

# 1939, whither Russia? Trotsky and his critics

By Max Shachtman

WHAT distinguished Trotsky from all other opponents of the Stalinist regime was his theory that it represented a bureaucratically-degenerated workers' state.

Why was it still a workers' state, even after the Opposition, representing the revolutionary proletariat, had in the late twenties been driven out of the ruling party and into prison and exile, even after the consolidation of an exclusive bureaucratic monopoly in the party and state? Because, first, there was still the possibility of defeating the bureaucracy by means of a vigorous but peaceful reform of the party. And, second, the principal means of production were still nationalised in the hands of the state, and not yet converted into private capitalist property. While the bureaucracy had betrayed the principles of the revolution, it had not yet surrendered this vital material achievement — nationalised property — to bourgeois counter-revolution. The latter was moving rapidly forward under the regime of the bureaucracy, but it had not yet triumphed. In no circumstances should it be allowed to triumph. Therefore, whenever and wherever there was an attack by bourgeois forces on the Stalinist regime, which for all its degeneration remained a workers' state, it was the duty of the Trotskyists and workers throughout the world to stand up for the *unconditional defence of the Soviet Union*.

In sum: the Stalinist bureaucracy was paving the way for a counter-revolution in Russia. A timely victory of the Opposition would restore the state to Soviet democracy and internationalism. The vacillating, parasitic bureaucracy was not a serious alternative. The alternative was the victory of the counter-revolution. Its social content was bound to be the restoration of private property following the destruction of nationalised property. Proletariat and bourgeoisie were the only two basic and decisive classes. The issue would be joined and determined in open conflict between them; and that conflict was imminent. Up to that moment, even the degenerated Stalinist state must be defended against bourgeois attack...

Banished from the territory of the Soviet Union by political decree at the end of 1928 Trotsky only intensified his war upon the Stalinists upon the basis of this doctrine, analysis and programme. He was now able for the first time to assemble and lead an international communist Opposition based entirely on his theory. But he soon found that he had to defend his theory almost as often and as vehemently from his partisans as from his enemies. From the time of his banishment until his tragic death, there was hardly a year in the existence of the Trotskyist movement abroad or of its counterpart inside Russia (so long as it retained any sort of coherent and articulate form) that did not see a crisis that rent its ranks in disputes over Trotsky's views of the 'Russian question'. There was hardly a year of his last exile when Trotsky did not find himself obliged, by new developments or by reconsideration, to modify his theory, sometimes drastically, while trying to preserve its essentials. The last year of his life saw another crisis, occurring at the outbreak of the world war. His position on Russia was again challenged by his followers. In this last controversy he allowed for an amendment to his conceptions so far-reaching in its implications as to shatter the very basis of his theory, in particular the theory of his opposition to Stalinism.

EVEN before Trotsky was banished to Turkey, the process of disintegration of the Russian Opposition had begun and it continued at an accelerated pace. The Democratic Centralists — residue of a faction in the controversies of the early twenties which had joined with Trotsky and Zinoviev in the United Opposition Bloc of 1926 — were the first to part with their allies. Led by old Bolshevik mil-

itants like Saponov and Vladimir Smirnov, they took the view that the Thermidorian reaction — the counter-revolution — had already triumphed in Russia and that the workers' state was at an end. Relatively, this was a minor loss; graver ones soon followed.

In the middle of 1928, with all the Oppositionists already expelled, it became evident that a new struggle was developing among the anti-Trotskyist leaders, precipitated by a crisis in grain collections. Now the fight was between Stalin's followers and those led by Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsy. It was the prelude to what was to be called the 'Great Change' or 'Russia's Second Revolution' — the programme of massive industrialisation and forced collectivisation which was to be the decisive feature of Russia's development for the next three decades.

Trotsky, then in Asian exile, treated Stalin's turn with the greatest scepticism and reserve. Indeed, he sounded the alarm against the impending counter-revolution more vigorously than ever. Stalin, he wrote repeatedly in those days and for a long time afterward, had not adopted and could not adopt a left course but only a 'left zig-zag'. He represented only the bureaucratic apparatus vacillating under the pressure of real and effective classes. Tomorrow, 'the right tail' would come crashing down on his head, because it represented the powerful restorationist and proprietor classes; and to them Stalin would capitulate. In a famous 1928 article, which was one of the pretexts for his expulsion from Russia, Trotsky insisted that the country was facing a 'dual power' situation, as it did in 1917 just before the Bolshevik victory, when Kerensky represented the state power of the bourgeoisie and the Soviets were the incipient socialist power. Only, this time, the 'film of October is unwinding in reverse' — that is, it was not the bourgeois element of the dual power that was about to be overturned by the socialist element, but exactly the other way around. Voroshilov was even mentioned as the possible 'man on horseback' — a counter-revolutionary Bonaparte.

As late as April 1931, even though the right wing had already been crushed by Stalin, Trotsky still spoke of the 'dual power' in Russia and declared that the further degeneration of the party machine — Stalin's faction — "undoubtedly increases the chances of the Bonapartist form" of the overturn of the Soviet state, that is, "The form of the naked sabre which is raised in the name of bourgeois property." (To my knowledge, he never again referred to the 'dual power' in Stalinist Russia, or to the outcome of the contest between the two classes it was said to represent.)

This analysis was entirely in keeping with Trotsky's idea of expected developments, but it was almost equally out of keeping with the political and social reality. It could not and did not serve to retard the decline of the Opposition, upon which the Stalinist apparatus was in any case exerting an almost unbearable pressure. As it became clear that Stalin's course was not a 'zig-zag' but a sustained and resolute line, that the Bukharin faction was irretrievably defeated; that the propertied, semi-propertied and potentially-propertied people in the country were being economically (and even physically) annihilated; that a restorationist bourgeoisie was not within miles of a struggle for power (then or later) — the Zinoviev and then the Trotskyist Opposition collapsed. First, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and their friends capitulated to the regime. Then of the Trotskyists, came the capitulation of Radek, Preobrazhensky and Smilga. Then (this was an especially hard personal blow to Trotsky) Rakovsky; then dozens upon dozens and finally hundreds of others. A tiny, dwindling minority remained steadfast, and none of these survived the blood purges of the Moscow Trials period — nor indeed did the capitulators.

In virtually every case — if we set aside exhaustion, apparatus pressure and the like — the political reason given was at bottom the same: the perspective of a rising bourgeois counter-revolution had proved to be false. If anything, Stalin was smashing the economic



and political foundations of the bourgeois elements more ruthlessly than the Opposition had ever proposed to do. And his economic policy was not a momentary tactic but a durable line by which he was expanding and consolidating the basis of socialism. In this they had to work along with him.

This reasoning was not without its defects. It is true that even the soundest theoretical and political arguments would have been of little avail in holding together the Opposition in the extraordinary circumstances. It is true, too, that Trotsky's analysis, criticism, and predictions about the Stalinist course in a dozen vital fields of domestic and foreign policy were matchless and were confirmed by events.

But in the basic theory that the bourgeois counter-revolution and the restoration of capitalism were on the order of the day in Russia, that the destruction of the economic and political power of the workers under Stalin was bound to bring about the counter-revolution and this one alone, that the Stalinist bureaucracy could not effectively resist it but would only manure the soil from which it would surely arise — this theory found no confirmation at all.

Yet Trotsky reiterated the analysis and forecast in a dozen different ways in all his writings during the critical decade of the thirties, emphatically and without reservation. From a mind so luminous and penetrating, it is almost incomprehensible, unless we remember that it was a fixed point in Trotsky's doctrine: a workers' state can be destroyed and replaced only by a bourgeois state based on private property.

OUTSIDE Russia, the Trotskyist movement enjoyed far greater continuity and coherence, if only because it was free of the ruthless police pressures of the Kremlin. Trotsky never had to cope among his foreign supporters with the problem of capitulation to Stalinism or conciliation. Except for a few trivial individual cases, no such tendencies manifested themselves. But he was not free from the necessity of defending his views continually from doubts and challenges in his own ranks. It may be said that even those who accepted his theory, including the changes he introduced into it from time to time, did not always agree with the passionate enthusiasm and conviction they shared for his trenchant attacks upon the Stalinist regime and its policies. But Trotsky's prestige and authority in his movement were probably unequalled by the leader of any other branch of the radical movement. For most of his followers this sufficed to turn the balance against doubt, but not for all.

Barely settled in his Turkish exile, Trotsky was forced into a sharp struggle with a large part, if not the majority, of his adherents in Europe. In the Russo-Chinese conflict of 1929 over the Chinese Eastern Railway, in which Moscow held important rights inherited from Tsarist times, a military clash appeared possible. This raised the question, among the Trotskyists, of the validity of the policy of

"unconditional defence of the Soviet Union in wartime". Many of them held that Moscow was displaying an imperialist attitude towards China and the revolutionists should not support it. Trotsky attacked them furiously. Russia was to be defended in spite of Stalin because it was still a workers' state. The ensuing debate ended in the first big split in the Trotskyist movement. Most of the Germans followed their chief, Hugo Urbahns, in separating from Trotsky. In France, most of the communist-syndicalists, around Fernand Loriot and Pierre Monatte, founders of the French Communist Party and partisans of Trotsky as early as 1924, broke with him in the dispute. So did many who were in the Trotskyist group led by Maurice and Madeleine Paz. The split extended to Belgium, where Trotsky lost the allegiance of the group around Van Overstaeten, the former head of the Communist Party and then of the Trotskyist opposition.

This split was a stiff blow. But under Trotsky's tireless hammering, the oppositional groups in Europe and the Americas, though they never became a political force, were re-united around his views. The union did not endure. It was breached, at first in a minor way, during the period of the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War. Up to that time, Trotsky had defended his theory that Russia was still a workers' state on the ground that the workers retained the possibility of turning the political helm in Russia and bringing the bureaucracy under their control, without resorting to a revolution, by means of an internal reform of the ruling party. By 1936 he could no longer maintain this view and abandoned it.

The bureaucracy had now, he argued, attained total political power. Indeed, in its *political* rule, it did not differ from the fascist bureaucracy in Germany. In fundamental distinction from the latter however, it rested upon different social foundations, defined as nationalised property, which the Stalinist bureaucracy preserved "in its own way", just as the Nazi bureaucracy preserved private property in its way. The Russian workers had been completely expropriated of all political rights and power. Because the 'way' in which the bureaucracy defended nationalised property was such as to bring closer the return of capitalism, the bureaucracy had to be removed from political dominance, which had reached such a totalitarian level that it could not be corrected by peaceful reforms. The bureaucracy could be overturned only by a revolution; but this revolution would not be a social revolution as it would not alter the prevailing property forms. It would be a "political revolution".

It is hardly necessary to dwell on the dimensions of the hole this thesis created in the wall of Trotsky's basic theory. Here it must suffice to refer to two reactions in the ranks of the Trotskyists. The vast majority in Europe and America accepted it out of hand, so to speak, with little reflection on its significance. Few recalled that only a little earlier Trotsky, both in exposition and in polemic, had insisted that Stalinist Russia was a workers' state precisely because, while the bourgeoisie need a revolution against the regime in its interests, the working class could realise its interests by means of peaceful reform.

The other reaction was shown by those Trotskyists, a very small and ineffectual minority, who rejected Trotsky's thesis. One of them was the young Frenchman Yvan Craipeau. In Russia, he wrote, the loss of all political power by the working class meant that it no longer ruled in any social sense, that Russia was no longer a workers' state, and that the bureaucracy had become a new exploiting and ruling class. Furthermore, this new class, by its military alliance with French imperialism (in the form of the Stalin-Laval Pact), and by its role in the Spanish Civil War (where the Stalinists opposed all steps towards a socialist revolution and proclaimed themselves defenders of private property) ruled out, for revolutionists, the policy of defence of Stalinist Russia in a war.

The other was an American Trotskyist leader, James Burnham, a somewhat unorthodox Marxist who was later to become more widely known in a different capacity. Leaning heavily on Trotsky's contention that the Russian working class had lost all trace of political power, Burnham argued that, though Russia was no longer a workers' state, it was not yet a bourgeois state. The bureaucracy was playing a reactionary role because it had "definitely entered the road of the destruction of the planned and nationalised economy." It expressed only the interests of those social groups that were "now in the process of transformation of a new bourgeois ruling class." However, since nationalised property still existed, the defence of

Russia in war was the "imperative and inescapable duty" of the proletariat. This was in 1937. It did not even foreshadow the altogether different position Burnham was to take later. Trotsky's response was moderate, for clearly Burnham did not differ too widely from his own view.

One element in Trotsky's reply is worth recalling, however, for the special light it throws on a later development. Although in a certain sense Hitler and Stalin both served the bourgeoisie, "between the functions of Stalin and Hitler there is a difference. Hitler defends the bourgeois forms of property. Stalin adapts the interests of the bureaucracy to the proletarian forms of property. The same Stalin in Spain, that is, on the soil of a bourgeois regime, executes the function of Hitler." It was thus shown again, concluded Trotsky, that the bureaucracy was not an independent class "but the tool of classes" — a tool (a bad one) of the workers in Russia where state property prevailed, and a tool of the bourgeoisie outside Russia where private property existed.

The 1937 dispute was allowed to lapse. Neither Craipeau nor Burnham pressed his views further, and Trotsky seemed content to let it go at that. The new doctrine of the political revolution became official, and in 1938 Trotsky added an amendment that the revolution which was to restore the democracy of the Soviets would exclude the bureaucracy from participating in them.

TWO years later the war broke out, and the conflict over the 'Russian question' flared up more intensely than ever before. It proved to be the most bitter and most wracking of the internecine struggles of the Trotskyist movement, and the last one in which Trotsky was able to participate.

The theory of "unconditional defence" of the 'workers' state' was given its crucial — indeed, its only concrete — political test with the firing of the first gun. The armies of Hitler and Stalin joined forces to conquer and subject Eastern Europe and to divide the spoils of victory. The annexation of the Baltic lands and parts of Poland and Finland was undoubtedly required for the defence of Stalinist Russia in much the same way as the subjugation of Korea and Manchuria were required by Imperial Japan. But what had such a course in common with socialist politics, asked a minority of the American Trotskyist leadership. Their answer to this question was: nothing! Russia was now an integral part of an imperialist war, allied with a reactionary imperialist power, and pursuing with its ally an imperialist policy of conquest and oppression. Russia's invasion of Poland and Finland must be condemned, and the slogan of defence of Russia discarded. They did not advocate support of the western coalition, which they characterised similarly as imperialist. The break with Trotsky's rational policy was unmistakable and portentous.

The minority leaders included Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, two of the founders of American communism, and two of the three communist leaders who launched the Trotskyist movement in the United States in 1928. Shachtman founded the theoretical journal of the American Trotskyists and edited Trotsky's works in English. The third, James Burnham, although a later adherent to Trotskyism, was widely respected in its ranks. The three could not easily be dismissed as casual figures. The American organisation was by far the most stable, steadfast, and important branch of the international Trotskyist movement, and Trotsky could not let it depart from his position by default or negligible interventions. From Mexico, he plunged into the debate.

Although differing on the sociological question, the 'class character of the Russian state' (Abern believed that it was still a degenerated workers' state, Burnham had abandoned that view in 1937, and Shachtman was uncertain), they agreed not to debate, the three were at one about the political question ('unconditional defence'). It was perfectly obvious that analysis of the theoretical question was in itself far from being decisive in determining policy towards the war.

Trotsky ignored the fact that it had only recently been just as obvious to him, and after starting out with a relatively mild article against the view of the minority, he launched a large-scale attack upon it. Drawing on his exceptional intellectual resources, which the minority could not match, and using his unrivalled gift for irony, he blanketed his opponents under a mounting drumfire of polemic. They stood firmly by their position even though Trotsky exploited its every weakness and gap, reassured by their conviction

that he had not answered what was sound and rational in their rejection of 'defencism'.

A few weeks later, Trotsky expanded the range of his assault. He confronted the minority with questions ranging from the class nature of Russia to the logic of Aristotle and Hegel; from dialectical materialism down to the most trivial of internal organisational matters. He called into question the revolutionary probity of the minority leaders, their personal characteristics, and their records in the movement. They were denounced as a "petty-bourgeois opposition" suffering from "gangrene". The political question, the only one posed by the minority, was all but lost in this universalised turbulence.

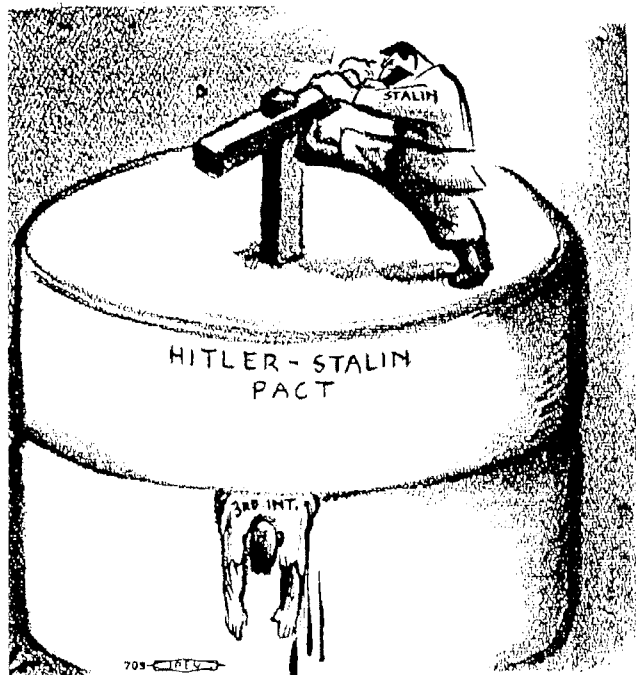
With this kind of intervention from Trotsky, his supporters retained control of the American organisation at the end of the dispute, but only by a narrow margin; the minority won the decisive majority of the young Trotskyists and almost half of the party membership as well. After the 1940 convention, the minority were expelled on bloc without trial, and the split was irrevocable. Abern, Shachtman, and their friends continued in a new organisation; Burnham, deeply shaken and repelled by the fight Trotsky had conducted, quit the movement entirely with a disavowal of Marxism in general, and soon moved to the position presented a year later in his *The Managerial Revolution*.

TROTSKY'S victory was as complete as it was dubious. From the vigour and intensity of his participation in the dispute, nobody could have imagined that he was at the same time in such despair about his personal condition that he was seriously contemplating taking his own life. Of this melancholy prospect there was not the slightest sign in his polemical writings.

Yet, oddly enough, it was neither the direct targets of these writings — his party opposition — nor the arguments levelled against them that were the most important aspect of the development of Trotsky's theory in this last period of his life. From this standpoint, the fight against his own opposition was of decidedly secondary, at most of auxiliary significance. Primary importance belongs instead to Trotsky's critical observations on a theory put forward by a non-participant in the dispute. This was a former Italian communist and ex-Trotskyist who, on the eve of the war, published a book in French, *La Bureaucratization du Monde*, under the name of Bruno R — Bruno Ricci.

Ricci rejected Trotsky's theory of the 'degenerated workers' state' and held that a new revolution was taking place throughout the world. It had brought, or was bringing, to power a new ruling class in a new social order, 'bureaucratic collectivism'. It was neither capitalist nor socialist in any significant sense. The working class is reduced to totalitarian slavery, exploited collectively by the new





bureaucracy. The Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia and the fascist bureaucracy are equally representative of the supremacy of this new class and new social order. So too is the New Deal of Roosevelt, even if in a not yet equally advanced form. Thus, Ricci. Thus also a little later *The Managerial Revolution*, in which Burnham adopted Ricci's thesis virtually *in toto* and with the addition of some extravagant predictions.

Up to the appearance of Ricci's work, Trotsky defended his theory from those critics in or around his movement (except in the case of Craipeau) who held that the Russian state stood above the contending classes, or that it had become a bourgeois state, usually called 'state capitalism'. Hugo Urbahns, for example, put this label upon Stalinist Russia as well as upon fascist Italy and Germany. In Marxian terms and in terms of social realities this label was an absurdity. Trotsky had little difficulty in ridiculing and riddling this point of view, and more generally, in rejecting the identification of the Stalinist and Hitlerian social regimes despite the similarities of their political rule. Rudolph Hilferding, the eminent Austro-German socialist theoretician and economist, who in 1940 linked fascism and Stalinism in the same social category of "totalitarian state economies", likewise gave short shrift to the theory of 'state capitalism'.

A social order in which there is no capitalist class, no capitalist private property, no capitalist profit, no production of commodities for the market, no working class more or less free to sell its labour power on the open market — can be described as capitalist, no matter how modified by adjectives, only by arbitrary and meaningless definition. In any case, there was no capitalist anywhere in the world who would accept such a definition.

In Ricci's case Trotsky had a different problem. He did not hesitate to acknowledge the merits of Ricci's work, or to criticise what he called its mistakes. But in acknowledgement and criticism he managed to subvert the foundations of his own theory:

"Bruno R in any case has the merit of seeking to transfer the question from the charmed circle of terminological copybook exercises to the plane of major historical generalisations. This makes it all the easier to disclose his mistake [he wrote on 25 September 1939]. Bruno R has caught on to the fact that the tendencies of collectivisation [operating in all modern economy, in Russia, Germany or the United States] assume, as a result of the political prostration of the working class, the form of 'bureaucratic collectivism'. The phenomenon in itself is incontestable. But where are the limits, and what is its historical weight?"

The answers given by Trotsky to these questions were little less than startling in view of the tenacity with which he had till then

clung to his own theory of Stalinism and the arguments he had mustered in support of it. Three weeks later (18 October 1939) he wrote:

"Some comrades evidently were surprised that I spoke in my article ('The USSR in the War') of the system of 'bureaucratic collectivism' as a theoretical possibility. They discovered in this even a complete revision of Marxism. This is an apparent misunderstanding. The Marxist comprehension of historical necessity has nothing in common with fatalism. Socialism is not realisable 'by itself' but as a result of the struggle of living forces, classes and their parties. The proletariat's decisive advantage in this struggle resides in the fact that it represents historical progress, while the bourgeoisie incarnates reaction and decline. Precisely in this is the source of our conviction in victory. But we have full right to ask ourselves: What character will society take if the forces of reaction conquer?"

"Marxists have formulated an incalculable number of times the alternative: either socialism or return to barbarism. After the Italian 'experience' we repeated thousands of times: either communism or fascism. The real passage to socialism cannot fail to appear incomparably more complicated, more heterogeneous, more contradictory than was foreseen in the general historical scheme. Marx spoke about the dictatorship of the proletariat and its future withering away but said nothing about bureaucratic degeneration of the dictatorship. We have observed and analysed for the first time in experience such a degeneration. Is this revision of Marxism? The march of events has succeeded in demonstrating that the delay of the socialist revolution engenders the indubitable phenomena of barbarism — chronic unemployment, pauperisation of the petty bourgeoisie, fascism, finally wars of extermination which do not open up any new road. What social and political forms can the new 'barbarism' take, if we admit theoretically that mankind should not be able to elevate itself to socialism? We have the possibility of expressing ourselves on this subject more concretely than Marx. Fascism on one hand, degeneration of the Soviet state on the other, outline the social and political forms of 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."

What "some comrades evidently were surprised" at, and not without cause, was the view Trotsky had set down in his article of 25 September 1939. It is worth citing:

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

"The second imperialist war poses the unsolved tasks on a higher historical state. It tests anew not only the stability of the existing regimes but also the ability of the proletariat to replace them. The results of this test will automatically have a decisive significance for our appraisal of the modern epoch as the epoch of proletarian revolution. If contrary to all probabilities the October revolution fails during the course of the present war, or immediately thereafter, to find its continuation in any of the advanced countries; and if, on the contrary, the proletariat is thrown back everywhere and on all fronts — then we shall have to pose the question of revising our conception of the present epoch and its driving forces. In that case it would be a question not of slapping a copybook label on the USSR or the Stalinist gang but of re-evaluating the world historical perspective for the new decades if not centuries: have we entered the epoch of social revolution and socialist society, or on the contrary the epoch of the declining society of totalitarian bureaucracy?"

"The twofold error of schematicists like Hugo Urbahns and Bruno R consists, first, in that they proclaim this latter regime as having been already finally installed; second, in that they declare it a prolonged transitional state of society between capitalism and socialism. Yet it is absolutely self-evident that if the international proletariat, as a result of the experience of our entire epoch and the current war, proves incapable of becoming the master of society, this would signify the foundering of all hope for socialist revolution, for it is impossible to expect

any more favourable conditions for it; in any case no one foresees them now, or is able to characterise them."

WITH these pronouncements, Trotsky turned a corner in his thinking so abruptly as to bring him into violent collision with the main pillars of the theory of Stalinism he had long and stoutly upheld:

1. The doctrine that Russia was still a workers' state because the bourgeoisie had not yet become the ruling class, was essentially exploded. It is possible for Russia (or other countries) to be ruled by a new exploiting class which is neither proletarian nor bourgeois.

2. The doctrine that the maintenance of nationalised property proved that the Stalinist regime was a workers' state, however degenerated, was similarly exploded. It is possible for nationalised property to be the economic foundation for the rule of a new class.

3. The conception of a new ruling class commanding a society which is neither capitalist nor socialist (a conception not long before derided by Trotsky) was not a revision of Marxism at all. "Marxists have formulated an incalculable number of times the alternative: either socialism or return to barbarism." And this conception does not of itself mean the end of socialism or the fight for it. "An alternative of this kind [has] enormous importance in agitation, because in its light the necessity for socialist revolution appears most graphically."

It is true, to be sure, that Trotsky endeavoured at the same time to reaffirm his old theory. It was no longer so easy. Having insisted that Russia remained a workers' state because the rule of the bourgeoisie had not been restored and nationalised property still prevailed, he now conceded that the workers' state could be utterly destroyed even if the bourgeoisie did not come to power and even if property remained nationalised.

The Russian state, he argued, remained proletarian because the Stalinist bureaucracy had no prospect of retaining control of it ("its inglorious downfall" might be a matter of "a few years or even a few months", he said in 1939, almost a quarter of a century ago), whereas Trotskyists had the perspective that in all probability the October Revolution would "find its continuation" in advanced countries "during the course of the present war, or immediately thereafter."

To determine the nature of a social order by appraising the prospects for political success of its upholders and its opponents, is extraordinary procedure for a Marxist. The two are closely related, but in exactly reverse order. The nature of cancer is not established by the success of medical science in finding the cure for it or the speed with which it is found. The nature of the atomic bomb is not determined by the use to which it is put, by the appalling consequences of its use, or by society's success in controlling or destroying it. Marx determined the class nature of capitalism by an analysis of its social anatomy, starting with the commodity. The validity (or invalidity) of this analysis is not to be determined by the conclusions he drew from it about the prospects for a socialist revolution in the Europe of 1848 or later.

By reducing the question of the nature of the Stalinist state to a matter of the prospects for success of the bureaucracy and of the socialist revolution in the period he indicated Trotsky effectively abandoned the essential elements of the theory of the "degenerated workers' state."

The course of the war undermined another of Trotsky's doctrines and drove him to another radical revision. Before the war, he had unremittently attacked Stalinism for its theory of "socialism in one country". This theory was, to him, the central axis of the bureaucracy's thought, from which it derived, or with which were inseparably connected, all its errors, crimes, and betrayals of the revolution. If, on the Russian soil, it might still play a positive role in

so far as it maintained or defended state property, abroad it played an unequivocally reactionary role in that it defended capitalist private property. In Spain, as has already been noted, "i.e. on the soil of a bourgeois regime, [Stalin] executes the function of Hitler," wrote Trotsky only two years before the war.

In the first months of the war, it should have been clear, this analysis of Stalinism proved completely indefensible. And it was clear enough to Trotsky to end any attempt to defend it. "On the soil of a bourgeois regime" — that is, the part of Poland which was occupied by the Russian army at the start of the war — Stalin did not "execute the function of Hitler" within the meaning of Trotsky's phrase. Instead, he destroyed the power of bourgeois and landowner, abolished private property, and set up the same economic-political-social regime as the Russian. It was an inconvenient turn of events. Given the theory he would not disavow, Trotsky had no choice but to acknowledge that Stalin's course in Poland (as later in the Baltic lands) was "revolutionary in character — 'the expropriation of the expropriators'... that the stratification of property in the occupied territories is in itself a progressive measure." This acknowledgement placed Trotsky squarely in the centre of a dilemma from which he was not allowed the time to extricate himself. A few weeks after acknowledging the basic social changes

introduced in Poland by Stalin, Trotsky introduced a new modification of his theory. "Some voices cry out: if we continue to recognise the USSR as a workers' state, we will have to establish a new category: the counter-revolutionary workers' state." Well, why not? he continued in an article on 19 October. The trade unions of France and Britain and the United States were counter-revolutionary since "they support completely the counter-revolutionary politics of their bourgeoisie... why is it impossible to employ the same method with the counter-revolutionary workers' state?"

The "new category" did alleviate his position. The term 'counter-revolution' had been applied to the reformist unions in the west precisely because they "defended private property" and refused

to "expropriate the expropriators". The "counter-revolutionary workers' state", however, was now acting in Poland in an exactly and fundamentally opposite sense by carrying out measures that were "revolutionary in character — 'the expropriation of the expropriators'." The dimensions of the "revolutionary expropriation" could not be known to Trotsky. Only after his death were they extended far beyond Poland, nowhere under the auspices of the proletariat, everywhere under the aegis, direction and control of the "counter-revolutionary workers' state."

Yet he saw enough in 1939, and wrote enough, to indicate that his central indictment of Stalinism for its theory of 'socialism in one country' was no longer relevant. The bureaucracy was showing that while it remained 'counter-revolutionary', it could and would carry out a fundamental revolution against the bourgeoisie abroad, but without the working class and against the workers; indeed, in Trotsky's own words, in order to convert them into its own semi-slaves.

The counter-revolutionary proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie and the working class was a concept which not even the much-burdened dialectic could sustain. It was too much for the back of a theory which held that a regime under which workers and peasants enjoyed not a shred of economic or political power but were pitilessly exploited, was nevertheless a workers' state because it was not a bourgeois state.

The unique nature of Stalinist society, of its ruling class and of its social relations, and its true international significance both for capitalist society and for socialism — on these crucial problems of our time Trotsky found and offered promising clues to an understanding in the last polemical fight of his life. The assassin's axe soon ended all chance of his pursuing the clues to their end. ■

*"Some comrades evidently were surprised that I spoke in my article of the system of 'bureaucratic collectivism' as a theoretical possibility. They discovered in this even a complete revision of Marxism. This is an apparent misunderstanding. The Marxist comprehension of historical necessity has nothing in common with fatalism."*

LD Trotsky