

Trotsky's contribution to Marxism

By Max Shachtman

LEON Trotsky belonged to the school of Karl Marx. The difference between these two titans of the revolutionary socialist movement can be found not so much in a comparison of their respective intellectual attainments as in a comparison of the epochs in which they made their mark and which could not but leave their mark upon them.

Marx was the incomparable analyst, critic and revolutioniser of capitalist society. With a pitiless scalpel, he disclosed the immanent contradictions which doomed the contemporary social order to collapse and which at the same time generated the living force that had the destruction of the old society and the building of the new as its historic mission. In the more than ninety years since his views were first presented systematically if briefly in the *Communist Manifesto*, they have successfully withstood every effort to demolish them. The crashing noises of capitalism collapsing throughout the world at this very moment only give us the grimmest and most emphatic confirmation of Marx's analytical insight.

What Marx miscalculated — it was his only serious error — was the rate of speed at which the inexorable process of disintegration would take place. Even there, his error was that of a genius, in that he foresaw with such penetration what was to occur long after his time had passed. But the error was nevertheless the error of an epoch. After his death, world capitalism reached new heights of development and expanded beyond the dreams of his contemporaries; the proletariat, on the other hand, did not move directly towards the revolutionary maturity that would make possible the execution of its historic mission.

Marx's time was not the epoch of the proletarian world revolution, the Vienna uprising and the Paris Commune notwithstanding. It was the epoch in which the great bourgeois nations of Europe and America were finally established and consolidated. The founder of the scientific socialist movement was born on the morrow of the Great French Revolution and the revolution of the thirteen American colonies against English sovereignty. He died on the morrow of the consolidation of the numerous Germanic states into an independent imperial nation, liberated from Franco-Russian oppression and semi-feudal dismemberment.



The struggle for national unity

THE struggle to form the great independent nations of the modern world characterised the end of the 18th and most of the 19th centuries. It was a progressive and even revolutionary struggle, and in the course of it, feudalism was destroyed. The feudal system had become a barrier in the path of further social progress. Capitalism and the then young and militant bourgeoisie had to find a large framework, a more extended soil for its development than were permitted them by the outlived feudal regimes. The new ruling class ruthlessly razed the suffocating frontiers of Popes and princes and dukes and counts so that the new economic system might have a whole nation in which to expand freely. At the same time, the new national frontiers which it erected were raised less for the purpose of confining themselves than for protecting the new order from the encroachments and invasions of dying but still vicious reaction, at

the beginning from the Holy Alliance and towards the end from the Gendarme-Tsar.

Marx, who was not and could not by his whole spirit be a mere sentimental anti-nationalist, was altogether on the side of the struggle for national independence. He was not, to be sure, a bourgeois democrat, but a socialist revolutionary. He saw in the fight for the free bourgeois-democratic nation the pre-condition for developing the independent struggle of the young proletariat for its own social emancipation and thereby the emancipation of society from all class rule. The bourgeoisie never erred, even in its most revolutionary period, in its judgment of Marx and his ideas, and it never hesitated to turn to an alliance with hated reaction against them. It never mistook Marx for a bourgeois democrat or a German nationalist — as venomous critics have tried to picture him — for its class interest gave it sufficient perspicacity to understand more clearly even than did the follower of Marx, what the latter meant by the war-cry: "The revolution in permanence!"

There are few things so tragic, and sometimes disastrous in politics as the inability of men to understand when an old situation has changed to a new one, when ideas and slogans suitable for one set of circumstances have become the very opposite of suitable in other circumstances. Marx's conception of the revolution in permanence embraced this set of ideas: the struggle for the

independent bourgeois nation was progressive; the bourgeoisie conducting that struggle against feudalism and reaction was playing a progressive role; the working class, no matter how young or immature, must make a practical fighting agreement with the bourgeoisie in this struggle, but an agreement in which the working class maintained its full class independence and did not suspend its revolutionary efforts once feudal reaction was defeated and the bourgeoisie installed in power.

Capitalism as an international order

THE years that followed Marx's death marked a period of such comparative social peace and organic capitalist expansion, as to create an atmosphere in which his disciples, while maintaining the externals of his ideas, gradually disemboweled them of all revolutionary contents.

In the period preceding the first world war, capitalism had undergone profound changes. National frontiers, which had first constituted a necessary field in which the productive forces could be expanded by capitalism, had now become a barrier to their further development. The bourgeoisie, once a revolutionary class which had organised and directed the expansion of economic life, had now become reactionary and parasitic. The great enterprisers had become coupon-clippers; the descendants of Robespierre had become comrades-in-arms (or mercenaries!) of the Tsar.

A concomitant degeneration had taken place in the socialist movement in almost every country. Its leaders had carved up Marx's essentially revolutionary internationalism into so many national segments, the simple arithmetical total of which in no way resembled the original indivisible whole. The defence of the nation, even after the very concept of a nation (at least so far as the big countries of Europe and America were concerned) had become economically and politically reactionary, became an end in itself. The practical agreement with the revolutionary bourgeoisie against the feudal reaction turned into class collaboration with a decadent bourgeoisie which had long ago fused with that same feudal, monarchical and clerical reaction. When the war broke out, the corruption of socialist internationalism into social patriotism was sensationally revealed. With the collapse of the Second International, of official socialism, an epoch came to an end and a new one began.

What raises the great man above the level of his contemporaries is not so much that his time leaves its mark upon him as it is that he leaves his mark upon his time. The deepest, most lasting marks left on our time were carved by two revolutionists. One was Lenin; the other Leon Trotsky.

The greatness of Trotsky's contribution to the socialist cause lay in the fact that it corresponded so perfectly with the most urgent need of our period: internationalism. He was its greatest prophet, not merely as an ethical or humanistic ideal but as an unpostponable economic, political and cultural step, made possible and imperatively necessary for society if it is not to fall back into barbarism. A Marxist to the marrow of his bones, he did not derive his internationalism from some eternal morality which mankind would attain some day when the necessary chemical changes took place in its soul, but rather from a thoroughgoing analysis of the changes taking place in the way in which men are related to produce the things they live by and in the elaborate institutions developed to maintain these relations. This analysis, not made overnight but developed throughout a lifetime of study and struggle, is summed up in the theory which will always be associated with the name of Leon Trotsky, the theory of the permanent revolution. It is his unique contribution, it is his own addition to the legacy of Marxism which he legitimately took over and which he

left to a new generation as a vastly enriched heritage.

Trotsky and 1905

TROTSKY began to develop his theory in systematic form following the experiences of the first Russian revolution in 1905. Knowing as we do how the proletarian revolution triumphed in Russia in 1917, it is impossible to read or re-read Trotsky's first thorough analysis of class relations in the country and his forecast without being startled by them. No wonder they met with almost universal scepticism and even ridicule when they were first put forward!

According to the theory prevalent in the Russian social democracy of the time — in both Bolshevik and Menshevik factions — Russia differed from the advanced West-European countries in that it faced not a socialist but a bourgeois-democratic revolution. What had long ago been accomplished in the West still lay ahead in the East: the ending of feudal or semi-feudal relations in agriculture, democratic rights for the people, a democratic legislative assembly for the nation, the right of self-determination for the national minorities in the empire etc.

On this score, there were not and could not be any serious differences among socialists. Where the division developed between the two major factions was, essentially, over the question of who would lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution. The Mensheviks, operating formally on the basis of the same party programme as the Bolsheviks, declared that the bourgeois revolution in Russia would be led by the bourgeoisie, supported by the peasantry, and that the working class would play the role of a left-wing spur urging the bourgeoisie on to accomplish its historic mission. The revolution once accomplished and normal, modern democratic conditions established, the working class would take up a position similar to that occupied by it in such countries as England, France, and Germany. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, refused to attribute a revolutionary role to the Russian bourgeoisie. The revolution in Russia, they declared, would be directed not only against the Tsarist bureaucracy but also against the Russian bourgeoisie, more miserable and cowardly than the German bourgeoisie of 1848 whose social rule had to be established finally by a Junker prince. There were, they continued, only two revolutionary classes in Russia, the proletariat and the peasantry, and their victory would take the form of a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry." In Lenin's strategical concept of the Russian revolution, the democratic tasks facing the country would be solved by the lower classes in the most radical, plebeian, "Jacobin" manner. Neither of the two socialist factions entertained the possibility of an immediate socialist perspective for Russia.

The Permanent Revolution

IN his study of the revolution of 1905 and in the furious polemics written between the two revolutions, Trotsky developed his own audacious theory. Russia, he acknowledged, is a backward agricultural country which has not even solved its democratic problems. But precisely because the latter were posed so belatedly, the class which had directed their solution in other countries, generations ago, had appeared just as belatedly on the Russian scene. The Russian bourgeoisie could not and would not play a revolutionary role. It was already inextricably bound up with the old Tsarist bureaucracy and the landowning class, and more important than that, it faced two revolutionary lower classes which it preferred to struggle against rather than to arouse and collaborate with. The democratic revolution in Russia would therefore be directed against the bourgeoisie as well, and it would be led by the workers and

the peasants.

Thus far, Trotsky's theory was sufficient to bring him into irreconcilable conflict with the Mensheviks and into fundamental solidarity with the Bolsheviks. But his agreement with the Bolsheviks on the role of the bourgeoisie was at the same time the point of departure for his disagreement with them.

While the democratic revolution will be carried out by the working class and the peasantry, Trotsky continued, it must be borne in mind that these two classes are not socially or historically equal. One is a propertyless class; the other is or seeks to become a propertied class. One represents the economy of tomorrow; the other the economy of yesterday. Historically, the one, as it takes the form of a class for itself, is socialist; the other, in so far as it can express itself as a class is bourgeois or rather petty bourgeois. By its position in society, the one is international; by its very position in the economic life of a country, the other is national. The one is a progressive class with a clearly-defined historical mission; the other is a divided and doubtful class which plays a reactionary role when it is led by the bourgeoisie against the proletariat or a revolutionary role when it is led by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.

The decisive question, therefore, is which of the two revolutionary classes in Russia, combined in a bloc against Tsar and bourgeois, will have the leadership in the struggle? Which of the two classes will make the decisive imprint on the coming revolution? The peasantry cannot lead, it must follow one or another of the urban classes. But if the proletariat is to lead the revolution, it cannot, once it comes to power with the mighty aid of the peasantry, confine itself rigidly to its minimum programme, that is, to the solution of the democratic tasks. The very peculiarity of class relations in Russia would impose upon the proletariat-in-power those "despotic encroachments" upon private property about which the *Communist Manifesto* had spoken. It would be compelled to initiate distinctly socialist measures; the democratic tasks of Russian society would be solved essentially as a by-product of a socialist reorganisation of the country. The democratic revolution would pass directly into the socialist revolution. In accordance with what Trotsky called the law of combined development, the very backwardness of Russia would compel it to take a long leap forward, and momentum once gained, would bring it to a socialist, proletarian dictatorship. Russia would experience a continuing revolution, the revolution in permanence!

That much Trotsky already made clear as early as 1906. The international aspects of the permanent revolution he developed in the following years, particularly during the war. Lenin, who looked forward to a more or less durable democratic revolution in Russia, emphasised that not even a democratic revolution could be maintained in the country unless it was speedily followed by a socialist revolution in the more advanced countries of Europe. In this Trotsky was naturally of Lenin's view. He added only, in accordance with his own theory, that the proletariat could not remain in power in Russia, much less realise a socialist society, without the "state aid" of the workers in the west, that is, without the victorious revolution in countries like Germany, France and England.

Russia's very backwardness would thrust her forward in the revolutionary scale and bring her under the rule of the working class perhaps before any of those countries which, because of their economic maturity, were commonly regarded in the socialist movement as the first ones to see the socialist victory. But this same backwardness, after having forced the proletariat to the front, would overtake it and drag it down unless it received the support



Trotsky's internationalist politics tried to arm the workers against both Stalin and Hitler

of its brothers in other lands. That this support would come in the form of the socialist revolution in the west, was never doubted by the irrepressibly optimistic author of the theory.

The permanent revolution was thus elaborated not so much as a theory of the Russian revolution, but as a theory of the international revolution having its likely origin in the old Tsarist empire.

Trotsky and the First World War

THE war offered Trotsky the opportunity to give his views wider scope than they had had before it. Official social democracy had rushed to the defence of the nation in every country. The earlier internationalist and anti-war commitments, made so solemnly and meaninglessly, were discarded on all sides. Only a handful remained loyal to internationalism. Trotsky was among them. He was too much the authentic, the orthodox Marxist, if you please, to be taken in by the social patriots who quoted Marx on the struggle for national defence. As is often the case in such polemics (and who knew that better than Lenin, who nevertheless chided him for it!), Trotsky sometimes bent the rod too much in the other direction; as a rule, there is no other way of straightening a crooked rod. But fundamentally, he was quite correct.

The war itself, he pointed out, was only the most terrible form of a crisis produced by the conflict between the development of the productive forces of the nations and the national frontiers which had become a suffocating barrier to their further development. To defend, that is, to try to perpetuate these frontiers, economically outlived and therefore reactionary, meant only the perpetuation of war and the retardation of the socialist revolution. In place of the war-cries of reaction, echoed by nationalistic social patriotism, Trotsky put forward the slogan of the Socialist United States of Europe. It would be a Europe freed of monarchs and autocrats, liberated from exploitation by a union of working-class republics, the mounting tariff walls torn down, and a peaceful and

fruitful collaboration of the peoples established on the basis of free economic and cultural intercourse. The United States of Europe, in turn, could only be conceived as the forerunner of the Socialist United States of the World, a free federation of the freed peoples of the world in which each group participated harmoniously in an international division of labour.

Trotsky's views, especially when he first formulated them in Russia, can hardly be said to have met with universal acclaim in the socialist movement! The Mensheviks simply denounced them as fantastic; the harsher among them said they were the vaporings of a madman. Lenin attacked them with a violence that was really directed at Trotsky's conciliatory position in the fight of the two factions. While the epigones later outrageously exaggerated the differences, even on this question, between Lenin and Trotsky, there is no doubt that the differences were sharp. There is also no doubt that, in the main, Lenin was wrong in the dispute. Lenin constantly put Trotsky on the defensive with regard to the enormous importance of the role that would be played by the peasantry in the revolution. While Trotsky continued to declare that the peasantry was an indispensable element in his revolutionary perspectives, it is true, and quite understandable, that in his polemical emphasis on the dominant role that the proletariat would have to play he seemed to facilitate Lenin's disproportionate criticisms of his theory. Likewise, it is true that he did not foresee with exactitude the concrete forms that would be taken by the transition between the democratic and the socialist periods of the revolution. But then again, neither did Lenin. And between the two, it is absurd to contest the fact that while Lenin had to abandon his theory of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry," Trotsky had only to revise his bold and amazingly confirmed forecasts in what were, after all, mere historical details. What better proof of this is required than the fact that Lenin's "Old Bolshevik" collaborators chided him for his "Trotskyism" after he made public his *April Theses* in 1917? That the reaction against Leninism in Russia took as its battle-cry the slogan of "Down with the permanent revolution?"

Trotsky was an internationalist

THE sole virtue of this reaction, which set in just before Lenin's death, might be said to lie in the fact that it compelled Trotsky to reconsider the old pre-war polemics on the question of permanent revolution, to renew and amplify his theory and bring it up to date. In the course of struggle, ideas have a power of their own which is often stronger than its proponents. Reluctant to revive the old dispute with Lenin, Trotsky nevertheless found that the theory of the permanent revolution was the only consistent and revolutionary reply to the theory of nationalist reaction put forward by the bureaucracy under the name of "socialism in a single country." The Stalinists, so to speak, forced his hand. It was good that they did. The theory proved to have a far greater vitality and a more universal applicability than could even be dreamed of by its author when he first formulated it. In a word, it proved to be the finished expression of the needs of our whole epoch. No man can be expected to

make a greater social contribution than this.

Internationalism found in Leon Trotsky not merely its most consistent ideologist but its most persistent and courageous warrior. From the time when the Zimmerwald movement was launched by the left-wing socialists at the beginning of the First World War, to the formation of the Fourth International which he led to the day of his death, Trotsky's record of struggle is a single unbroken line from which he never departed. It would have been fairly easy for him to retain his enormous power in the Soviet Union at the expense of principle, but that was a cost he could never pay for anything.

Together with Lenin, he fought the international bourgeoisie and its social-democratic handmaiden for the leadership of the working class of the world. He left an imprint on the early, bright years of the Third International which all the efforts of the usurpers have not succeeded in eradicating. Already shorn of his official power, he left a deep mark on the great Chinese revolution of 1925-27. It was really in connection with this tremendously significant upsurge of the Orient that the theory of the permanent

revolution was revived and renewed, that it proved its eminent contemporaneity. In the retarded East, more backward than was Tsarist Russia, the proletariat will triumph only under the banner of Trotsky's theory, only with the weapons he forged in the heat of the struggle against the backsliding Soviet bureaucracy.

But not only in the East. Those brilliant contributions he made to the struggle of the workers in a whole series of modern capitalist countries were all made from the comprehensive angle of view of the theory of the permanent revolution. The German working class will recuperate and regain its

sapped strength, they will wreak the vengeance of the victors upon overturned fascism, only along the lines of those magnificent — and alas ignored — directives contained in Trotsky's writings on the German crisis from 1931 to 1940. The British working class has had no outline of the path it must blaze to freedom that is worth mentioning in the same breath with Trotsky's analyses. The same holds true in greater or lesser degree for every important country which was in the forefront of the class struggle in the last two decades, more particularly in the decade since Stalin thought to bury Trotsky alive by banishing him to Turkey.

There may be journalists — Karl Radek was one; but there were not many others — who might write more brilliantly about one or another episode of the class struggle. None compared with Trotsky in point of systematic, sustained analysis and programme of action. No one, not even Lenin, we think, had so highly developed a gift for generalisation as Trotsky. Few if any had his consummate ability to dispose of incidental or accidental detail and to go directly to the heart of a situation or of a problem. These talents, which seemed to be native to Trotsky, were enormously enhanced by the fact that he saw all situations and problems through the penetrating fluoroscope of his comprehensive theory of society and of our epoch. More than anything else, that made it possible for him to express so eloquently and accurately the needs of both.

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● Max Shachtman's discussion of Trotsky's Marxism will be continued in the next issue of *Workers' Liberty*.