

Remember Leon Trotsky!

IF there is one man to be singled out as the individual who was the main source of this insight, this understanding, this cleansing of the struggle for democracy and socialism from the corroding blight of totalitarianism, that man is Trotsky. No movement that I know of was ever so dependent on a single leader for its ideas, its guidance, and its inspiration, as was the Trotskyist movement. However that may be judged, it is a fact. He may have erred in many ways, as indeed he did — in more ways, I believe, than today's Trotskyists might grant. And not everything he said or did has endured the unmerciful test of time. But no matter how severely critics may rate him, objectivity and fairness would compel a recognition of his gifts. He was the captain of the Bolshevik Revolution. Without any professional training, he was the creator and leader, and often the field commander of the Red Army in the early days. The theory and politics of Marxism was the home in which he was an easy master. He was probably the greatest orator of his time, certainly the greatest in the revolutionary movement. The muscular elegance of his literary gift was not equalled by anyone else in the ranks of the Marxists, whatever their school. The purity and wholeness of his commitment to the socialist ideal was unsurpassed and he was as unflagging in adversity, of which he had an ample share, as he was unaffected in victory.

“Even after all his comrades had fallen or conceded to the enemy, even after he was driven from exile to exile on three continents, he did not waver in his chosen battle until his last day, and then only when a blow split open his skull.”

Early in the days when the process began that transformed the liberating hopes of the revolution into the reality of the new tyranny, he took his stand against the recession without being asked, if it was popular or unpopular to do so, without making sure first of all that victory was guaranteed in advance, without concern for his personal fate. Against the rise of totalitarianism he planted his feet wide and stubbornly, never giving ground or bending his neck, fighting with open visor and with the weapons of his rich intellectual arsenal. Even after all his comrades had fallen or conceded to the enemy, even after he was driven from exile to exile on three continents he did not waver in his chosen battle until his last day, and then only when a blow split open his skull.

There have not been many figures like this in the political world



of our century. It is no wonder then that his ideas and his struggles opened the minds and lifted the hearts of many of the best of a whole generation, young and old. The Trotskyists did not succeed in the thirties, or afterward, in becoming a real political force, as the Communists for a while did. But while Trotskyism did not create a political party, it did create a political school. And many learned their politics and their ideals in it. In studying this school, in working in it, in fighting with it, there was much to learn. And

if in later years, many found that some of it had to be unlearned, much of it proved nonetheless to be fructifying and durable; and it remained.

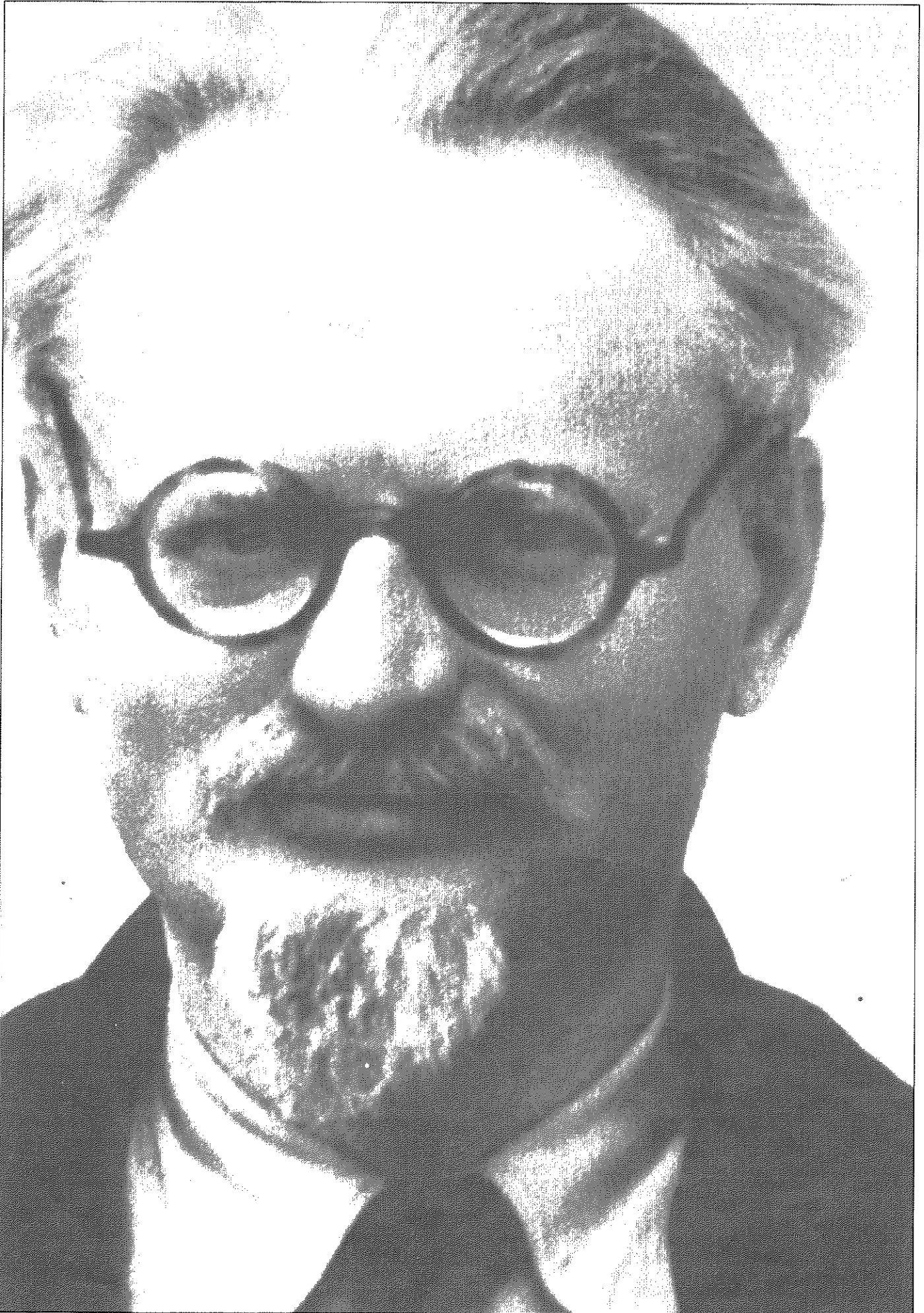
It would not be easy to find many of those who went through this school and fought its fight in the thirties who would express resentments or regrets. Justice Holmes once wrote: “A man should have a part in the passions and the actions of his time, at the peril of being judged not to have lived.” Those of use who went through the thirties would subscribe heartily to these handsome words. We know how true they were then. You will surely understand me if I add that they are no less true of the sixties.

Max Shachtman, 1967

Trotsky's Testament

I see the bright green strip of grass
Beneath the wall
And the clear blue sky
Above the wall
And sunlight everywhere
Life is beautiful
Let the future generations cleanse it
Of all evil
Oppression
And violence
And enjoy it to the full

1940



Trotsky and "Trotskyism"

BY the time he was struck down by Stalin's assassin on 20 August 1940, Leon Trotsky had for years insisted that the Stalinist USSR was socially, economically and politically an unstable formation, historically untenable. It could not last for long, he believed, and proclaimed. It must, and soon, in "a few months or years" be overturned and replaced by either a restored capitalism or by a new working class revolution [*In Defence of Marxism*].

Stalinism to Trotsky was a phenomenon of the destruction and decay of the October revolution: it was comprehensively reactionary. The "Transitional Programme" Trotsky drafted for the Fourth International in 1938 said in plain and true words, erring only in the direction of understatement, that the Stalin regime differed from [pre-Holocaust] Hitlerism "only by its more unbridled savagery."

Arguing that the USSR's nationalised property was "potentially progressive" (*IDM*) he said that the looming question was whether the bureaucracy would be overthrown by world capitalism or by the USSR's own working class: the first would greatly strengthen monopoly capitalism, the second would be a renewal of October. It was the task of the working class to bring socialism. In that sense, Trotsky remained an "unconditional defencist" for what he called the "degenerated workers' state."

The new working class revolution which Trotsky advocated would, he thought, "preserve collectivised property" and would, therefore, be "only" a "political revolution"; it would however overthrow the rule of the bureaucrats, smash their state, revive working class democracy, put the working class and not the "bureaucratic caste" in control of the economy, and liberate the oppressed nations of the USSR — in other words, the "political revolution" as conceived by Trotsky would be a thorough-going social revolution.

While reserving the term "imperialism" in the mid 20th century for predatory monopoly capitalism, he insisted that, nevertheless, in the foreign policy of the "potentially progressive" USSR there were already "elements of imperialism" (*IDM*).

Though he died never knowing the full extent of the horrors perpetrated by the regime which he compared unfavourably with Hitlerism, Trotsky knew how remote the Stalinist system was from socialism, how much of a regression it was even from bourgeois civilisation. But bourgeois civilisation too was descending into barbarism.

The historical and conceptual framework in which Trotsky saw the USSR was central here: fully collectivised property had emerged only because of the October revolution, and even in the epoch of Stalinist degeneration there remained something "proletarian" about it. Towards the collectivised economy the bureaucracy felt uneasy and antagonistic: it was not their form of property but the property form appropriate to the social rule of the working class. Yet in the last year of his life Trotsky effectively abandoned this conceptual framework.

When in September 1939 he admitted the theoretical possibility that a fully collectivised economy could form the basis of the rule of an exploiting minority class (*IDM — USSR in War*), he thus destroyed the theoretical framework according to which he had, while recording the horrors of Stalinism and working for a new proletarian revolution, continued to see it as residually a working class state. He did not, however, while taking the decisive intellectual step in that direction, jettison his old *political position*.

It was too early, he argued, to say that this was already so, that the USSR's collectivised property, which was functionally the property of the bureaucracy that controlled the state, was the basis of a new fully-formed exploiting class. The rule of the bureaucracy was too unstable, too far from consolidation, its prospect of survival for more than a few months or years too remote, to require the abandonment of the view that it was a transitional phenomenon of the decay of the October revolution, and the political attitudes that for Trotsky went with it.

II

WHAT Trotsky wrote in September 1939 was, however, a plain statement of how — unless he radically shifted his way of seeing things — he would have seen the Soviet Union had he lived three, five or ten years longer into the era when the bureaucratic Stalinist state, surviving the

Nazi invasion of June 1941, became one of the two world superpowers, surrounded with a cluster of conquered vassal states that stretched into the centre of Europe and dissected Germany.

On the basis of what he wrote and of the direction in which his thought was evolving, it is clear that Trotsky could not have been a latter-day "Trotskyist", subscribing to the politics encapsulated in that word from the late '40s to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and into our own time. (His companion of 40 years Natalia Sedova, who lived until 1962, was not. She broke, after years of internal criticism, with the Pablo, Mandel, Cannon "Fourth International" in 1951).

Post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" revised and jettisoned almost every key idea of Trotsky's on Stalinism. It came to see the Stalinist USSR — that is the rule of the bureaucracy in a totalitarian property-collectivised state — as stable but still a "degenerated workers' state": turning Trotsky's ideas inside out, they saw the USSR — and inescapably, Stalinism — now as historically progressive and "post-capitalist". It was "in transition to socialism" by way of emulation and, maybe, warlike competition with advanced capitalism.

"Defence of the Soviet Union" became a primary and automatic identification with the atomic bomb-armed Stalinist bloc of states. The expansion of Stalinism, either by armed Russian conquest or by the victory of autonomous Stalinist formations in backward countries, such as Mao's, or Tito's, or Ho's, was, though its methods were not to be recommended, progressive, and therefore it had to be supported against the bourgeoisie and imperialism. The workers' revolution, which for Trotsky was a working-class movement for emancipation came — "critically" — to be identified with the survival and expansion of Stalinism. Criticism was very much secondary: for this was the — deformed — proletarian revolution. This, for now, was the unfolding world revolution.

In this way Leon Trotsky's basic, defining ideas were, though his terminology was retained, turned inside out and upside down. The great texts of Trotskyism, into which his "disciples" interpolated alien ideas, came in this era to have much in common with medieval palimpsests!

To take the strangest example: Stalin in October 1924 proclaimed the dogma of "Socialism In One Country", making it the world outlook of the new bureaucracy, and counterposing it to the ideas of October, which were anathemised as "Trotskyite" Permanent Revolution. What, to Trotsky, was wrong with Socialism In One Country? It subverted the basic Marxist idea that socialism necessarily grows out of advanced capitalism, because only here, for the first time in history, is there the possibility of escaping from the condition of social scarcity which throughout human history has generated and re-generated exploiting classes and class societies — as it did in Russia even after the workers had taken power there.

In its place the Stalinists put forward a crass variant of the old idea of the mid-19th century utopian socialists — Robert Owen, Etienne Cabet — that a socialist society — in backward Russia! — could be created outside of and parallel to capitalism, demonstrating its superiority, and finally overtaking and replacing advanced capitalism. The Bolsheviks of 1917 had no such idea, believing that though the Russian working class could take power in a backward country, they were ultimately doomed to defeat there unless the revolution spread to the advanced capitalist countries which were "ripe" for the building of a socialist society.

The post-Trotsky "Trotskyists" idea that the USSR and China and Russia's satellites in Eastern Europe, most of them very backward, were "in transition to socialism" was inescapably an acceptance of the fundamentals of "Socialism In One Country". The "utopian" colonies were totalitarian states which covered a third of the earth and were armed with immense armies and nuclear bombs, but, if they had anything to do with socialism they were, in terms of the Marxist theory of the relationship between capitalism and socialism, utopian colonies!

III

POST-TROTSKY "Trotskyism" tended to be, and on questions of international politics invariably became a political satellite, a political captive, of world Stalinism in its era of seemingly irreversible success.

This was in direct consequence of the movement's failure to continue along the lines Trotsky was on at the end of his life, and of its failure, in the light of the events of the Second World War and after, to draw for practical politics the conclusions he had already "theoretically" indicated: that the Stalinist system was a form of class society; that, moreover, far from being historically progressive and "proletarian", it was a historically regressive system, a historical blind alley, in which the workers

stood somewhere between the wage slaves of capitalism and earlier forms of slavery based on the forced physical control of the workers.

Worse: because they did not go forward, they went backward from Trotsky's position of 1940. For Stalinist states in which autonomous Stalinist forces, peasant armies led by declassed parties, cut their own road to power and created fully-fledged Stalinist systems — Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Cuba — the post-Trotsky Trotskyists, for a longer or shorter period, abandoned the revolutionary programme Trotsky had advocated for workers faced with full-fledged Stalinism in the USSR.

For Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, they — politically speaking — dropped Trotsky from "Trotskyism"! They had earlier dropped Marx and Lenin: their ideas about the ongoing "World Revolution" whose visible expression was the expansion of Stalinism meant a break with both Marx's ideas about the centrality of the working class and Lenin's development of this, the theory of the revolutionary party.

By advocating a policy of reform for totalitarian Stalinist states in which there had never been a working-class revolution, where the working class was atomised and the old labour movements pulverised by regimes which had from the start been fully bureaucratic high Stalinist regimes, they thus, though nobody acknowledged it, put in Trotsky's place in post-Trotsky-"Trotskyism", Heinrich Brandler — the right-wing Communist of the '30s, loyal critic of Stalin, and leader of an international current of dissident communists, old associates of Bukharin — and Brandler's disciple Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's influential biographer, and doyen of the palimpsestists.

They abandoned the ground of Trotsky, and amalgamated "Trotskyism" and "Brandlerism". Trotsky had denounced the Brandlerites in the last half of the '30s because, amongst other things, they refused to recognise either that the Stalin bureaucracy was a distinct social formation or that it needed to be overthrown by a new working-class revolution.

The Mandel-Pablo tendency did not come out for working-class revolution in China for 20 years after Mao took power! They have never declared for working-class revolution in Cuba!

The amalgamation in one incoherent political current of Trotsky's revolutionary working-class programme for Russian Stalinism with the politics of Brandler and Deutscher applied to China, Yugoslavia etc., generated an ever-mutating political instability in post-Trotsky "Trotskyism", faced as it was with the expansion of revolutionary, anti-capitalist Third World Stalinism. Many political variations, nuances and permutations grew up within "Trotskyist" terminology, generating a large archipelago of post-Trotsky "Trotskyist" groups.

Nevertheless, despite the fundamental falseness of the theories about Stalinism that they mutated out of Trotsky, throughout this long and, for socialism, bleak period of history, the "Trotskyists" — albeit ambivalently, incoherently and unreliably, and always subject to the exigencies of the need to "defend the Soviet Union" and the other Stalinist states — provided a radical, democratically-inclined, working class-centred, Marx-influenced critique of Stalinism. Their ambivalence and confusions may even have made their ideas accessible and acceptable to would-be revolutionaries influenced by the fact and politics of "actually existing Communism", that is Stalinism. That is one reason why this current survived and spread.

This relatively progressive role was possible, despite everything because on basic policy towards Stalinism's savagely exploited workers and oppressed nationalities, and on the concrete tasks of the working class in what he called the anti-Stalinist political revolution, Trotsky's position at the end of his life already anticipated and prefigured the programme appropriate to an analysis of Stalinism as the oppressive class society it was. Trotsky knew this: his quarrel in 1939/40 with those who wanted to declare the USSR to be a new form of class society did not lie here, in the realm of working class programme for the fight against Stalin.

Thus the core of Trotsky's critique of Stalin proved hard and durable even after the theoretical underpinning, wrong already in the last decade of Leon Trotsky's life, had come to be glaringly, absurdly, at odds with reality, and even though the flux of world politics worked constantly to attach the Trotskyists to the Stalinist bloc as mere loyal, "defencist" critics. Marx once wrote — in 1875 — a withering critique of the German social democracy's "Gotha Programme" but did not publish it

[Engels later did] because despite glaring theoretical inadequacies, the programme functioned roughly as a radical socialist manifesto against capitalism. Something like that could be said of the theoretically disorientated Trotskyists in their relationship to Stalinism, which they saw as both historical progress and murderous reaction. They provided a sometimes roughly adequate working-class critique of Stalinism in the USSR and, despite their reform-Stalinist Brandlerism for China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Cuba, sometimes for Stalinism elsewhere.

IV

THE following article by Max Shachtman tells the story of the 1939-40 dispute about revolutionary socialist policy for the Soviet Union from the point of view of Trotsky's opponents, of whom Shachtman was the most important. When it was published, in 1962, Shachtman was, for practical purposes, a reform socialist, but that has no bearing on the issues here.

In essence Trotsky said to his opponents in 1939-40 who tried — and not all that coherently, then — to draw conclusions from events and from his trajectory: "not yet." Given the semi-collapse of capitalism after 1929, Trotsky thought that to accept that the USSR was a society of "bureaucratic collectivism" was to accept that such a system and not working class socialism would replace capitalism on a world scale. With the post-World War II revival and expansion of capitalism — which eventually buried Russian Stalinism — no such implication could reasonably be drawn from it. (Though the fear of it seems to have governed Max Shachtman, who died in 1972, for the rest of his life).

Plainly Stalinism was a form to capitalism in backward countries.

One of the tragedies of post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" was that the

polemics he wrote then — collected in *In Defence of Marxism* — could for generations be presented as Trotsky's last word on the question of Stalinism and used to sustain politics which Trotsky — there is no reasonable ground to doubt it — would have condemned as treacherous "centrist" absurdity — as indeed he had condemned the politics of the Brandlerites in the '30s.

The collapse of the USSR has destroyed the entire basis on which the epigonic

post-Trotsky "Trotskyists" constructed their world view, their "perspectives" and their recycled utopian socialist, populist hopes for short or medium-term victory. That is progress! Young revolutionaries by studying the history of the movement will learn to distinguish between Trotskyism and kitsch-Trotskyism and between the real Trotskyist tradition and the tainted traditions accumulated during the long decades of kitsch-Trotskyist predominance. Thus they will equip themselves for the work of reconstructing a healthy socialist movement rooted in the politics of unfalsified Marxism which, in his time, Leon Trotsky personified.

After Trotsky's death the Shachtman current created a distinctive variant of Trotskyist politics, advocating responses to events radically different from those of the other "Trotskyists." Though not always right, these were usually more coherent and reality-grounded, and always unambivalently hostile to Stalinism. The politics of that current, which, most of it, sank slowly into a bleak, half-despairing reformism, can not be simply appropriated after so many years. Its literary remains, including its on-going criticism of "mainstream Trotskyism" in the '40s and '50s, constitute an important resource for the new generation of revolutionary socialists struggling to cleanse the living kernel of Trotskyist politics of the encrustations of the era of Stalinist hegemony and recreate a living revolutionary Marxist tradition.

* *In Defence of Marxism*, a selection of Leon Trotsky's writings on the USSR after September 1939, misrepresents Trotsky's position. As well as the polemics Trotsky was writing in defence of the degenerated workers' state thesis, there were many articles written at the same time damning Stalinism and linking Stalin and Hitler. Put out in 1943 by the SWP USA, which was then in a fever of pro-USSR patriotism, this one — selective — collection was kept continually in circulation while Trotsky's contemporaneous writings on Stalinism remained out of print for one third of a century. The pieces in *In Defence of Marxism*, read in proper sequence together with Trotsky's other articles of this time [which are in the 1940 volume of his work], add up to a very different picture of Trotsky's assessment of Stalinism at the end of his life.

"The collapse of the USSR has destroyed the entire basis on which the epigonic post-Trotsky "Trotskyists" constructed their world view."