

## Reassessing Trotsky's biography of Stalin

John Riddell

*Presentation to GERG conference in Winnipeg, September 29-October 1, 2017*

The new and complete edition of Leon Trotsky's biography of Joseph Stalin is a significant contribution to understanding of Trotsky's thinking in the last years before his execution in 1940.

This handsome volume, carefully prepared by Alan Woods and a team of collaborators, consists of two quite different parts.

- The first seven chapters, covering the years up to 1917, were drafted and edited by Trotsky as a continuous manuscript.
- The rest of the book's nearly 1,000 pages consists of fragmentary texts and documents assembled by Trotsky for the remaining chapters that he left unwritten.

An initial and unauthorized version of this work was published in 1946 by Harper and Bros. under the editorship of Charles Malamuth. It gave rise to both protests and confusion. Malamuth published the pre-1917 text essentially as prepared by Trotsky. The second half of this edition, however, arbitrarily selected a portion of Trotsky's texts and filled them out with extensive bracketed interpolations, which in one chapter made up 62% of the text.

Trotsky's cothinkers maintained that Malamuth's additions run "direct counter to Trotsky's own ideas." Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, vigorously protested this "unheard-of violence committed by the translator on the author's rights" – but to no avail.<sup>1</sup>

The objections centered on two concepts present in Malamuth's commentary that ran counter to Trotsky's long-held views: (1) that Stalinism was the inevitable outcome of Bolshevism; and (2) that the Soviet Union under Stalin was no longer in any sense a workers' state.

Did the unpublished portions of Trotsky's preparatory material perhaps provide a basis for this interpretation? It seemed unlikely, but still, the Alan Woods edition enables us to be sure.

Let us review the evidence on each of these two points.

---

1. See John G. Wright, "A Biography of Stalin," *Fourth International*, July 1946, pp. 18–21, and introduction to Leon Trotsky, *Stalin*, London: Wellred Books, 2016.

## First, did Bolshevism Lead to Stalinism?

Regarding this long-standing accusation against revolutionary Marxists in Russia, I find no supporting evidence in the manuscripts just published in part 2 of this book. A significant passage in part 2 refutes this charge.

In the previously published first half of the book, Trotsky argues that Stalin before 1917 was a “committeeman” *par excellence*, that is, a *praktik*, a political empiricist, who “reacted with indifference and subsequently with contempt toward the émigrés,” toward the “foreign centre” made up of Lenin and his close comrades in exile.

In the first half of his Stalin biography, Trotsky returns to the well-known critique of Lenin and Bolshevism wrote in 1904 under the title *Our Political Tasks*. Trotsky holds that this 1904 pamphlet was “fairly accurate” in stating that “the committeemen of those days had ‘foregone the need to rely upon the workers after they had found support in the principle of centralism.’”

Trotsky points to Lenin’s statement in 1905 that “there is evidently an illness in the Party.” Trotsky then comments: “That illness was the high-handedness of the political machine, the beginning of bureaucracy.” One might infer that bureaucracy, the very essence and breeding grounds of Stalinism, was already a malignant disease in the Bolshevism of 1904.<sup>2</sup>

Yet in reading Trotsky’s words, the context must be kept in mind. The Bolshevik local leaders under tsarism – the “praktiki” -- were not office-proud privileged officials. They were activists on the run from severe, unrelenting repression. Trotsky tells us that they spent half their time on average in detention. Extreme caution in consulting and selecting colleagues was a necessity of “*konspiratsiia*” – the rules for survival in the revolutionary underground.

The rise of mass workers’ struggles in 1905 eased the pressure of illegality and permitted the party to function more democratically and inclusively. Lenin was among the first to see this and pressed strongly for change. And the party did change, only to endure a new onslaught of tsarist repression in 1907 and after.

Elsewhere, Trotsky states that the political machine of the Bolshevik Party prior to 1917 was “petty bourgeois in its origins and conditions of life” and that Stalin “expressed the conservative inclinations of the party machine.” In Trotsky’s view, during the weeks after Russia’s February 1917 revolution, the conciliationist drift of this apparatus was steering the party toward liquidation into the Mensheviks. The party was then redeemed only by the arrival of Lenin, whom Trotsky termed “the leader of genius.”<sup>3</sup>

---

2. Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 82–84.

3. See *Stalin*, pp. 257, 265, 259.

(The word here translated as “conciliationist” referred to revolutionary Social Democrats who, like Trotsky himself during the 13 years prior to 1917, sought an accord with more moderate Menshevik forces.)

Yet four hundred pages later on, in the second section, we find a section entitled “Stalinism vs. Leninism” that repeats general remarks about the deficiencies of the Bolshevik apparatus but comes to a quite different conclusion. Trotsky here repudiates his 1904 pamphlet and affirms that the Bolsheviks achieved a fruitful balance of democracy and centralism.<sup>4</sup> He then explains how outside forces disrupted this balance:

The violation of this balance was not a logical result of Lenin’s organizational principles, but the political consequence of the changed balance of forces between the Party and the class. The Party degenerated socially, becoming the organization of the bureaucracy. Exaggerated centralism became a necessary means of self-defence.

Revolutionary centralism was transformed into bureaucratic centralism. The apparatus, which cannot and dare not appeal to the masses in order to restore internal conflicts, is compelled to seek a higher power, standing above itself. That is why bureaucratic centralism inevitably leads to personal dictatorship.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have Trotsky’s balanced view, consistent with his other later writings. The overriding cause of Stalinist degeneration was not inherent flaws in Bolshevism, he states, but the pressure of objective circumstances.

The discrepancy between these two passages justifies a warning. There are many such false starts and repetitions in the manuscript. Trotsky would surely have addressed these issues if he had been afforded an opportunity to complete the text and edit it for publication. Stalin’s assassin cut that short. As a result, no passage in the manuscript can be taken, in itself, as his definitive opinion. What Trotsky left to us was not so much a book as an archive of materials for a work in progress.

Setting aside the issue of the Soviet state’s class character, we must now assess Trotsky’s criticism of the Bolshevik underground leadership as petty-bourgeois in class orientation, bureaucratic in methods, and conservative in political direction. To my mind, this seems implausible. As Trotsky writes elsewhere in this manuscript, in quite a different context, how is it possible that such a fatally flawed party carried out the October revolution?

The most often-heard answer to this objection is that Lenin transformed the Bolshevik party immediately on his return to Russia in April 1917, a process often called the “re-arming of the party.” This interpretation is well stated, for example, in Alexander

---

4. See pp. 673–7.

5. *Stalin*, p. 676.

Rabinowitch's authoritative history of the revolution in Petrograd.<sup>6</sup> It has been strongly contested by Lars Lih and recently by Eric Blanc; their key writings are [on my website](#), along with rebuttals. These resources provide a firm basis for informed reconsideration of the "rearming thesis" and need to be encompassed in assessing Trotsky's viewpoint.<sup>7</sup>

### **Was the Soviet Union no longer a workers' state?**

Publication of this manuscript also enables us to test a second hypothesis suggested by the 1946 Malamuth edition: that Trotsky, in his final months, was retreating from his long-held contention that the Soviet Union, even under Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship, remained a "degenerated" workers' state.

First, I must say that having read the full text, I find his comments on the Soviet Union and its ruling layer to be consistent with his previous position, particularly regarding its character as a "bureaucratic caste" rather than a new "ruling class." I do not see a shift in approach. But my opinion is hardly conclusive, and we must try other lines of inquiry.

My friend and colleague Paul Kellogg has made the useful suggestion that we examine Trotsky's use in this manuscript of the concept that the Soviet ruling layer has control over disposition of the social surplus. Paul has suggested that this control is a defining characteristic of a ruling class. And affirming that the ruling layer under Stalin is a "class" is a marker, as Trotsky was well aware, of the theory that the Soviet Union under Stalin did not represent a workers' state.

I found three passages in this manuscript where this concept comes up, and in each case the context is the early and mid-1920s, the time of the early New Economic Policy. Each of them explicitly counterposes control of the surplus by the bureaucracy to that by the newly resurgent capitalist forces. Here are the passages:

The *kulak* [rich peasant] joined forces with the small industrialist to work for the complete restoration of capitalism. In this way, an irreconcilable struggle opened

---

6. Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 32–47.

7. See in particular:

- Lih, Lars, "All Power to the Soviets," a series of studies listed at "[A Basic Question: Lenin Glosses the April Theses.](#)"
- Blanc, Eric, "[A revolutionary line of march: 'Old Bolshevism' in early 1917 re-examined.](#)"
- Proyect, Louis, "[The revolutionary democratic-dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry? Say what?](#)"
- Marot. John, "[Lenin, Bolshevism, and Social-Democratic political theory.](#)"

up over the division of the surplus product of labour. Who would dispose of it in the near future: the new bourgeoisie or the Soviet bureaucracy?

The economy revived. A small surplus appeared. Naturally it was concentrated in the cities and at the disposal of the ruling strata.

In regard to the [struggle over the] national surplus product, the bureaucracy and the petty-bourgeoisie quickly changed from an alliance to direct enemies. The control of the surplus product opened the bureaucracy's road to power.<sup>8</sup>

This certainly does not read like an announcement of restoration of capitalist rule. Surely, if Trotsky concluded, in his final months, that the workers' state had been overturned in 1921, he would have voiced this view, at least as a hypothesis for discussion.

Nowhere in other writings on that period does Trotsky suggest that the Soviet republic was anything other than a workers' state. During the early 1920, Lenin did speak of the Soviet economy (not the state) as "state capitalist" in character; Trotsky declined to use that term.<sup>9</sup>

A second line of inquiry concerns the date of composition. Does this manuscript in fact contain Trotsky's final comments on the Soviet state under Stalin?

The editors' introductory material provides clues as to this date. Trotsky continued to write and edit until he was killed on August 21, 1920. At the time of his death, he is said to have been looking forward to resuming work on "my poor book" after a long and frustrating pause. The latest time that he might have worked on it, we learn, was May. But a review of political events at that time indicates that he must have ceased work at least eight months earlier.

During the last year of Trotsky's life, a series of events related to the outbreak of world war challenged all Marxists, including Trotsky, to review their analysis of the Soviet Union. These events included:

- The Stalin-Hitler treaty, which gave the Nazis the green light for war.
- The Soviet seizure of the country's eastern marches of Poland during Hitler's conquest of that country.
- The structural assimilation of these regions, which necessarily included (although details became available only later) extensive arrests and killings of those judged

---

8. Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 563, 589, and 595.

9. See the speeches by Lenin, Trotsky, and Clara Zetkin on the New Economic Policy which appear in Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front*, 2011. The speeches are analyzed, with references, *ibid.* pp. 36–41.

to be potentially disloyal – an extension of Stalin’s massacres in the Soviet Union during the previous decade.<sup>10</sup>

- Soviet occupation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and their incorporation into the Soviet Union.
- A Soviet war against Finland.

Many Marxists, including prominent leaders of the Trotskyist movement, took these events as proof that the Soviet Union was no longer in any sense a workers’ state and should not be defended in the onrushing war. Trotsky judged these actions to be justifiable as measures of military defense against German attack but pointed out that the cost in terms of world workers’ sympathy with the Soviet Union outweighed any military advantage.

Trotsky also posed Soviet occupation of these borderlands as a test of the Soviet state’s character. Would it be able to tolerate and utilize the capitalist social system in these territories, as China – to use a contemporary example – has done in Hong Kong? On the contrary, capitalist relations were overturned and the nationalized and planned economy extended to the occupied borderlands, proving the two systems’ incompatibility.

A debate on these issues flared up among Trotsky’s supporters in the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.), and Trotsky took part actively. His writings, running from 12 September 1939 to 17 August 1940, fill a good-sized book.<sup>11</sup>

There is no reference to these events or to the discussion around them in Trotsky’s *Stalin* manuscript.

Could it be that he had just not got to that point in his story? No, because Trotsky did not write the manuscript sequentially from beginning to end. He assembled materials for all projected chapters simultaneously, and his fragmentary texts and source material were sorted, as they became available, into folders relating to each chapter. If Trotsky had been working on his Stalin biography between September 1939 and May 1940, while he was immersed in writing on the war and the USSR, this would be reflected in his Stalin biography manuscript. The fragments he wrote on the Soviet state’s degeneration, which deals with events as late as 1938, cover 40 pages of the biography. Yet there is no mention of events surrounding the outbreak of World War 2 or of the resulting debate in this or any part of his Stalin manuscript.

---

10. Long after the war, Russian authorities admitted Soviet responsibility for the notorious “Katyn” massacres, in which some 20,000 suspects were killed.

11. Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism: The Social and Political Contradictions of the Soviet Union* [IDOM], New York: Pathfinder Press, 1990.

This shows conclusively that the manuscript was compiled before the outbreak of war and does not represent Trotsky's final views on the character of the Soviet Union. These are found in the *In Defense of Marxism* collection.

### **Trotsky's final writings on the Soviet Union**

The Stalin-Hitler pact of 23 August 1939 resulted in immediate calls within the Trotskyist movement for a change of stance regarding the USSR. Trotsky responded on September 12: "Who says that the USSR is no more a degenerate workers' state, but a new social formation, should clearly say what he adds to our *political conclusions*."<sup>12</sup>

The central political issue, as he saw it, was not what to call the Soviet Union but where to stand on its conflicts with imperialist states. "Suppose that Hitler turns his weapons against the east," Trotsky wrote later that month. The Fourth International, made up of Trotsky's supporters worldwide, will adopt "as the most urgent task of the hour, the military resistance against Hitler.... While arms in hand they deal blows to Hitler, [they] will at the same time conduct revolutionary propaganda against Stalin preparing his overthrow at the next and perhaps very near stage."<sup>13</sup>

On 25 April 1940, after more than six months of debate, Trotsky wrote a summary comment on the Finnish war in which he called on socialists to "explain to the world working class that no matter what crimes Stalin may be guilty of we cannot permit world imperialism to crush the Soviet Union, reestablish capitalism and convert the land of the October Revolution into a colony."<sup>14</sup>

A month later, on May 28, he completed a manifesto on the war. It includes a section "Defense of the USSR" that states, in part:

[T]he crimes of the Kremlin oligarchy do not strike off the agenda the question of the existence of the USSR. Its defeat in the world war would signify not merely the overthrow of the totalitarian bureaucracy but the liquidation of the new forms of property, the collapse of the first experiment in planned economy, and the transformation of the entire country into a colony; that is, the handing over to imperialism of colossal natural resources which would give it a respite until the third world war. Neither the peoples of the USSR nor the world working class as a whole care for such an outcome.<sup>15</sup>

---

12. Trotsky, *IDOM*, p. 1: "A Letter to James P. Cannon," September 12, 1939.

13. Trotsky, *IDOM*, p. 20.

14. Trotsky, *IDOM*, "Balance Sheet of the Finnish Events," p. 176.

15. "[Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and the Imperialist War.](#)" See also [Trotsky's letter on completing the Manifesto.](#)

Among those who believed that the workers' state had been entirely extirpated under Stalin and that the USSR represented either a capitalist restoration or a new form of class oppression, there were some who nonetheless favoured defending it against Hitler. However, most of those with this position, however, embraced a "third camp" position of de facto neutrality regarding conflicts between the USSR and Hitler's Germany. This position was maintained when Hitler's forces invaded the USSR the following year.<sup>16</sup> At a time when Hitler had unleashed genocidal slaughter against the Jews and Eastern European peoples, this position seems counterintuitive, to say the least. Sincere socialists seemed to have been caught in a doctrinal trap.

The question has been reposed in Europe today by the rise of far-right movements in many countries – Ukraine, Hungary, France, etc. – whose historical lineage goes back to Hitler's allies in the Nazi-dominated countries of Europe. For many neo-Nazis in Europe today, Hitler's war against the U.S. may seem misguided, but his crusade in Eastern Europe was a just war against communist barbarism. A socialist stance of neutrality on that war seems an inadequate response.

Reference to the horrendous human cost of Stalinist repression do not help us here. Trotsky affirmed that the Stalinist system of rule was similar to that of Hitler, applying the epithet "totalitarian." The question was whether working people could make use of the Soviet state and army to resist fascism and, thereby, to open the road to revolution.

In this regard, it is significant that both the quoted statements by Trotsky on defense of the USSR in the last months of his life note that the goal of Hitlerite Germany in its impending war against the Soviet Union would be not merely to conquer it and lay claim to its resources but to subject it to a vast project of settler colonialism. This was no secret at the time. Germany's rulers had floated this project many decades previously, terming it the quest for "Lebensraum" – living space. In 1914, they had integrated it into their war aims. The Nazis picked up on this project, included it in their foundational statements, and imbued it with their characteristically aggressive racist extremism.

As Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel later pointed out, the Nazis' genocidal methods were not new: they had been used before against peoples of Asia, Africa, and America. What was particularly horrifying about Nazi genocide was its employment against industrialized and culturally "advanced" white peoples of Europe.<sup>17</sup>

This neglected anticolonial thread in Trotsky's final statements on defense of the Soviet Union provides a framework within which Marxists who differ on sociological definition

---

16. See "[The War in Russia](#)," a manifesto of the American Committee for the Fourth International, in *New International*, September 1941, pp. 241–7.

17. Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, London: Verso, 1986, pp. 90-3.

of the Soviet Union may find common ground in their assessment of the historic clash of German fascism with the Soviet Union.