement of Trotsky's time, a piece of illiteracy, expressing the world outlook of the bureaucracy, and in USSR life a gruesome mockery of socialism, a modified version of it became the operational idea of the neo-Trotskyists. It was, wrote Ernest Mandel, for example, no longer one country, but a cluster of countries. Most of them were backward (though not all: Czechoslovakia, East Germany) but they were evolving towards socialism by way of what earlier Marxists would have dismissed as utopian colony-building on a giant scale, on the periphery of world capitalism. Socialism was — "for now" — evolving not out of advanced capitalism and as its spawn and replica, but as its competitor, moving from the periphery to the centre.

Formal lip service, on ceremonial occasions and in ceremonial documents, to the idea that the world revolution would only be completed when capitalism was overthrown in the advanced countries could not make sense of this in terms of the Marxism of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. That idea was for the future, more or less remote; and meanwhile the USSR, etc., were "societies in transition to socialism" side by side with capitalism. The "actually existing revolution" was a matter of "one, two, many socialisms in one country". On an international scale, it bore more than a passing resemblance to the vision of Michael Bakunin in the First International and after about the effective movement for revolution coming from the social fringes and the social depths. Not from the proletariat of advanced capitalism, on the basis of the best achievements of that capitalism, but from the "wretched of the earth" on the edges of capitalism.

In this way, Trotsky's ideas, proclaimed as "official" orthodox Trotskyism, were turned on their head, turned inside out and turned upside down. Socialism in one country — or "socialism in a number of backward countries", was proclaimed to be the permanent revolution.

The view that became dominant as neo-Trotskyism was already present in Trotsky's time. It existed in the communist movement, with the "Right Communists" (Brandler, Lovestone, etc.), but also among social-democrats. The old Fabian, George Bernard Shaw, for example, regarded both Stalinism and Fascism as progressive agents of the collectivist spirit immanent in 20th century capitalist society. Their ideas were brought into the fringes of the Trotskyist movement by the Italian, Bruno Rizzi, who is remembered because Trotsky polemicised with him in 1939-40. Like Shaw — who must have influenced him — Rizzi regarded the Stalinist system, which he defined as a new form of class society, as progressive; and, like the Right Communists and Isaac Deutscher, who would popularise their views mixed with elements of Trotskyism, he thought this system could grow organically and smoothly into socialism, without revolution. This idea of Stalinism as viable and progressive came to be adopted by the so-called official Trotskyists, those who, after Trotsky's death, made a palimpsest of his words and texts into which they interpolated alien ideas. The degenerated and deformed workers' state theories were Bruno Rizzi's progressive "bureaucratic collectivism",

“Trotskyised”!

It is possible to argue that, faced with the reshaping of the world in and after World War 2, Trotsky would have abandoned the path of thought which he sketched in “The USSR In War”, “Again and Once More...”, and in his last articles, and agreed with his “orthodox” disciples. It is certain, on the literary evidence, that the “disciples”, in elaborating what became official post-Trotsky Trotskyism, did not follow Trotsky’s method and did not heed what he wrote. They erected part of Trotsky’s tentative conclusions above reality, and for 30 years suppressed much that he wrote alongside *In Defence of Marxism*. Trotsky was flatly at variance with the positions that were, for decades after his death, falsely presented as his “last word”.

The alleged continuity of “orthodox” neo-Trotskyism with Trotsky was not in fact continuity, but regression to the Trotskyism of before 1933, in a world where Stalinism had plainly moved on very far from the reality of the 1920s, which still shaped Trotsky’s views up to 1933. Its angry criticisms of Stalinism were vitiated by its commitment to “unconditional defence” of the Stalinist state, and later the Stalinist empire, against capitalist forces.

Trotsky was receptive to events and their implications. The neo-Trotskyist movement used “Trotsky’s position” in lieu of thought and real analysis. Neo-Trotskyist analysis was cut and tailed and topped and pruned to fit into a static frame made by taking a snapshot of one moment (one side of Trotsky’s 1939-40 writings) out of what for Trotsky was a moving and evolving analysis.

When all the old conceptions of the nature of the Soviet Union and the bureaucracy had to be measured and reassessed against the survival, expansion and self-replication of Stalinism, the “official Trotskyists” — those who had taken Trotsky’s side in 1939-40, led by James P Cannon, joined soon after the reflux of Nazi Germany by Ernest Mandel, Michel Pablo, and others — turned ideas such as defence of the Soviet Union into frozen dogma and let that dogma commit them to defence of the Stalinist empire, the second power of the world. They came, as we will see, to regard its expansion in war or its replication in Asia or Eastern Europe as advances for the working class. They turned Trotskyism back in its tracks, from what it was in 1940, into a critical adjunct of the full-blown Stalinist empires. They defined Stalinist expansion as the expansion of a deformed working-class revolution. They maintained the belief in the workers’ revolution, which for Trotsky was a belief that the labour movement could be “turned round” so that it would play the necessary revolutionary role, by mystifying it out of all reality and beyond all tests of reality; they even rechristened Stalinist Chinese peasant armies as workers’ parties.

In fact, this was only another way of declaring the whole real perspective of the Bolsheviks dead — everything that Trotsky had tried to avoid in the 1939-40 debate. It had the additional fault of not doing this clearly but by way of naming something else as the working-class revolution and even for the working class.

Their “revolutionary perspectives” came to have as their immediate protagonist the Stalinist movement. They evolved a variant of degenerated workers’ state theory, supposedly Trotsky’s, or developed from Trotsky, that switched all the directions, definitions, class affiliations, and lines of movement in Trotsky’s actual theory, arriving at definitions of the Stalinist states — that these were societies in transition to socialism — that were the opposite of

Trotsky's . They wound up accepting variants of the perspective of "socialism in one country", of socialism advancing from backwardness on the periphery of the world economy to the centre.

It was a procedure with the legacy of Trotsky belonging to the same order of things as the Stalinists' scholasticism and mummery over "Lenin", and with the same consequence, that words and terms lost their meanings and, filled with different content, acquired new and sometimes opposite meanings — except that those engaged in this work were sincere and honest revolutionaries who retained a democratic criticism of Stalinism and made propaganda for, and tried to organise to win, Trotsky's working-class programme against Stalinism. Suspicious of innovation and motivated at root by the desire to do the best they could, they were cautious about challenging Trotsky's authority for fear that they would thereby succumb to the pressure of their own ruling classes.

Neo-Trotskyism was rooted in the abortive factional dispute of 1939-40 and in the lines prematurely drawn and defended there. For the "orthodox" Trotskyists, who remained critical of Stalinism and advocates of either reform (as — anachronistically — for China until 1969, Yugoslavia, Cuba, etc., as if these were societies analogous to the USSR in the early period of degeneration in the 1920s) or political revolution — in the USSR and eastern Europe — it was a way to come to terms with the reality of Stalinism as a great collectivist anti-bourgeois power which was also and simultaneously an anti-working-class power. The Stalinist states, no matter how critical of them the neo-Trotskyists were, usurped the place in Marxist theory of the working class in the anti-capitalist revolution — in its first stage. All the typical word-play and all the mystified and mystifying assertions that the working class — crushed and enslaved by the new state and denied the most elementary liberties and civil rights — ruled, could not change that fact. But what else could these be but workers' states, degenerated like Russia or deformed at origin like the others?

For Trotsky, the "degenerated workers' state" idea existed within a complex web of ideas and perspectives. For his "disciples", the system within which Trotsky saw the USSR as a workers' state tended to shrivel to a "totalitarian economism". That is there in Trotsky, but there is a lot more. For post-Trotsky Trotskyism, the bare fact of nationalised property and a system modelled on Stalin's USSR, and the rule of Stalinist forces committed to this model, defined a workers' state whatever happened to the workers. It was, for this stage of history, carrying through the transition to socialism — and was to be valued above the lives and liberties of the workers. Words in defence of the workers, however sincere and deeply-felt, could not balance out this logic. From the late 1940s, as the "orthodox" accepted the extension of the Stalinist system in various ways as creating workers' states, they could do it only by taking nationalised property as the ultimate criterion of the alleged class character of those states.

V. MILLENARIANISM: "THIRD PERIOD" NEO-TROTSKYISM

THE LOGIC OF the neo-Trotskyists' conditionally positive assessment of the new Stalinist "revolutions" turned them to millenarianism — to the idea that

socialist progress could be made by some force of “history” or “world revolution” above, beyond and outside the living working class.

Echoing the “Third Period” of Communist Party policy, 1928-34, when it was a dogma laid down by Stalinist command that revolution was imminent always and everywhere, the neo-Trotskyists professed certainty that the revolution was coming and, like seers seeking confirmation of prophecies, looked for or redefined events to fit their expectations. This too had roots in some of Trotsky’s sweeping predictions of revolution when he could not clearly identify the agency, other than the working class in the most general terms — and in his final view that capitalism was “finished”. The point is that the neo-Trotskyists were led, by extrapolation from the idea that the USSR remained a workers’ state and the fact that Stalinist forces could create other similar states, to accept — for now — as substitute for the working class those who created in, for example, China, as much as “remained of 1917” in the USSR. There was logic in it. The first essay in millenarianism came out of World War Two.

In the period beginning with the end of the siege of Stalingrad (late 1942), the neo-Trotskyists turned to perspectives for socialist gains and capitalist defeats spun around the advances of the “Red” Army from the East to the very centre of Europe. The new approach was most preposterous in its attempts to claim the Russian Army as “Trotsky’s Red Army” — a staple of *The Militant* throughout the war — and its promotion of the idea that it was the nationalised economy that was winning USSR victories and inspiring the Russian workers and soldiers to fight.

These bizarre fatuities, on the level of crude advertising-agency or public relations material, can too easily divert attention from the important and continuous core idea within the blatant nonsense — acceptance of a positive revolutionary role for what in fact was Stalin’s army and Stalin’s state. There was talk of the “Red” Army rousing workers and inspiring them — as there had been in 1939 at the start of the events in Poland and Finland — as if nothing had been learned from the fact that, in Trotsky’s words, “the invasions immediately bring about the transfer of power into the hands of the local Stalinist candidates for totalitarian rule”, and “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”.

There was nonsensical pretence that there was not much to worry about in the (sometimes mentioned) counter-revolutionary character of the Kremlin and, implicitly, of its “Red” Army, because that would be lightweight compared to the “revolutionary impulse” from Stalinist advance. There was utter unclarity about the relation between “progressive” nationalisations imposed by the “Red” Army, as in 1939-40 in Poland, and the working class as the agent of revolution. There was absolute subordination, in the last analysis, of all else to the supposed overriding principle of “defence of the USSR”. As late as March 1945, only a few weeks before the end of the war in Europe, this fictitious view of the “Red” Army was the dominant one in the most important neo-Trotskyist publication in the world, the *US Militant*. (See chapter 6.)

The fundamental idea was, as we’ve seen, an identification of nationalised property with progress and of Stalinist policy, despite Stalin, as a mere reflex of that progressive economy. Everything else was faded into the background. Without dropping their criticisms — especially of the Communist Parties in western Europe, against which they fought bitterly — the US official

Trotskyists and those they influenced took up the posture of hopeful expectancy, of a push for socialist revolution connected with the advance of Stalin's army. The principle of "defence of the USSR" led directly to this; but to assert a straight line from Trotsky to the neo-Trotskyist politics of 1942-5 you have to ignore Trotsky's prognosis of 1939-40. This could not have been the policy of the Trotsky who wrote what he did in 1939-40. No, after Stalingrad the "orthodox" Trotskyists had taken a sharp fork in the road away from both the spirit and the letter of what Trotsky wrote. Post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" as it existed from 1942 was indeed part of the "Stalingrad draft" that led vast numbers to join the Communist Parties.

Foolish triumphalism about the victories of the workers' state was their response when history offered up the evidence that Trotsky had indicated would conclusively falsify the "workers' state" thesis: the bureaucracy remaining stable in the convulsions of a world war. The leader of the "orthodox", James P Cannon, had himself put the perspective most sharply, in a passage which I have already quoted from a letter to Trotsky: "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. If such really is the case, we certainly must revise everything we have said on the subject of the bureaucracy up to now" (*Struggle for a Proletarian Party*).

When Stalin did conquer a large part of Germany, however, Cannon made no such revision. What he revised, or licensed others to revise, while holding to Trotsky's words, were the framework and criteria of Trotsky's entire approach and Trotsky's root and branch rejection of socialism in one country.

Neo-Trotskyism became a chaos of crazily distorting mirrors. At the end of the war the workaday millenarian politics about "Trotsky's Red Army" were still clothed in shreds of the old Trotskyism. As the Russian Army consolidated itself as master of half of Europe, the USSR, though in fact the second power in the world, and the great power of Europe and Asia, was — so the ventriloquised Trotsky, used as Lenin had long been used in the USSR, told readers of *The Militant* — still in danger. "Only the world revolution can save the USSR for socialism. But the world revolution carries with it the inescapable blotting out of the Kremlin oligarchy".

Reading the coverage of current affairs in the files of the "Shachtmanite" *Labor Action* and *New International* and the "orthodox" *Militant* and *Fourth International* is like being with, on one side, people who live on the planet Earth and read bourgeois newspapers, and, on the other, citizens of the Moon peering at the affairs of Earth through a weak telescope and relying on old photographs and accounts of life on Earth thousands of years in the past to decipher what is going on.

Millenarianism is the all-tuning note in post-war "orthodox" Trotskyism. It was in full control by late 1942; by 1951 it was running riot, as the "Fourth International" looked to a Russian victory in an imminent nuclear world war (a "War-Revolution") to put an end to capitalism and begin the transition to socialism on a world scale. But there was not a straight line. In the 1940s there was an interruption, and perhaps the possibility of the "orthodox" evolving in a different direction.

VI. THE LESSONS OF ITALY

IN THEIR TIME Burnham and Shachtman had written almost all the policy statements and analytical articles for the SWP. After the split of April 1940, those who took over this work — but now with no help from Trotsky other than old texts — were Albert Goldman, Felix Morrow and John G Wright.

In the 1939-40 dispute Goldman had at first taken a flat and crass line of positive support for the Russian invasion of Poland (see chapter 7). No-one else had such a position. Morrow wrote daffy but logical extrapolations about “the class significance of the Soviet victories”. But these were honest people, and thoughtful. Goldman’s crassness in 1939 was evidently that of a down-right man who wanted to say plainly and bluntly what he thought the position of his own side came down to. Soon Goldman, Morrow, and a number of others, including Jean van Heijenoort, Trotsky’s secretary for seven years, became convinced that events were falsifying the perspective of “the Fourth International” (which at this time, though it had activists in Europe and throughout the world, was, as an organisation, not much more than a sub-committee of the SWP). When Italian fascism fell in mid-1943 they began to face up to realities.

Bourgeois democracy and Stalinism were the immediately powerful forces in Italy after two decades of fascist rule; the Trotskyists were a tiny force, facing immense difficulties. Trotsky had understood and written about the probability of illusions in bourgeois democracy being generated by fascism; he had counterposed to the ravings of Third Period Stalinism, for which “revolution” was everywhere and continuously imminent, a rational Marxist assessment of what it took to make a revolutionary situation (see chapter 9). Some of his general comments at the end of his life were vaguer. The Cannon group had “perspectives” for imminent European workers’ revolution, as if it could be produced mechanically out of the war.

Working-class experience and Marxist and Bolshevik theory said that a socialist revolution could not be made and consolidated just by a sudden upsurge of raw working-class anger against capitalism, but required preparatory education and organisation. The Cannonites implicitly had a view of revolution as emerging spontaneously from working-class economic grievances. They occasionally paid lip-service to Marxist ABCs by talking of the super-rapid growth of Trotskyist groups to leadership of the workers in Europe — in abstraction from any real perspectives for the evolution and self-development of working-class politics. This mixture — an implicit view of revolution as produced by raw rage, combined with a sectarian drive to “build the party” which would unblock the spontaneous revolutionary lava — would become the central characteristic of certain neo-Trotskyist currents, in Britain of the SLL-WRP and its splinters. The Cannonites at first rejected democratic slogans. Talking as if victory was assured to the Trotskyists, they wanted to and did exclude from the re-forming ranks of the Fourth International groups which did not share their views on the Russian question (see chapter 10). They were too busy trying to catch a little of the glory of “Trotsky’s Red Army” to notice that mass Stalinist movements existed in Europe, or to think of what that implied for socialist revolution.

It was all deeply unrealistic, and in fact ultra-left, with implicit underlying assumptions more akin to anarchism than Marxism. The Third-Period-style

ultra-leftism and the millenarianism — the expectation that other and non-human forces such as “crisis” and “history” would push through the revolution — would feed off each other for decades, in varying combinations and changing situations.

By contrast, the “Shachtmanite” Workers Party not only proposed more earth-grounded assessments of and responses to world events, but subjected the Cannonites to a running fire of criticism; and in 1943 and afterwards that criticism came to be echoed inside the SWP by Goldman and Morrow. They accused the SWP of ultra-leftism and unrealism, and of living on and purveying a lethal mixture of dogmatism and empirical opportunism. After the fall of Mussolini they advocated recognition of the realities of Europe and the use of democratic and transitional demands by the Trotskyists. Immediately, as in 1939-40, the political questions became snarled up with issues of party life and democratic procedure. Goldman and Morrow became an embittered opposition, and began, piecemeal and empirically, to see what the triumphs of Stalinism implied for the hopes of socialism in Europe; and they recognised the fact of Stalinist imperialism.

There was a more eminent critic of the SWP’s “softness” on Stalinism: Natalia Sedova, Trotsky’s companion of 40 years, who still lived in Mexico and participated in the affairs of the movement. After the siege of Stalingrad, Natalia veered slowly towards the opposite fork of the political road to that taken by the “orthodox” Trotskyists. She began to find the fantasies and delusions about “Trotsky’s Red Army” distasteful and nonsensical, but also politically dangerous: the Stalinist advance was a mortal threat to the European workers’ prospects of socialism, Natalia began to insist. Natalia’s pressure slowly produced a certain shift in emphasis.

By the end of the war a Fourth International had been recreated in Europe. Real discussion developed — about what the future would be for Europe, the economic prospects for capitalism, assessment of the areas under Stalinist domination, and, once more, the nature of the USSR. The Workers Party considered itself a section of the Fourth International and was accepted by the Europeans as such; there were radical anti-Stalinist currents in the small European parties. Unity discussions took place between the WP and the SWP in 1946 and ’47; a group from the SWP joined the WP (Goldman and some of his comrades; Morrow, expelled from the SWP, dropped away from politics), and then a group from the WP joined the SWP (C L R James and Raya Dunayevskaya and five or six dozen people). The Workers Party participated in the Second World Congress of the Fourth International in March 1948, which made a formal distinction in one of its documents between “revolutionary bureaucratic-collectivists” like the Workers Party and “reactionary” ones like Dwight Macdonald.

VII. THE DILEMMAS OF 1945-8

THE THREE YEARS between the end of the war and Tito’s break with Stalin in July 1948 were an interregnum in the evolution of “orthodox” neo-Trotskyism, at the end of which, much depleted in forces, it returned to the millenarian course of 1942-5 and developed it into a whole new system of politics. Afterwards it would develop by way of fraying, partial recoils, and

eccentric movements from the doctrinal clarity around the perspective of "Stalinist-led world revolution" which it had by the "Third World Congress" of 1951. In 1945-8, however, there was real discussion and real fluidity.

The USSR's power had expanded enormously. In Eastern Europe, "Trotsky's Red Army" had repressed the workers and set up "coalition" regimes in which Stalinists had the key police-military, that is, state-controlling, ministries. Indigenous Yugoslav Stalinists won power in a long war against German occupiers, Croat fascists and Serbian monarchists. Having occupied Czechoslovakia and set up a "mixed" government, the Russian Army withdrew. Everywhere else (Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania) the Russian Army remained in occupation. Czechoslovakia had had a mass Communist movement before the war; the German Communist Party had been strong before 1933; nowhere else in these states were there strong CPs. There had been a strong independent Marxist tradition in Poland, but Stalinism had destroyed it, formally dissolving the CP in 1938, shooting its leaders who had taken refuge in Moscow from Polish military dictatorship. A new Polish party had to be created for Russia's purposes in 1942 after Germany invaded the USSR.

Everywhere, parties bred to rule were created out of old CPers, turncoat Social-Democrats, and nondescript careerists. The top-ranking Stalinists returned from Moscow "with pipes in their mouths" (like Stalin), as the saying went. After 1949, most of those Stalinist leaders who had been at home in the underground, and not in Moscow, during the war would be purged, tried for imaginary crimes, and hanged or jailed. The bourgeoisie was weak or had been heavily discredited or smashed by the Nazis. Chauvinism akin to the tribalism of the Dark Ages, and to Hitlerism, characterised these Stalinist-run states in their relations with each other. The USSR kept the areas of Poland it had taken in 1939 and gave to Poland large areas of Russian-occupied Germany in return. Ten million Germans were cleared out of that territory at gunpoint, and with appalling suffering and many casualties. Three million Germans were driven out of the Sudetenland in the Czechoslovak state. Large numbers of Hungarians, too, were driven from Czechoslovakia.

How to evaluate these states? Plainly they, like the Baltic states in 1940, and the areas of former Poland Stalin controlled, were being "sovietised". Nobody paying attention and reading newspapers could doubt it. If the "orthodox" Trotskyists did doubt it, it was because this "sovietisation" presented them with all the questions that they had been avoiding since Stalingrad, or since 1939, or... since the Stalinist bureaucracy established its self-defined rule two decades earlier. The questions were writ too large to tolerate evasion, now that the USSR was the second power in the world, controlling a giant empire. The neo-Trotskyists would try to evade them in what was by now the traditional way: juggling with words and definitions, whose meanings were merely shifted.

The "orthodox" attitude on the Stalinisation of eastern Poland and the Baltic states had now to be reassessed. Why should it not be applied to the states now being turned into replicas of the USSR, and matching it for horrors with such things as the mass deportation of over ten million Germans? If the same approach were now applied to the vastly greater Stalinist expansion, would that not destroy whatever coherence remained to the "orthodox" position, compelling the neo-Trotskyists to see police-state repression of whole nations as somehow simultaneously being a form of socialist emancipation? But how,

if the movement were not to fall into a gibbering lunacy, could it not be applied? Not applying it would disarrange the “orthodox” neo-Trotskyist position as much as applying it, only differently.

The hard fact was that anti-capitalist revolutions were being made. However the Stalinist transformations in Eastern Europe were defined, they were that, anti-bourgeois revolutions. For those who continued to see the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state, the assimilation of the other countries into its model had to be defined as some variant of a workers’ revolution — an anti-worker, counter-revolutionary, bureaucratic workers’ revolution.

The labour movements were being subverted and destroyed by the Stalinist police states, and replaced by totalitarian entities in the service of the totalitarianising states. The working class was being subjugated at least as much as under fascism, and more than under the ramshackle pre-war loosely authoritarian regimes such as that of Hungary, for example. But if a categorisation as workers’ states of the new Stalinist systems now congealing in eight East European countries and North Korea — and by 1948 the Maoist armies were on the road to control of all mainland China — was to be rejected, then how could such a rejection not logically imply that the whole “degenerated workers’ state” assessment of the USSR was untenable?

If the dilemma were resolved by defining the new Stalinist states as being of the same nature as the USSR, that is as being workers’ states of some sort, then another and more fundamental question was posed (though I don’t think it ever was posed explicitly in those terms): what then was the theory according to which the USSR, with or without its empire of satellites, was a workers’ state? The answer, “Trotsky’s theory” — which became the “orthodox” Trotskyist answer, meaning that nothing basic had changed so long as nationalised property remained — would satisfy only those who had forgotten or not understood the whole trend of Trotsky’s thought in the 1930s and what the terms of his workers’ state theory had been.

The Soviet Union, even apart from its satellites and replicas, could not in 1945 be considered a workers’ state according to the approach indicated in Trotsky’s evolving and constantly-revised assessments in the 1930s. The bureaucracy had proved itself in the hardest possible test to be no mere malignant tumour on society, no collective bandit seizing the economy for a short transitional period in the reflux of the workers’ revolution before it gave way either to capitalism or to renewed workers’ power, no freak in the historical interstices between workers’ power and capitalist restoration or workers’ renewal. Events had made Trotsky’s old theory impossible: a new one had to be developed and within the old name it was: that, as we have seen, came to be Bruno Rizzi’s thesis of progressive bureaucratic collectivism as a stage on the road to socialism, renamed as “*degenerated workers’ states*”. Only a modified version of Trotsky’s name for his very different theory of the degenerated workers’ state would remain. The change took time.

Plain facts that could not be evaded had cancelled out the entire structure of reasoning according to which Trotsky had hung on to the “degenerated workers’ state” theory in 1939-40. The facts of the mid and late 40s pointed imperatively to other conclusions, those provisionally indicated by Trotsky then: that the USSR was a species of new class society. The question in the discussion after 1944-5 was whether the collapse of Trotskyism into flat “totalitarian economism” — the idea that state ownership, or, in the given case, totalitarian state ownership, supposedly rooted, directly or more loosely (China,

etc.) in the October Revolution, was necessarily working-class — would spread and prevail, or be reversed.

There was a large body of classical Marxist writing against the “totalitarian-economist” idea. It answered no real questions, but begged every question of working-class socialism. Such a reduction of the criteria to staid economy was always the “bottom line”, the hard-fact basis, of Trotsky’s theory. Trotsky was dealing with something new in history and compelled to measure it by comparison with known phenomena and by the pattern of previously existing modern class societies. Even so, his denial of the autonomy of the autocracy after 1928 was wrong; was by the mid-1930s blamably wrong. The war-time fantasies were an abandonment of the responsibility to think realistically about the world. But not even the war-time fantasies about “Trotsky’s Red Army” completely and flatly replaced the working class with some other agency. The “Red” Army was supposed to stimulate working-class action. There was still some rational notion of ends and means hovering, or flapping loosely in the air, around the “Trotsky’s Red Army” fantasies. Now there were only hard brute facts. For a period, the hard facts undid the millenarianism of 1942-5.

It needs to be stressed and kept in mind that the people involved were sincere and honest advocates of working-class socialism. They understood — and in a way that later generations of neo-Trotskyists often would not — the monstrous aberration from any sort of socialism that the Stalinist system was. With fascism a recent and vivid memory, they understood the horror of even contemplating the notion that the fascist-style states that the USSR was erecting in Eastern Europe (in part, with police forces staffed by recent fascists) could be accepted as a variant of workers’ state. But they needed to make sense of the world. They needed to ward off the conclusion of despair some drew from the repeated defeats of the working class, the idea that the working class could not play the role indicated in Marxist theory. The lessons of history proved the opposite — the Paris Commune, the 1917 revolution, the workers’ struggles in Spain in the 1930s, and many others — lessons that are indelible. But they saw depression and defeats of the working class, side by side with victories against the bourgeoisie by people calling themselves “communists” — victories that achieved as much as remained of the October 1917 Revolution. Revolutionary Stalinism beckoned as well as threatened. They needed to preserve hope for socialism, and paradoxically many of them — like the notorious US general who said he had destroyed a Vietnamese city “in order to save it” — preserved their hope for socialism in this epoch by killing the old idea and perspective of socialism and substituting for it something else (for “now”, for “this stage”).

These dilemmas opened a period of discussion in the reorganising Fourth International. Max Shachtman could at the end of the war write that the “degenerated workers’ state” thesis was withering and dying. He was wrong, but that seemed to be the trend. (He was right too: the last echoes of *Trotsky’s* workers’ state theory were dying; it would be replaced, by quite different theories. The death of the old workers’ state was surely the only consistent and logical development of Trotsky’s final position. In June 1946 the international centre, newly re-located in Europe, declared for the withdrawal of the USSR army — what had been so recently and for so long “Trotsky’s Red Army” — from Europe. The 1948 Congress document talked about “defending what remained of the conquests of October 1917” in place of “defending the Soviet

Union". This reflected a very much changed mood.

VIII. THE BRITISH REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY

ILLUMINATING HERE IS the case of the British Revolutionary Communist Party. At its peak around 1945 this organisation had 500 members; thereafter it steadily declined. By 1946 its leaders, Jock Haston, Millie Lee and Ted Grant, had provisionally decided that the USSR, its satellites and its Yugoslav replica, were of a similar class character — state-capitalist. After mulling this over for a while they changed their minds. The USSR and the others were, they still thought, of the same sort, but they were... workers' states. The RCP became the major proponents of this position in the Fourth-Internationalist movement, representing the opposite pole to the Workers Party, which was arguing that Stalinism was a form of class system, bureaucratic-collectivist (the WP majority) or state-capitalist (the minority). The RCP held that the Stalinist satellites partook of the same class nature as the USSR and were thus workers' states. For this phenomenon a new adjective would be coined: they had not degenerated, as the USSR had, from a workers' revolution, so these were "deformed" workers' states.

The majority supported neither pole, and the RCP were much despised and much condemned for their position. The Shachtmanites said that the RCP were at least logical; the other supporters of the thesis that the USSR remained a workers' state spurned the RCP for creating a *reductio ad absurdum* of it. The RCP leaders were regarded as people who had gutted Trotskyism and bestowed on Stalinism undeserved recognition as a progressive anti-capitalist force. Ernest Mandel and others dealt with the issue by declaring the satellites — most of them occupied, except Czechoslovakia, by Russian troops, and with governments dominated by Stalinists — to be state-capitalist, while the USSR remained a workers' state. Mandel, the major academic theoretician of neo-Trotskyism from the late 1940s, managed to combine these two positions with a third: great enthusiasm for the victorious Chinese Maoists.

IX. TITO

THE MARCH 1948 second world congress, in Paris, consisted of 50 delegates and represented 22 organisations in 19 countries, including the Workers Party of the USA. The shape of the world which would last with secondary modifications until the collapse of the USSR 43 years later was now plain. Capitalism had stabilised and begun to revive, though much of Europe was still in ruins. The main changes still to work their way through would come from a range of anti-colonial struggles.

Just before the Congress, on 25 February 1948, the Stalinists in Czechoslovakia organised a coup which was the last act in the Stalinisation of all of Russian-occupied Eastern Europe — a coup in which mass working-class support allowed the Stalinists, who already controlled the key ministries, to stage something, with mass demonstrations, like a parody of a

workers' revolution.

The tone of the 1948 congress resolutions is that of defeat and perplexity³⁹. The USSR remained a workers' state. How, why? "The social revolution still lives in what remains of the conquests of October [i.e. the nationalised property] and in the vanguard layers of the working class", declared the congress document. Fourteen years after the start of the Great Terror, and twenty years after the consolidation of totalitarian rule, the idea of the "vanguard layers of the working class" still being able to determine the class character of the state was surreal. The congress resolution placed much stress on the "instability of the social relations" and the need to study the trends by which "the progressive character of the Russian economy... tends to become eliminated by the bureaucracy" and "the possibilities of reaction and regression in all fields, including the economic, within the framework of these [nationalised] property relations, have been shown to be infinitely vaster than anyone could have thought". With the experience of Nazi rule fresh in their minds, the congress delegates described the USSR as "the most totalitarian police dictatorship in history". All the welter of qualifications and contrived arguments reflected minds at the end of their tether, about to flip back into the plain "totalitarian economist" definition of a workers' state by nationalised property alone.

In fact the congress solved nothing. By holding to the position that the USSR was a workers' state it indicated how the mainstream would solve the problem: but the congress itself stood between two open doors on either side of that final bivouacking of the old Trotskyist movement. Within three months the "orthodox" neo-Trotskyists would troop — no, stampede — through the one marked "Stalinism is revolutionary".

Tito's Yugoslavia was a fully-formed smaller replica of the USSR: if, as the congress said, it was capitalist, then it was a fascist state. Tito had won power with no dependence on the Russian army. In July 1948 Yugoslavia and the USSR fell out violently. Yugoslavia resisted the predatory — imperialist — relations that the USSR imposed on the satellites. Overnight, for the Russian propagandists, Tito became a fascist, a long-time "agent" in the Communist movement, and the new Trotsky. Tito acted to repress pro-Stalin people in his own state. A war of propaganda opened up. The Stalinists called for the removal of Tito. Russian invasion seemed a distinct possibility. Tito had a mass base of support, and appealed to the Yugoslav people. Not immediately, but over time, the Tito dictatorship, while retaining all the Stalinist basics, including the Byzantine cult of the leader, loosened up, and organs of (firmly controlled) popular representation appeared. The Yugoslavs criticised Russian Stalinism: they would soon designate the USSR as state-capitalist, and the "orthodox" Trotskyists would polemicise with them in defence of the working-class character of Stalin's state; they would denounce the orthodox Trotskyists for being soft on the USSR!

Now millenarianism — looking to other forces half-miraculously to make the revolution for the workers — came back to the "official" Trotskyists with a force and an all-conquering logic that showed the period of "Trotsky's Red Army" to have been a mere experimental half-rehearsal of a half-written play. Immediately the leaders of the Fourth International recognised that what on its merits had seemed a Yugoslav fascist, capitalist state was really a socialist state. All Tito's typical Stalinist talk of socialism and workers' power, which had been dismissed as cant at the March 1948 congress, was now understood

to be good stuff. The recent fascist, capitalist state was to be supported against the degenerated workers' state. Everything was redefined. An open letter was quickly dispatched to the "comrades" at the head of the Yugoslav CP. Speculation on the possibility of fishing in the pro-Tito current which emerged in the Western left were part of it, but this was a genuine new "revelation".

At the congress, the "world revolution" had seemed to be in a cul-de-sac, apart from the colonial struggles. Now everything was on the move. By April 1949 the International Executive Committee was ready to recognise that the countries where Russian Stalinism had overthrown capitalism and created societies in its own image were after all workers' states — deformed workers' states. They had adopted the position of the long-despised and much-derided RCP majority. Their all reshaping idea now was that they should not be "sectarian" towards the "living revolution". None of the implication that had led them to despise the RCP had disappeared. Now they drew conclusions that repelled even the British. Alone of all the Trotskyist currents in the world the British RCP, in a front page article in *Socialist Appeal* by Jock Haston, had welcomed the Stalinists' final coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948: now Haston could with justice criticise the "orthodox" for Tito worship!

Acceptance of the "living revolution" in Yugoslavia toppled the "orthodox" neo-Trotskyists over into acceptance of Stalinism as revolutionary. Now they saw that the Russian bureaucracy had played a tremendous international revolutionary role — as in the USSR after 1928. So had Tito played a great revolutionary role; so would Mao; so would others. Implicitly, this acceptance of the revolutionary role of the Stalinist bureaucracy internationally was a long-ranging backward revision of Trotsky's view of the bureaucracy, and implied a much-needed understanding of its independent role after 1928; but it was accompanied by positive acceptance of the Stalinists' new international achievements, and led not to a criticism and correction of Trotsky's conclusion that the USSR was a workers' state but to a thoroughgoing revision of his account of how and why it was a degenerated workers' state. The label "workers' state" was kept from Trotsky; little else was.

In the new millenarian world-view, the socialist revolution was moving forwards. It had made tremendous strides in the suppression of capitalism.

Hesitantly and with zig-zags, the "orthodox" had levered the "workers' state" theory up away from Trotsky's whole method of analysis, so that eventually it rested on a single point, nationalised property. Then, pivoting on that single point, the theory was turned round so that it came to be, not a one-sided version of what Trotsky had argued, but in many respects its opposite.

A nationalised economy defined a workers' state. The Stalinists created nationalised economies. Therefore, the Stalinists were a force who made workers' states. Therefore, for some, Stalinist power defined a workers' state, and was in fact the political core of it, nationalised economy being only the economic result — as in Trotsky's theory nationalised economy was the economic result demonstrating the continued vitality of traces from the 1917 workers' revolution. China could be seen by many of the "orthodox" as a "workers' state" as soon as the Stalinists took power, long before they got round to comprehensive statisation of the economy — and, in the terms of the "orthodox", rightly so!

Though the "orthodox" still upheld a norm of democratic workers' power, what they meant by "workers' state" in immediate politics was a state where

the workers were crushed uninhibitedly by a monopolistic bureaucracy. The inversion of meanings was as complete as any that Stalin had worked.

The “orthodox” Trotskyists had saved their “belief in socialism” by altering their socialist perspective and by redefining socialism — for now — out of recognition; now they regained their vision of a world revolution by raising it above and separated from the real labour movements. They hitched their hopes to the Stalinist movement, and cut loose from the only possible agency of real socialism, the working class.

The wide variety of Trotskyist groups permuting basic positions proves how much freedom there is to juggle in the framework of the “new Trotskyism” defined in 1949-51. Yet there was in all the strands a logical connection with the basic theory on the Soviet Union. If the USSR was any sort of workers’ state or advance beyond capitalism and towards socialism, then the states modelled after it by the “Red Army” or Tito or Mao were advances beyond capitalism — perhaps only a first stage of advance, but a decisive one. History had found its way out of the impasse of the 1930s. One could not be “subjective” about it. In plain language, this meant that other forces were doing at least the first stage of the job that was the workers’ in Marxist theory. In backward countries, the solution, *pro tem*, to the crisis of leadership of the working class was to accept that history, for now, had dispensed with the working class.

X. THE “THIRD WORLD CONGRESS”: A NEW TROTSKYISM IS FOUNDED

IN THE NEXT few years after 1948, the “orthodox” neo-Trotskyists would reconceptualise the world as one of ongoing struggle between the proletarian class camp — the USSR’s empire and its allies — and imperialism. Russian *imperialism* was revolutionary anti-imperialism. All the signs were turned round. Trotskyism experienced as profound an inner transformation of ideas as the Communist International after 1923.

We have seen that one reason for the great difficulties that Trotsky experienced with understanding Stalinism was that he had thought of the autocracy’s rule not as a regime “in and of itself” but as a freak short-term phenomenon of transition. Since the expected rupturing of forms (of state property by the bourgeoisie, or of bureaucratic political power by the working class) had not happened, only reconceptualisation of the USSR opened a way out of the cul-de-sac. Mesmerised by the survival and success and the challenge to capitalism Stalinism embodied, and fearful of innovation, Trotsky’s followers, when they came to the unavoidable reconceptualisation, veered off in the opposite direction to that indicated by Trotsky in 1939: to critical but positive reassessment of Stalinism.

Between Tito’s break with Stalin and their April 1949 decision that the states of the Russian empire were all workers’ states, they performed a spectacular reconceptualisation. The only changes had been the transition there from the looser post-1945 regimes to the full-scale airtight Stalinist totalitarian terror system. Yet what the second world congress had defined as state-capitalist systems, with fascist-style regimes, became progressive variants of working-class rule, and would be designated as “in transition to socialism”. Regimes

in which, since 1945 the fascist-like destruction of labour movements, of civil liberties and of all workers' rights by Russian quisling regimes had been observed, condemned and summed up in the resolutions of the 1948 congress, were now "reconceptualised". You would have to look to the most spectacular voltes-faces of the Stalinern for a parallel switch.

Here there were not the complexities and difficulties that Trotsky had unavoidably faced in analysing the stage-by-stage degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Evolving, open-ended, seeming to be radically unstable by all available measures, the USSR could not look to Trotsky as it does in retrospect to those who know the whole story and approach it as history. The 1948-9 "official" Trotskyists approached their analysis from the other end.

They had seen the systems for something like what they were: and then they "saw" them again in a blinding light of revelation. So far had norms and standards been pulped. For the satellite states the neo-Trotskyists advocated the same programme as for the USSR: they did not abandon the working class. For the autonomous "workers' states" — Yugoslavia, China, Cubaⁿ — they would not do that. They would adopt the posture of loyal critics with suggestions to make for reform. When some Chinese Trotskyists fled to Hong Kong from the Maoists — those who did not were killed or incarcerated for three or four decades — Michel Pablo, secretary of the new "Fourth International", dismissed them as "refugees from a revolution". Comradely open letters were written to the victorious Chinese Stalinists, too — and would be written to the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as late as 1962.⁴⁰ Bowing down before success was part of it; so was a supine attitude to history that was the opposite of that appropriate to representatives of a revolutionary class at bay.

The reconstituted Fourth International consisted of very small groups (mostly only a few dozens strong) with an international leadership dependent on the bestowed authority of James P Cannon raised as a literary apparatus of commentators and fantasy strategists above a very weak movement. As it turned out, they would not long remain tractable to Cannon's bidding or long let themselves be held in check by Cannon's "old Trotskyist" inhibitions.

The implications drawn from the 1948-9 turn and its working-through were now that the transition to world socialism was moving forwards of its own momentum. It was surging forwards and seizing on and using any organisational instrument to hand.

As Ernest Mandel put it in January 1951: "The worldwide revolutionary upsurge continues to expand and deepen, even if between 1948 and 1950 it saw a temporary retreat in Europe: today it pulls all Asia in its wake, tomorrow it will cross the Atlantic and attack Capital in its last bastion. The development of this upsurge is the almost automatic product of the extreme decomposition of capitalism. It is in the absence of a sufficiently powerful revolutionary leadership that this revolutionary upsurge temporarily takes new and transitional forms, like those we have seen in Yugoslavia and we see now

39. The Congress launched the slogan for the transformation of the small Trotskyist propaganda groups (some very small) into "parties of mass working-class struggle". The same call had been made by a previous conference in 1946, but this time it was made in the face of a major decline of all the groups. About half the membership of the French group, which was the largest in Europe, quit soon after the Congress, and its paper, previously weekly, appeared only three times between April and November 1948; the British RCP was also on the point of collapse.

blooming in Asia.

“For ten years the advance of the world revolution has taken the most diverse and unexpected forms, the most outlandish and confusing combinations... Not to understand this concrete development of the world revolution, and to retrench behind schema of an ‘ideal’ world revolution, is to turn one’s back on the real movement in the name of a chimera, to push communism back from the level of science to that of utopia” (“Ten Theses”).

There was an ongoing, evolutionary-revolutionary, process. It no longer depended on the workers, at least not for now. Where democracy and every sort of self-determination or self-rule had been eliminated — not because to the neo-Trotskyists it was undesirable; but events had proved that for now it was inessential and unnecessary for the creation of this sort of workers’ state — so now too was the action of the working class itself. Even the action of revolutionary socialists substituting for the working class — which would itself be far from Marxism — was eliminated: in its place were peasant armies or the Russian army. For Trotsky the bureaucracy was a corrupt, usurping stop-gap locum: for neo-Trotskyists it came to be the prime agency.

The evolution-revolution was an ongoing, self-moving process, raised out from reality and abstracted from the actualities of Stalinist revolutions, which in true Third-Period, or religious prophet, style were merely phenomenal expressions of the Grand Design. This process was seen as something that moved as though “striving” teleologically towards some goal already determined. The “transition to socialism” was moving forward, and continuously, of its own momentum, taking many and varied forms and with varying types of protagonist. The ongoing World Revolution, as if impatient with delay, abstracted from actual revolutions. The actual revolutions were given the name of proletarian revolution, but in the old meanings of such words they were nameless and classless — manifestations of a process elevated into a shadowy historical actor, a spectre stalking the Earth.

This was ideologising the “historical process”, rationalising and prettifying reality, not Marxist analysis. A man like Ernest Mandel rationalised “the historical process”, including Stalinism as, earlier, Karl Kautsky had rationalised the doings of the dominant parliamentary and trade union leaders in German Social-Democracy. Natalia Sedova wrote bitter words when she broke with the new Fourth International:

“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 dehumanized brutes without a shred of socialist thought or spirit could have argued this way. Now, notwithstanding the revolutionary aims which animate you, you maintain that the despotic Stalinist reaction which has triumphed in Europe is one of the roads through which socialism will eventually come. This view marks an irremediable break with the profoundest convictions always held by our movement and which I continue to share.

“Most insupportable of all is the position on the war to which you have committed yourselves. The third world war which threatens humanity confronts the revolutionary movement with the most difficult problems, the most complex situations, the gravest decisions. Our position can be taken only after the most earnest and freest discussions. But in the face of all the events of recent years, you continue to advocate, and to pledge the entire movement, to the defense of the Stalinist state. You are even now supporting the armies of

Stalinism in the war which is being endured by the anguished Korean people. I cannot and will not follow you in this.

"I know very well how often you repeat that you are criticizing Stalinism and fighting it. But the fact is that your criticism and your fight lose their value and can yield no results because they are determined by and subordinated to your position of defense of the Stalinist state. Whoever defends this regime of barbarous oppression, regardless of the motives, abandons the principles of socialism and internationalism."

What might be called the peak experience the clearest possible proof that the picture painted here is not false or artificial, was the neo-Trotskyists' preparations for war. A Third World War was almost universally expected. Instead, the USSR developed an atom bomb, and the era in history characterised by a balance of nuclear terror began — though that is a view in hindsight. In June 1950 a proxy war began in Korea, when the Stalinist North invaded the South. World War seemed imminent — all-out, partially nuclear war. What did it mean for socialists? Basing themselves on the experience of Stalinist resistance movements in the Second World War, and on the militant discipline of the non-Russian Communist Parties, the apparatus of the Fourth International developed the following thesis: a Third World War will in fact trigger the European socialist revolution. The "Red Army" and the indigenous Communist Parties will conquer Europe and make that revolution. It will be a combined War-Revolution. Michel Pablo, who was by now the main international leader of the current, would speculate that this would lead to "centuries of deformed workers' states". What others feared as Armageddon, and what Trotsky, writing about the prospect of a world war after the Second World War, said would be "the grave of civilisation", was for these millenarians, now they had hitched themselves firmly to the Stalinist empire and its world-conquering mission, the socialist revolution. The Red Flag decorated with a picture of Trotsky in military uniform in front of a hammer and sickle, and the red flag waving behind the four horsemen of the Apocalypse — fire, famine, pestilence and war — would have properly emblematised this vision.

Michel Pablo explained in 1949: "The two notions of Revolution and of War, far from being opposed or distinguished as two markedly different stages of evolution, are brought closer and interlaced to the point of being merged in place and time. In their place, it is the notion of the Revolution-War, the War-Revolution, which emerges, and on which should be based the perspectives and the orientation of the revolutionary Marxists of our epoch.

"Such language may perhaps shock the lovers of dreams and 'pacifist' bluster, or those who are already lamenting the apocalyptic fate of the world which they foresee as following an atomic war or an expansion of Stalinism. But these sensitive hearts have no place among the militants, and especially among the revolutionary Marxist cadres of this epoch, the most terrible of all, where the sharpness of the class struggle has risen to its paroxysm. It is objective reality which pushes this dialectical complex of the Revolution-War to the first place, which implacably destroys 'pacifist' dreams, and which leaves no respite in the simultaneous gigantic deployment of the forces of the Revolution and of War, and their battle to the death...

"To the efforts of the bourgeoisie and of imperialism to mobilise the masses in their war against the USSR, the 'people's democracies', China, and the other Asiatic revolutions under way, and to crush the Communist Parties and the revolutionary movement of their respective countries, broad layers will

respond by revolt, open struggle, armed struggle, the new Resistance, but this time with an infinitely clearer class character. It is possible that on the basis of these mass reactions, and of the chaos and aggravation that such a war would rapidly create, different Communist Parties will see themselves obliged to undertake, pushed by the masses, pushed by their own base, a struggle which would go beyond the soviet bureaucracy's own objectives.

"Such a war, far from stopping the struggle which is currently going on to the disadvantage of imperialism, would intensify it and bring it to its paroxysm. It would shatter all balance, pulling all forces into the struggle, accelerating the process which has already begun namely that of the convulsive transformation of our society, which will only subside with the triumph of international socialism. The fate of Stalinism will be decided precisely in this period of gigantic overturns.

"People who despair of the fate of humanity because Stalinism survives and even wins victories are cutting down History to their measure. They had wished that the whole process of transformation of capitalist society into socialism should be accomplished in the span of their short lives, so that they could be rewarded for their efforts for the Revolution. As for us, we reaffirm what we wrote in the first article we devoted to the Yugoslav affair: This transformation will probably take a whole historical period of some centuries, which will be filled in the meantime with transitional forms and regimes between capitalism and socialism, necessarily distanced from 'pure' forms and norms...

"Those who think they can respond to the anxiety and the embarrassment of some people at the so-called victories of Stalinism by minimising the objectively revolutionary significance of these facts are obliged to take refuge in a sectarianism, anti-Stalinist at all costs, which scarcely conceals under its aggressive appearance its lack of confidence in the fundamental revolutionary process of our epoch. This process is the most certain pledge for the inevitable final defeat of Stalinism, and it will be realised all the more rapidly, the quicker the overthrow of capitalism and of imperialism progresses and gains a bigger and bigger part of the world". ("Where Are We Going?")

Pablo restated the perspective in a pamphlet of August 1952, "The Coming War". The war would be "that of united imperialism, led by Washington, against the Revolution in all its forms... The forces which threaten the capitalist regime are... those of the Revolution in all its forms: the non-capitalist states, the colonial revolution, the international revolutionary movement. In all these elements is expressed... directly or indirectly, in more or less clear and conscious forms, the fundamental, objective process of the world socialist Revolution of our century".

This drum-tight vision of apocalyptic Stalinist-led world revolution would change as tension relaxed in 1953 and after, and the world settled into the long years of nuclear stalemate. The method of relying on forces other than the working class would not change, though the forces would change and proliferate. The pattern has been set out, and there is no point in tracing it further. The number of permutations it produced is immense.

XI. THE 1953 SPLIT

ONE BREAK IN the pattern, which created its own kaleidoscopic variations, remains to be indicated. Against the logical drift there would be recoil. The Pablo-Mandel current itself would recoil from the wild speculations of 1949-52. These were sincere socialists and anti-Stalinists, however inadequate their ideas seem with hindsight. The most important recoil was that of James P Cannon.

In 1953 he led a split in the Fourth International — the mono-factional and very shrunken rump that had in effect refounded itself as a different movement in mid-1951 at the so-called “Third World Congress”. It was an utterly incoherent recoil, which kept all the basic ideas of the 1951 congress but demanded more emphasis on the building of Trotskyist parties. Cannon, who had pioneered millenarianism in the 1940s, reshaped the Fourth International after the war, and erected the “world leaders”, now recoiled from them. 1953 was an incoherent and hysterical lurch towards what had been “Shachtmanism” in the early 1940s — the emphasis on the centrality of building Trotskyist parties. But Cannon and his comrades were held as by a chain to over a decade of confused history that had culminated in the “Third World Congress”.

In his own way, incoherently, Cannon tried to do what Shachtman and his comrades had begun to do in 1939. There is evidence that Cannon thought he could “lift his finger” and Pablo would fall. Cannon was mistaken. The significance of Cannon’s break (joined by groups in Britain and France) is that all coherence was lost.

Like ripples spreading out from a stone dropped in still water, the reverberations spread. Groups proliferated, some quite mad. A useful distinction in sorting out these groups is between people honestly trying to understand the world and trying to function politically — and both Cannon and his opponents in 1953 were that — and the charlatans. An increasingly conspicuous section of the neo-Trotskyist movement consisted of charlatans, groups like the French “Lambertists”, the later British “Healyites”, the Morenists in Latin America — people who would say or do anything for catchpenny advantage, for whom the old idea that the political programme builds the party had been inverted and for whom the exigencies of party-building dictated politics and “programme”.

XII. CONCLUSION: THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO AND TROTSKYISM

“History does nothing; it ‘possesses no immense wealth’, it ‘wages no battles’. It is man, real living man, that does all that, that possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not a person apart, using man as a means for its own particular aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.” Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*.

TROTSKY TRIED TO make sense of the bureaucratic-collectivist Stalinist society in terms of classical Marxism and the 1917 Bolshevik version of those ideas. His tardiness in drawing the sharp and clear conclusions which can be seen now as necessary wreaked havoc with the Marxism he set out to defend.

40. It was 1969 before the Mandel Fourth International came out for a “political revolution” in Mao’s China.

He was forced to follow in the steps of Stalinism, putting his own gloss on events while critically accommodating to the brute reality of the USSR. In Trotskyism and then neo-Trotskyism there was a transformation, often out of recognition, of the ideas and language of Marxism. Throughout the 1930s, Trotsky stretched and adapted the old Bolshevik and Marxist ideas and terminology to accommodate the new things, adding qualifying adjectives and using terms with implied quote-marks, such as “caste” for the USSR’s rulers. Beyond very narrow limits, such a procedure could not but corrupt meaning and confuse definition. By the end it had become a scholastic game or even a form of juggling with words akin to word magic and superstition. For example, what more than superstition was the idea that to hold back from giving the USSR bureaucracy a name — ruling class — implied in all Trotsky’s concrete descriptions of its reality would somehow ward off the disturbing implications of that reality for the old Marxist schemes of history?

The toll taken by this attempt to “save the old theory” was that the meanings of most of the terms of that theory were changed. For example, “defence of the USSR” against a small non-imperialist nation, in the USSR-Finnish war, the “defence” that led anti-Stalinists to back those whom Trotsky had called “the rapists in the Kremlin” in their attempt to take over Finland, was not the same thing as the old “defence of the USSR against imperialist attack”.

Within the old terminology, there took place what in other fields has been called a “shift of paradigm”. This happened again and again as events shunted brutally into each and every one of Trotsky’s theoretical positions on Stalinism, pushing them off what had seemed solid ground. Trotsky was working within a false theoretical frame from as early as the mid-1920s, when he saw the Stalinist “centre” as a minor threat compared to the Bukharinite “right wing”. Trotsky’s frame and the impact of reality on it combined to create doctrinal havoc with the very basics of communism. It was not enough that Trotsky conscientiously restated those basics from time to time. The fact that Stalinist society, calling itself socialist, was misidentified by its most bitter critics as a workers’ state, inevitably debased the meaning of all the key words involved.

There was a further infusion of new meanings into old words as Stalinism spread after 1944. This process in Trotskyism paralleled what Stalinism did to Marxism and represented a degree of ideological conquest by Stalinism of its most consistent critics. By around 1950, neo-Trotskyism had stood on its head the Communist Manifesto and its basic ideas, that is, the foundation of Marxism as it was in 1917.

1) Marx and Engels made socialism “scientific” by converting it from a moral scheme, counterposed to capitalism, into a logical, although revolutionary, dialectical development from material preconditions created by capitalism. In neo-Trotskyism (that is, mainstream revolutionary socialism, for a whole era) a pre-Marxist sectarian rejection of capitalism on a world scale, and an identification with Stalinist states as a progressive alternative (because they were anti-capitalist), had replaced this idea of the relationship of capitalism to socialism.

The idea that capitalism (and even on some levels imperialism) is progressive was excised from Marxism. So was the idea that to reject and negate the progressive work of capitalism (technology, bourgeois civilisation, the creation of the working class) is sectarian and backward-looking. Marxists reverted to the spirit of those who in the mid-nineteenth century wanted to

go backwards from industrialism and of those against whom Lenin polemicalised for their “petty-bourgeois” desire to unscramble imperialist concentrations of industry back to an earlier stage of capitalism.

The neo-Trotskyist idea that the Stalinist states were “in transition to socialism”, following in the tracks of Stalin’s “socialism in one country”, turned elementary Marxism on its head. The “movement” was from the periphery to the centre. This was the politics of Marx’s anarchist-populist opponent Mikhail Bakunin, not of Marx himself, or Lenin or Trotsky. Even reactionary alternatives to capitalism, and not Stalinist ones alone, were seen as progressive, even though they destroyed the fruits of world civilisation since the Renaissance. World history was seen teleologically as a process with an outcome — world socialism — mechanically fixed in advance, irrespective of what living women and men did or failed to do.

2) The patently false notion that capitalism had reached its historic end was used in the spirit of utopian socialists who felt they had discovered “the last word”. That Stalinism was replacing capitalism was supposedly proof of this proposition.

Acceptance of the mid-nineteenth century idea of socialist colony-building, which would compete with advanced capitalism and replace it, was at the heart of post-1951 “Third World Congress” neo-Trotskyism — acceptance of Stalinism as representing a viable “transition to socialism”, albeit one that would eventually need drastic working-class reform, or even “political revolution”, to perfect it.

3) The idea that the proletarian revolution is made by the proletariat and cannot be made for them had been displaced by the idea of a locum acting to create, if not socialism, then the first decisive step towards socialism — the creation of a “workers’ state”. Working class rule was seen to inhere in the forms of bureaucratically nationalised property. A totalitarian economism — a fetish of nationalised economy, separated off from all the social and political conditions that might give it a working class socialist character — was substituted for the traditional politics of Marxism.

Actual working-class political rule — “to win the battle for democracy and make the workers the ruling class”, as the Communist Manifesto put it — was pushed to the margins and relegated to the future by the ongoing “revolutionary process” that was spreading worker-enslaving and labour-movement-destroying “workers’ states” across the globe. That “process” was the first and immediate stage of the socialist revolution. Workers’ rule would be a second and subsequent stage.

The old communist centrality of democracy — even during the dictatorship of the proletariat — went. Democracy was a desirable extra. It could be done without in the “workers’ revolution”, at least in the first and immediate stage.

The idea of socialist revolution was detached from Marx’s notion of the organised, self-aware working class as the force that could make it, and reduced to millenarianism, the hope for a superhuman agent of liberation. Marxists became millenarians scanning the horizon for the revolutionary agency. Again, Stalinism was central; it was the prototype of the non-proletarian force which nonetheless, through a perverse twist of history, becomes the agent of proletarian progress.

4) Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto saw the development of the organised, conscious communist political party as integrally interlinked with the self-development of the whole working class. The communists

would “represent the future of the movement in the movement of the present”. This was replaced by the notion of a “party” self-defined by the possession of an esoteric doctrine and revelation. The Marxists were those who could see the hidden and secret process leading to a socialist future within the horrors of Stalinism. Having once discovered that truth, their job was primarily to gain enough forces, anyhow, to present themselves as “the leadership” to the elemental working-class revolt guaranteed by the decay of capitalism.

Neo-Trotskyism, rationalising from Stalinist reality and building its “revolutionary perspectives” around it, regressed back behind the political level attained in 1848 at the dawn of Marxism.

4. max Shachtman and james p Cannon

I. MAX SHACHTMAN

THE AUTHOR OF most of the material in this volume is Max Shachtman. His texts champion the Russian Revolution and revolutionary socialist politics with incomparable verve. Through most of the 1930s Max Shachtman had played a role second only to Trotsky in propagating revolutionary Marxism. But by the time he died in 1972 he had moved far from such politics. Sometime in the later 1950s Shachtman became convinced that revolutionary politics in the USA were not “operational” in the foreseeable future.

Like the Workers Party, which he and others founded in 1940 after breaking with Trotsky over Russia, and its successor the Independent Socialist League, Shachtman believed it to be his duty to help the American working class develop a mass political party, of the sort the British Labour Party then was, but with better politics. In 1958 the ISL liquidated itself into the tiny Socialist Party, and soon Shachtman and his friends controlled that party. The Democratic Party, since Roosevelt, had had the active support of most of the trade union movement. Soon the Socialist Party was working in the broad Democratic Party for a strategy devised by Shachtman: they would take the American working class a giant stride forward in politics, by transforming the Democratic Party into a labour-controlled party, in effect a Labour Party. How? The racist southern Democrats, whose affiliation to the Democratic Party dated back to the Civil War, would be hived off. Shachtman became a sort of operational Fabian, working behind the scenes to manipulate developments in the trade unions and the Democratic Party in the direction he thought would best serve the next stage of working-class development on the road to a socialist consciousness. In this guise of American Fabian, Shachtman helped organise the civil rights movement.

He had at the beginning described this Democratic Party realignment strategy as “foul and discreditable work”, but necessary. In pursuit of an “opening to the right” which dominated the labour movement, he himself moved on to the right wing’s political terrain. How much was initially a pedagogical adaptation, I do not know. He worked with the existing trade union leaders, whom he had once justly described as agents of the ruling class — the labour lieutenants of capital.

In an exact replication of the fate of the USA’s “Right Communist” grouping of the 1930s, headed by Jay Lovestone, many of Shachtman’s supporters became part of the trade union bureaucracy. Shachtman ceased to believe in a “Third Camp” of the working class and oppressed people throughout the world, and opted — like the “orthodox” Trotskyists, only on the other side — for one of the two great camps in the world. He chose the camp led by the USA.

Like the working class itself, as a revolutionary political force, the “Third Camp” existed only as a potential, as something to be won, worked for, propagandised about, wrought in the class struggle. Shachtman had insisted on that against those who felt impelled to stand, with however critical a demeanour, in Stalin’s camp. After the crushing of the Hungarian rising by

Russian tanks in 1956, increasingly Shachtman gave up on it. He accepted liberal capitalism as a “lesser evil” to Stalinism. He believed that the imposition of Stalinist regimes, which would stifle and destroy the labour movement and democratic freedoms won over decades and centuries, as Stalinism did everywhere it ruled, was to be resisted, on pain of death for the labour movement — resisted, even in alliance with liberal bourgeois and American imperialist forces.

ii

In the post-war world where the USSR was the second great global power, recognition that the USA and Western Europe — advanced capitalism — was the more progressive of the contending camps, the one which gave richer possibilities, greater freedom, more for socialists to build on, was, I believe, a necessary part of the restoration of Marxist balance to socialist politics. It was a pre-requisite for the reconstruction of Marxism after the systematic destruction of concepts over a whole period. That destruction began with the early 1920s conversion of Bolshevik civil-war exigencies into revolutionary law and culminated in the final ideological convulsions of Trotsky. But reconciliation with capitalism in the manner of Shachtman in his last years was no necessary part of it, any more than it was for Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* when he rejected the “reactionary socialists”. Marx was able to analyse the progressive work of British rule in India while also opposing it; Lenin could write “Can anyone in his senses deny that Bismarckian Germany and her social laws are “better” than Germany before 1848?... Did the German Social Democrats ... vote for Bismarck’s reforms on these grounds?”.

For Marx, for Lenin, and for the classical Marxists, to recognise something as “objectively” progressive did not at all necessarily entail supporting it or endorsing it politically; their task, as they saw it, was to educate, organise and mobilise the working class and to help it to utilise its opportunities — not to promote progress in general in abstraction from the class struggle.

Thus the idea of defending even bourgeois liberty against Stalinism, which was an international extension of the tacit alliance revolutionaries might enter into with liberal bourgeois forces against threatening reaction, did not necessarily imply surrender of working-class independence, or demand of revolutionary socialists that they should commit *hara-kiri* for its sake.

Shachtman drew conclusions he had never drawn in the fight against fascism. He joined the democratic capitalist camp. At the time (1962) of the CIA-backed Cuban émigré invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, Shachtman broke with those of his comrades, Hal Draper and Phyllis and Julius Jacobson, and others who would continue to stand on Workers Party and ISL politics. Shachtman thought that a Stalinist Cuba, where no real labour movement could exist, was the greater evil, and backed the invaders.

Shachtman’s hopes for the development of the Democratic Party into a party controlled by the labour movement floundered as Lyndon B Johnson’s America got drawn deeper and deeper into war in Indochina — a war of mechanised slaughter wreaked from the air indiscriminately on Vietnam and Cambodia. Shachtman believed that only behind the bulwark against Stalinism which the USA thus provided could the forces that would resist Stalinism on the basis of progressive politics and democracy be given a chance to emerge. He backed the USA.

He died of a heart attack on 4 November 1972, as the USA was preparing to “bomb Cambodia into the Stone Age” — which it did, leaving the ultra-Stalinist Khmer Rouge as murdering kings of the ruins. The folly of relying on US imperialism against Stalinism could not have been more horribly proven. At his end Shachtman stood as a negative example of the need for the politics he had defended for four decades — socialist, working-class independent politics. Yet his writings continue to stand as an immensely valuable positive embodiment of such politics.

iii

IT IS only from the point of view of the so-called “Third Camp” — that is, of the consistently independent working-class politics which he did so much in his time to clarify and defend — that Shachtman can properly be evaluated or justly condemned. Those who opted for Stalinism, however critically, as a progressive anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist force, were Shachtman’s mirror image, only in the other “camp”. Those who supported Vietnamese self-determination against the USA were right to do so, but many of us too blithely dismissed the concerns that led Shachtman to his “foul and discreditable” course because, in the last analysis, we accepted that Stalinism, the force, for now, fighting imperialism in Indo-China, was also progressively anti-capitalist.

Nor were Shachtman’s machinations to find a road forwards for the mass labour movement necessarily discreditable. Even if one thinks the strategy for turning the Democratic Party into a labour party unlikely to succeed, or simply fantastic, and the techniques employed by Max Shachtman and his friends to help engineer it suicidal for socialists, it does not follow that dawdling in sectarian aloofness — still less doing that while basking in imaginary reflected glory from foreign Stalinist dictatorships — is thereby certified to be the best socialist politics. Shachtman’s efforts to avoid relegation to the role of passive propagandist have merit, even if one emphatically disagrees with his actions. Nonetheless, Shachtman at the end was deeply mired in conventional American dirty bourgeois politics.

The man who had with some justification denounced James P Cannon’s conception of the revolutionary party as owing too much to conventional American machine “boss” politics, died in the company of the real machine-politics “bosses”. His section of the Socialist Party in effect supported Richard Nixon in the election that was held a week after Shachtman’s death.

This end to Shachtman’s political life must for socialists cast a dark shadow on his memory. There are those eager to make sure it does, who use it to discredit his ideas and his struggle in the ‘40s and ‘50s for rational revolutionary working-class politics — that is, to develop the real heritage of Trotsky. It is not so simple or straightforward. The position of Hal Draper and his comrades, their resistance to Shachtman’s course, and their break with him would alone refute the canard that Shachtman’s end was implied in his differences with Trotsky.

Shachtman, when he took himself into the camp of American imperialism, did not take his life’s work with him. He could not. Against his future self, he had laid down immense barriers of passionate reason, unanswerable logic, truthful history, righteous contempt for turncoats and fainthearts and scorn for those who in middle age make peace with the capitalism on which in their

braver youth they had declared war to the death. Shachtman's "Third Camp" writings are the best commentary on, and the best condemnation of, Shachtman at the end. Those writings, and the writings of Shachtman's comrades, are an important, indeed a unique part of the capital of revolutionary socialism. Arguably — I would so argue — they are the lineal defence, elaboration and continuation of Trotsky's ideas, that is of unfalsified Marxism, as they really were and as they really were developing at Trotsky's death. These writings are a precious part of the heritage of revolutionary socialism: in the post-Stalinist world they are no small part of the seed from which an unfalsified socialism will be reborn.

There are parallels. Lenin advocated that the literary remains of George Plekhanov should be kept in print and studied by socialists. Plekhanov, one of the greatest and the first of Russian Marxists, had backed the Russian Tsar's war in 1914-18.

Lenin also advocated that the pre-World War One work of Karl Kautsky should be treated in the same way. So should Shachtman and his work.

Isn't it to aggrandise Shachtman and his comrades too much to bracket them with Plekhanov and Kautsky? On the contrary, it is to risk understating their importance. Plekhanov and Kautsky were very talented and accomplished participants in a large school. The group of which Shachtman was the political leader and the outstanding writer were the rearguard of an overthrown and ruined political civilisation, which they worked to preserve and restore. It was a political world in which Stalinism fostered amnesia, charlatanism, spiritual darkness, a world in which socialism was eclipsed by vile fraudulence and the old socialist movement had been engulfed by political barbarism. Shachtman and his comrades kept alive Marxist method, culture, political memory, and the aspiration to working-class liberty in that age of political barbarism. Even their nearest brothers and sisters, the "orthodox" Trotskyists, who, despite their faults and inadequacies, had great merit of their own, were infected and tainted by the forces dominant in the labour movement during the Stalinist dark age.

Neither Plekhanov nor Kautsky was irreplaceable in his time: there were others as good or better and a large movement from which they could be expected to emerge. The work Shachtman and his friends did was irreplaceable in their time and place. No-one else did it. They were part of no big school of thought. They had to resist the gravitational pull of the far more numerous forces of "official" Trotskyism, itself caught in the gravitational pull of "Communism", in order to do their work. Most who called themselves Trotskyists misrepresented them then, and have since tried to obliterate the memory of the work Shachtman and his comrades did. Making these writings accessible is a necessary part of rebuilding socialism in our time.

Nor are the literary remains of Shachtman tainted, except in the eyes of those who want them to be tainted, by his political end: it was not in his power to taint them. As far as I know Shachtman made no serious attempt to repudiate his earlier work.

The small prefaces he wrote in his later years to editions of Trotsky's books put out by the Ann Arbor Press — *Terrorism and Communism* and *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* — make criticisms of the Bolsheviks no more stringent, though one-sidedly put, than what he said (I think justly) in "The Mistakes of the Bolsheviks" in November 1943 (chapter 1 of this book).

IN THE NATURE of things revolutionary politics is generally a young person's game. Hope wells; reality is perceived raw; indignation is untempered by the sense of powerlessness and resignation; sensibility is uncalled, raw human responses uncowed, courage naive and unchastened by fear of consequences or a sense of its own insufficiency.

Age and experience cow, make callous, teach resignation. They impress the painful cost of banging yourself against walls that for now may be impregnable, of pitting yourself against things you cannot soon change, of forgoing the sustaining and comforting community of the acquiescent; of living with a raw sharp awareness, like a nail in your shoe, that ours is a world of iniquity and intolerable injustice — the world which, yet, even when you struggle to change it, you must live in. The sense of powerlessness replaces the youthful idea that anything is possible. Vulnerability replaces the youthful sense of indestructibility. The brutal foreshortening with age of personal time and perspective dims or blots out the longer perspective of a collective socialist struggle. That is especially so when that struggle against capitalism and for socialism is narrowed down to maintaining a small group of socialists now and preparing the future. Then especially, the sense of personal impermanence and weakening infects and saps the idea of an ongoing struggle. The desire to achieve something becomes seductive and warps and replaces the fresh, clean, young sense of what is *necessary* and worth striving to achieve, whatever the cost and however long the struggle. The long view and the overview give way to shorter, discrete, unintegrated views. Impatience breeds opportunism and induces indifference to the seemingly less immediate concerns. The business of achieving a little bit now displaces the old goal, or pushes it beyond the horizon. So it must have been with Max Shachtman, who in addition saw the world threatened with engulfment by Stalinist barbarism.

Julius Jacobson, a long-time associate of Max Shachtman's before 1961, wrote in an obituary of Shachtman in *New Politics* that, by the end, it was an abuse of language to call him a socialist at all.

Yet there is continuity, despite the waning and attrition of individuals. There is a movement, whether a great mass movement or a faltering and struggling cluster of little groups. There is an accumulation of texts and literature and ideas that, once created, once put into circulation, are independent of the mind and the personality in which they originated and of the fate of that individual. Though individuals backslide, grow old and tired, or cowardly or corrupt, they cannot always undo what they did, unwrite what they wrote, erase the criticisms they made of class society, dim the socialist vision they conjured up, even though it has now grown dim for them — nor can they snuff out the activities of those they won and inspired and set to work to win others to the old ideals. Capitalist society has at root not changed even if its old critic has. And so it is with Max Shachtman, as with Karl Kautsky, as with George Plekhanov and many others.

That it is so with Shachtman is of tremendous importance. For Shachtman with his comrades, bore, for almost two decades, the main burden of ensuring the continuity of socialism. They knew themselves to be the survivors of a subverted socialist civilisation that had almost vanished; and they knew that it could eventually be recreated by the will, energy and dedication of socialists like themselves, acting in accord with the inner logic of history and

basing themselves on the struggles of the working class. In that sense, Max Shachtman remains a great force for socialism.

II. JAMES P CANNON

IN MANY OF the polemics in this volume, J P Cannon is not only antagonist but villain: he is what Shachtman is to the “orthodox” Trotskyists. Lucifer, Satan. Since Cannon did more than anyone else to determine the fate of the “official” Trotskyists — those who stood with Trotsky in '39-'40 — there is, I think, some justice in this. Nonetheless, it is one-sided, inadequate and essentially unfair.

Cannon was no villain. He was and remained a Marxist working with ideas on Stalinism he took from Trotsky, and conceptions of socialist organisation that proved wrong or inadequate. He insisted on calling himself an “agitator”, indicating perhaps a too modest conception of his own capacities; at the same time he had too much confidence and too much self-assurance that he knew what was what in the field of socialist organisation — and far too much assurance that it could be sufficient.

Cannon would, according to Shachtman, say to his intimates that he was a Trotskyist in his politics but a “Leninist” in organisation. Shachtman plausibly argued that Cannon’s organisational notions had been shaped by the mid-'20s Zinoviev-led Communist International.

The factional battle in 1939-40, and Trotsky’s death, left Cannon the undisputed leader of the biggest Trotskyist organisation, and the one around which the FI would regroup at the end of the war. To Cannon and those he could find for the work fell the task, if they could do it, of liquidating Trotsky’s political errors and repairing his tardiness in re-evaluating the USSR.

But Cannon was tied as by an iron shackle to the logic of the locum workers’ state that would remain a comparatively progressive force no matter what it did so long as the economy remained nationalised. In response to the World War experience of Stalinism, he might have chosen to follow through on Trotsky’s 1939 — and his own — indication of the need to revise the whole position: he chose instead to follow the logic of “totalitarian economism” through to the end. Possibly, he was a late casualty of the '39-'40 faction fight: he had spent too much energy denouncing the indicated changes as criminal “revisionism” and betrayal of “the programme of the FI” to find it easy work.

The continuing competitive struggle with the “Shachtmanite” Workers Party did not make it easier. There is perhaps a suggestion of relief in the way in which Cannon in late '41 seems to have accepted that the destruction of the USSR had virtually been accomplished. There can be no doubt that Cannon hated and taught others [the writer, for example] to hate Stalinism. But ultimately, Cannon chose to tie himself and those for whom he had the authority of guardian of Trotsky’s legacy, to “progressive” Stalinism; he chose to freeze the movement politically and theoretically at the point Trotsky died. He used his authority after the war to “appoint” and back official theoreticians who extrapolated and developed in a scholastic spirit socialist perspectives from the existence of the anti-capitalist Russian Stalinist empire and the new autonomous Stalinist states such as China.

He reconstructed the FI (after the close of discussion in the three-year tran-

sitional period after 1945) as a mono-tendency sect around the frozen Trotsky of 1940, in a world that had not remained frozen. Cannon played little traceable part in the theoretical re-evaluation after 1945. He could not have done worse than those he licensed and endorsed.

The Catholic Church is a mutated piece of the bureaucracy of the later Roman Empire, that has floated down to our time through a number of different types of society; the typical “official” Trotskyist organisations shaped and influenced by Cannon’s organisational conceptions can be seen collectively as a fragment of the mid-20s Zinovievist Communist International. Even where comparatively sizeable organisations have been built, they have been politically sterile.

5. TROTSKY AND THE FUTURE of socialism

“To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one’s programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives — these are the rules”.
Leon Trotsky

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION showed for all time what the working class is capable of achieving, what working-class socialists, democratically organised and clear-headed, can do. It proved that the idea of working-class socialism is no chimera.

But the real October has been buried for decades, first under the foundation stones of the autocratic Stalinist system and now under the ruins of Stalinism. Together with other bankrupt Stalinist stock, the bourgeois victors have taken over Stalinism’s great lie — one of the most poisonous lies of the twentieth century — that Stalinism was Bolshevism. In the war of ideas, the ghost of Stalin is enlisted now on the bourgeois side, still insisting that Stalinism was Bolshevism.

The bourgeoisie proclaim that history has ended and that they are the victors. But do they believe it themselves? Marxist socialism is the conscious expression of the underlying unconscious processes of history. Those processes go on. Whatever the fond ideologues of capitalism say, the laws of capitalism uncovered by Marx have not been suspended or superseded. The class struggle goes on: it is ineradicable.

Despite the triumphant crowing of the bourgeoisie, socialism now and in the period ahead has a better chance of being revived than at any time in 75 years. Stalinism as a force in the working-class movement is dead! Socialism is rooted in capitalism itself: in the beginning of socialism is the critique of capitalism from the point of view of its exploited victims, the working class. The bourgeois claim to have killed socialism is the claim to have frozen history. No-one can do that. All the contradictions of capital remain. The bourgeoisie must abolish the class struggle before it can eliminate socialism. It can’t.

The bourgeoisie have won the long cold war with their Stalinist competitors.

But capital has, in Stalinism, merely seen off a backward, inestimably more primitive competitor. *Their ideological victory over "socialism" is an imaginary victory.*

The texts in this book establish what the real relationship of unfalsified socialism and historical Bolshevism was to Stalinism, and therefore what value is to be placed on the capitalist version of the old Stalinist myths and lies — right now, the lie that Stalinism was socialism, and that socialism died with the collapse of the USSR.

Class struggle is ineradicable because the working class is ineradicable. It is the law of life of capitalist society, because capitalism cannot do without the proletariat. Capitalism repeatedly revolutionises technology and the organisation of production. Thereby it changes the proletariat. It disrupts working-class organisations by technological change and by blows in the class struggle. But the labour movement too revives, reorganises, redefines itself. The handloom weavers and others who made the first mass labour movement, The Chartists in the 1830s and 40s, were no longer a social force when the modern labour movement was created. The working class, renewed, changed, augmented, was. The exploitation of labour by capital — the basic cell of capitalist society — continues generating class struggle and self-renewing labour movements. It will continue until the working class abolishes capitalism.

ii

Marxists criticise the waste, the irrationality and the savage inhumanity of capitalism, but at the same time see capitalism as the necessary forerunner of socialism. That, not that capitalism is vindicated, is the proper conclusion from the experience of the defeat of the Russian Revolution and of the collapse of the society set up by its Stalinist gravediggers, who tried in their own way and for their own reasons to "by-pass" and "dispense with" capitalism.

Capitalism has not ceased to be irrational and inhuman, nor have market mechanisms ceased to be blind and wasteful, just because of the failure of the Stalinist experiment in "state socialism". Wage slavery and exploitation have not ceased to be at the heart and root of capitalism. *Millions of poor children die needlessly under this system every year.* In the United States, the richest capitalist country in the world, thousands of people sleep on the streets, or get a living only through the drug trade. Third World slum conditions exist side by side with obscene opulence in its leading cities. In Latin America unemployment runs at 40% in many cities. Cocaine gangsters rule huge areas. Malnutrition and even starvation are widespread. That Stalinism's "authoritarian state socialism" failed to bypass capitalism and emerge as a historical alternative to it does not mean that socialism has ceased to be the answer to capitalism!

Stalinism was an experience on the fringes of world capitalism, arising out of the defeat of a working class revolution, and stifling under its own contradictory bureaucratic regime. Stalinism was part of the pre-history humankind must grow beyond. So, still, is capitalism!

The idea that only the market system of the West can be the basis for democracy is the idea that only wage slavery for the masses together with the phenomenal concentration of wealth — and therefore power — at the top of society can be the basis of democracy! It is a prize example of the crazy logic

satirised by George Orwell according to which war is peace and lies are truth. It has a lot in common with the old Stalinist habit of asserting that black was white, truth was lies, bureaucratic tyranny was socialism.

Even such democracy as we have in the West owes its existence to decades and centuries of struggle by the working people. Democracy in capitalism is limited, imperfect, and frequently not very stable. Mass self-rule by the producers, dominated neither by a bureaucratic state monopoly nor by the economic rule of the multimillionaires and their officials, is a better form of democracy. It is democracy worth the name. It is socialist democracy.

The model of socialism restored to its proper shape and colour by the disintegration of Stalinism and the open disavowal of socialism by the Stalinists is the only model of socialism that ever deserved the name — the fight to organise the working class as a clear conscious force, a class for itself, to break bourgeois state power and abolish wage slavery. “To raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy... to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organised as the ruling class... In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”. *The Communist Manifesto*

Socialism will revive as a mass force. The only questions are what sort of socialism, and how soon will it revive? And how free will it be from the defects that have rendered it a nullity or worse for most of the twentieth century — since the crushing of the Bolshevik Revolution in the 20s? That depends to a considerable extent on the socialists themselves, on what they do. That in turn depends greatly on how we come to terms with the twentieth century experience of socialism.

In the 1880s in Britain less than 200 socialist pioneers set to work to win over the working class, to expand the labour movement and transform it into a *socialist* workers’ movement. Their inadequacies need not detain us here. Work like that will be done again: and we start on a very much higher level, with a mass trade union movement. Here tradition is very important. Tradition is our collective memory. The Marxists are the memory of the working class. The historical memory of a class is worked and reworked; learned from or forgotten, lost and regained, relearned and reinterpreted, and put to work as part of the political capital of the movement. Much depends on the socialists. Not “history”, or “capitalist crisis”, nor any mechanical agency will do it, but living, conscious, determined, remembering people.

iii

This book is a relentless criticism of the “Trotskyist” tradition that for decades has in a hundred permutations been the most widespread variant of revolutionary socialism. *It is criticism from within that current.* A large part of the introduction is a systematic criticism of Trotsky’s thought on the USSR all through the 1930s: but it is *Trotskyist* criticism of Leon Trotsky, and it is, I hope, loyal criticism in the spirit of Trotsky himself. The publishers of this book are proud to name themselves in politics with Trotsky’s name. However, we refuse to mistake piety for political rigour or mimicry and mummery for fidelity to Trotsky. Trotsky mimicked no-one; and he had the contempt of a reasoning human being for all mummery and all mumbo-jumbo. Trotsky

made grievous mistakes on the USSR. In the light of history this is indisputable. The serious Trotskyists are those who critically apply themselves to rectifying and renewing the ideological fabric with the help of which a renewed mass revolutionary socialist movement will be built. That demands a critical, and self-critical, appraisal of the history of socialism.

Trotsky once asked rhetorically: What do we do when the “good old books” fail to give the necessary answers? *Try to manage with one’s own head!*

After Trotsky’s death, his mistakes on the USSR were frozen in the work of pious but uncomprehending or irresponsible disciples into something inimical to his whole spirit. Trotsky was thereby lost.

The real Trotsky was both the hero of the workers’ victory and the embodiment of the Russian workers’ resistance to the Stalinist counter-revolution. He is not only the Trotsky but also the Spartacus and the Blanqui of the twentieth century. Trotsky personified a whole epoch of proletarian culture, tradition, experience, and unbreakable belief in the rational and humanist traditions of Marxism and of the proletariat.

Trotsky has come to symbolise and personify revolutionary communism itself, the elemental drive for freedom of the slaves of capitalist class society.

Trotsky’s writings embody the lesson of working-class struggles that ended in unprecedented victory, and of struggles that ended in catastrophic defeat. Trotsky’s writings constitute our best link with the Russian Revolution and the early Comintern: here Trotsky is the Buonorotti of the twentieth century, the passer on of great tradition, the link between the past and its future renewal on a higher level. His writings, mistakes on the USSR aside, embody the lessons of the greatest struggles in working-class history. They are an irreplaceable part of the political, theoretical and moral resource of extant socialism.

But Trotsky’s legacy will necessarily have to be assimilated critically, and reworked in the light of new experiences and new realities — just as Trotsky himself reworked and developed the heritage of his teachers, as, for example, on the theory of permanent revolution. He can *only* be reappropriated critically. Trotsky, rescued from the posthumous captivity in which for so long he has been imprisoned by well-meaning disciples, offers guidance, tradition and an incomparable example. He cannot think for socialists today, but he can help us learn to think better for ourselves. Not misplaced piety — loyal Marxist criticism!

It is in this spirit and to contribute to that work that people who think of themselves as Trotsky’s people have subjected Trotsky’s writings on the USSR to severe criticism. Trotsky is infinitely more than his mistakes.

iv

History is unending struggle — economic, political and ideological. The truth of history is on the side of socialism. This volume will, we hope, make that clearer. That the bourgeoisie should now be triumphant is natural. It is shortsighted. All around the globe, wherever capitalism has created a modern economy it has raised up a militant working class — in Korea and Indonesia, for example. Even when most successful, capitalism only creates its own gravediggers. The paths of capitalist glory lead but to the grave! Class war goes on.

What socialists do in this war can be decisive. What they are able to do

depends on how they see the world, how they come to terms with the past, how well they resist the pressure of the conservative anti-socialist classes — in short, how they fare in the battle of ideas. The ideas in this book are a contribution to that battle.

6. The purpose of this collection

THIS COLLECTION HAS a number of purposes. We aim to put into circulation certain key documents of revolutionary Marxism, long lost to anyone not prepared to rummage in libraries, and unavailable even in most good libraries. Though some of the publications in which these texts first appeared had a small circulation in Britain and Ireland, even the most important of them, such as "Is Russia a Workers' State?", were never printed or given any decent circulation here. Neither was Shachtman's collection of articles *The Bureaucratic Revolution*, (1962). Without being too fanciful, and indulging in no more than a little permissible exaggeration, one could call these documents the Dead Sea Scrolls of 20th century revolutionary Marxism.

We want to provide an approach to the real history of Trotskyism, that is, of unfalsified Bolshevism and Marxism, and its post-Trotsky mutations; to give as comprehensive as possible an account of the dissident Trotskyists who continued along the basic lines indicated by Trotsky in "The USSR in War", and the trajectory of his concrete descriptions and political responses to the USSR, from "The Theory of Degeneration" (1933) to "The Comintern and the GPU" (1940). We want to put these texts into the living stream of a reviving left, one of whose pre-requisites is a proper coming to terms with the experience of the Russian Revolution and its gravedigger, Stalin, and with its own real political history.

It is not a matter here of imagining that one can go and find and put on a tradition, like an old garment found in an attic. Revolutionary politics is not like that. It is not a Disney theme park where you can choose: today we are in the Wild West, or the Middle Ages, or the American or French Revolutions. Maoists in the 1960s and '70s did that with various past periods of the Stalinist movement — the Third Period, the Northern Ireland Communist Party's World War 2 Unionist period, Popular Frontism... It does not work. Real political tradition is a living thing, made up of the practice and assumptions and mutual relations of active militants.⁴¹

These texts are an irreplaceable element in the work of re-elaborating a living Trotskyist tradition.

It should not be thought that one has to take or leave the political legacy of the Workers' Party and the ISL as a whole. Nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of that organisation. The Workers' Party was not a "monolithic" party; nor are the organisations of those who want to learn from it (for example, some of those who have worked with me to produce this volume would find "state capitalism" — though not as understood by the Workers' Party minority — a better framework for understanding the Stalinist states than "bureaucratic collectivism"). There are things to criticise and reject in that tradition.

They got the overall perspective of Stalinism wrong. From our vantage point it is plain that Trotsky, and then Shachtman until 1946 or '47, were right to regard the Stalinist phenomenon as an aberration in the broad sweep of history. It is understandable that the spread of Stalinism after 1944 to a further sixth of the Earth should have led Shachtman to misunderstand. Nonetheless it is plain now that the Stalinist systems emerged as parallels to capitalism, not as its successor. They were historical blind alleys.

Apart from the historical importance of some of the pieces reprinted here, the labour movement can learn a very great deal from these texts about what living Marxism is and is not.

41. For example, the tradition of Workers' Liberty/Phoenix Press is an evolution from the tradition of James P Cannon, an evolution that has led us to criticise and rethink, but not to repudiate and disavow.

