

# a BRIEF ACCOUNT OF TROTSKYISM

20903

LAURENS OTTER  
West Midlands Jubilee  
Group.

This short account assumes almost total ignorance. It is not however entirely dispassionate. I was involved in some of the splits. I have written various articles and pamphlets attacking Trotskyist orthodoxy from the Left, and therefore am hardly dispassionate. Some of the more personal details which are relevant to the more recent history of Trotskyism in Britain are perhaps not suitable for general circulation and have therefore been omitted.

\* The Russian Revolution came to power as the conquest of state power by the Soviets. By the time the Soviets took power, the Bolshevik Party and the groups (including the "Left Social Revolutionaries") who were following a more or less Bolshevik line - the latter in fact numbered more than the Bolsheviks themselves - were the majority in the Soviets. There were critics, ranging from opponents to hesitant allies, to the Left and Right of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks themselves had recently absorbed two smaller groups: the "Social Democrat Internationalists" led by Maxim Gorki, and the Mezhariontii led by Trotsky. They had also been rejoined by a number of people who had been previously expelled or resigned from the party.

The differences between the Bolshevikii and the other groups was mainly on a matter of organisation, although differences on organisation usually reflect deeper divisions on political issues. Until a few months before the October Revolution, Lenin had been in exile, as had many of the leading Russian revolutionaries including Trotsky, and the paper of the Bolshevikii was edited by Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin. They supported the Provisional Government which had arisen after the February Revolution. Lenin in the famous April Theses came out for immediate opposition to the Provisional Government and a struggle for Soviet power, a position previously only held by the Far Left - anarchists, syndicalists, maximalist social revolutionaries - and Trotsky's Mezhariontii. The Bolsheviks in Russia however suppressed Lenin's theses.

When Lenin returned to Russia, the Bolshevik central committee tried to prevent him from speaking to the masses directly, and at one stage a motion was passed through the central committee expelling him from the party. Therefore in a real sense the fusion of the Bolshevikii with the Mezhariontii was not a case of Trotsky winding up his organisation and independent position in order to join Lenin, but rather Lenin, against the wishes of those who had formed the leadership of the party within Russia, re-orienting his party to follow Trotsky's earlier line, and join Trotsky. It should be pointed out that Trotsky immediately on his return to Russia was elected President of the Petrograd Soviet, the body which was later actually responsible for calling the revolution, and this was because of his courageous work as President of the earlier Petrograd Soviet of 1905.

Isaac Deutscher in his biography of Trotsky makes the point that most of what we know of him in the West comes from the time of his exile from Soviet Russia when he was at pains to underplay any

\*"Soviet" merely means "council"

differences he had with Lenin. The Stalinists were saying that he had always disagreed with Lenin. This meant that he didn't say, "Yes, I disagreed with Lenin on occasions, and later Lenin agreed I'd been right", which was more or less the truth. It is particularly true of Trotsky's critique of Leninist organisational/party theory. So while Trotsky wrote what was perhaps the best debunking of Bolshevik organisational concepts, he was to forget this when he was ousted by Stalin, and the parties he tried to set up in the West were on the Leninist model, not his own earlier one, even though in practice his had been proved to be more effective.

In his writing even before the revolution, Trotsky had warned that the Bolshevik model would lead not to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but of the proletariat party, which would degenerate into that of the party over the proletariat, not long into that of the party ruled by the central committee, and finally one would have the dictatorship of one man over the central committee, over the party, over the proletariat. But in power, he proved authoritarian. He justified the suppression of independent soviet power, the suppression of all parties outside the Bolsheviks, the suppression of all factions within the party. He justified the imposition of one-man-management in industry, taking railways, mines and petroleum away from direct workers' control. He led military attacks on the soviet of the Vyborg Quarter of Petrograd which had been the centre of the revolutionary faction before the October Revolution, against Makhno whom he attacked in the back while Makhno was fighting the Tsarists, and against the Kronstadters. Kronstadt had been the first significant military post to rally to the revolution, had protected the Kerenski Provisional Government from an attack by the Tsar, had then protected the Petrograd Soviet from the Provisional Government's attacks, and was now demanding that the programme on which the October Revolution had been made be implemented. He also started the suppression of the trade unions.

Nevertheless, when Lenin died, Trotsky was seen as the focus of Leftist opposition to the regime. There were a few, mainly anarchist and maximalist, who never forgave him his earlier attacks on the Left, and refused to have anything to do with him, saying that there was no difference between him and Stalin. When Trotsky said that Stalin was the gravedigger of the revolution, they, reasonably enough, pointed out that a grave only needs to be dug when there is a body, and that Trotsky had been the murderer - rather Lenin and Trotsky together.

Trotsky was forced into exile and he tried to set up an international Left opposition. His position changed with the passage of time. He believed at first that Stalin represented only minor things which were wrong with the Communists and Russia, that only a few reforms would be necessary to put Russia back on the right track, and only a shift in tactics for the Communists internationally. It was only when he saw that Stalin's tactics were largely responsible for Hitler coming to power that he came out for a revolution in Russia against Stalin and a different Communist international. He always held that Russia was still in a sense a workers' state, albeit a degenerate and deformed one, and he attacked people who held it to be "state capitalist" (bureaucratic collectivist), though many people, including his widow, believed that had he lived longer, he would have shifted his position here too. In fact his Testament gives those who hold this view quite a lot of arguments.

### British Trotskyism

On the beginnings of Trotskyism the best introduction is Reg Groves, The Balham Group: How British Trotskyism Began (Pluto Press, 1974, £1.20). If one relies on most modern Trotskyist writers, one is not liable to hear that Trotskyism in Britain began as an offshoot of the Catholic Crusade. Conrad Noel took the Crusade out of the Communist Party, and one of the London chapters thought that this would separate them from the working class. So at a meeting held in Father John Groser's house, they resolved to join the Communist Party as individuals rather than as an affiliated group. A year later, this group, who controlled the Balham Branch of the Party, got into trouble with Communist Party officialdom, and since they were involved in joint campaigns with other socialists, mainly ILP, in the Labour Party. This made them start thinking about why the CP had a wrong policy and connect the criticisms they had with the party in Britain with worries they already had, when they rejoined the party, about the way events were going in Russia. This made them look at Trotsky's position. The term "Trotskyist" was then, and for many years after, a term of abuse, and many people first looked at Trotsky's ideas after being labelled a Trotskyist by the CP - without at the time knowing what a Trotskyist was.

It should be pointed out, in passing, that Stalinist policy went through very rapid shifts. During the years 1924-28 the CP was playing down the aim of international revolution and the development of socialism in Russia. Then in 1928-29 Stalin reversed himself, implemented much of Trotsky's domestic programme in Russia, and moved to an ultra-left position internationally, calling all other socialists "social fascists", and as bad, if not worse, than the Nazis. This was again reversed in 1933-34 when the Popular Front became the watchword. In Britain they called for one behind Eden and Churchill and had ultra-rightists like the Duchess of Argyll regularly speaking on their platforms. There were then something like four volte-faces during the war years.

Some individuals dropped out of Trotskyism fairly soon after this period. Other groups moved towards it. A faction within the ILP, for example, the Marxist Group, published Controversy. No doubt some of its members had been in the CP - a lot of ILP activists in the 30s were people who had dropped out of the CP in the 20s for various reasons - but there was no organisational link, as there was with the Balham Group. Another group which came to Trotskyism was the Revolutionary Socialist League (1932-44 vintage, not the present group of that name). This had been the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and before that the British Section of the International Socialist Labour Party, which had broken away from the SLPGB in 1908. Like its predecessor, it was De Leonist, and as such was critical of the Bolsheviks in 1917, and therefore didn't join the original Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Finally a group of South African socialists around Jock Haston, now the Political Officer of the EPTU and formerly London organiser of the Labour Party, formed the Workers' International League. It should be mentioned that when the Balham Group applied to Trotsky to be recognised as the English section of the Left Opposition there were two other factions which had made the same request. Partly because of the fact that their applications were ignored, they developed left criticisms of Trotsky and were among the dozen or more groups which for various reasons criticised Trotsky from the Left.

During the war, the CP, after 1942, supported the Churchill government uncritically. Both it and the Labour Party were campaigning against strikes and defending the government against criticisms. There was a Left wing of the Labour Party which still made some criticisms and socialist noises, and partly because of the looser

disciplina of the Labour Party, it could survive, whereas similar critics in the CP could not. As a result many people left the CP to the Left, as others had done when the Stalin-Hitler Pact was on a few years earlier. The Trotskyists were not the only Left grouping. The ILP and Common Wealth were both then to the Left of the CP and both got a quarter of a million votes in 1945. The anarchists were larger than they had ever been in Britain before or since: over 1,000 people attended meetings in Glasgow every week, every Lanarkshire miners' shop steward was in the AFB, the London busmen who had a breakaway group considered converting it to a British part of the International Workers of the World (IWW), and there were a number of smaller groups. Nevertheless, the Trotskyists were for the first time a significant force.

In 1944 there was a unification conference, Under the influence of the Workers' International League, a number of groups came together -the RSL had previously split three ways - and from this arose a body called the Revolutionary Communist Party. This only had about 400 members, but a high percentage were shop stewards and so its members were fully involved in wider industrial and class struggles and not just selling their own point of view. Also as well as their work in the wider movement, the members were selling 20,000 copies of every issue of their paper Socialist Appeal.

Gerry Healy

Healy decided to leave the RCP with a minority which formed round him, and he entered the Labour Party. His argument was that if we were in the midst of a revolutionary situation, there wasn't time to build an independent party and so one must join the mass party to push it to the Left. This is rather amusing for when, eleven years later, he led his supporters out of the Labour Party to form the Socialist Labour League, he produced much the same argument; we were in the midst of a revolutionary situation, there was no time to build a revolutionary wing within the Labour Party, and it was therefore necessary to form an independent party. Later still, when he converted the SLL into the Workers' Revolutionary Party, he said much the same.

Healy was backed in his desire to enter by the International (Fourth International) Secretariat. This paid over to his small entrust group as a subsidy the subscriptions received from the RCP. After a time the RCP, which was financing its chief rival, broke up and most of the party went out, and, for a time, joined Healy, who then controlled Socialist Outlook. The main industrial force connected with Socialist Outlook was John Lawrence's influence at Dagenham. This was the period when all the Leftist groups had begun to decline in size, and so the Trotskyists had lost more than half their members, and most of their most influential industrial activists had refused to join the Labour Party and had become lost to membership of socialist organisations.

Healy was jealous of Lawrence's growing reputation and of the fact that he might have got control of the paper and the group, and so he got involved in an international split and used this as an excuse to attack Lawrence. By use of a legal/procedural trick he was able to maintain his control and expel Lawrence. The International Secretariat had begun to argue that the masses were pushing the Communists into taking power, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Trotsky had said that Stalinism would never again play a revolutionary role, and this was his reason for forming the Fourth International. Trotskyists, Leninists, hold that a revolution can only occur where there is a conscious revolutionary leadership and a vanguard party, and so it was an obvious betrayal of Trotskyist principles to take the Secretariat line. So an International Committee was formed

comprising the majority of the French Parti Communiste Internationaliste and Healy, and supported by the American SWP.

Back in the days of the RCP, after reading Trotsky's Testament, the RCP national committee briefly adopted the "state capitalist" analysis of Russia, and when it reversed itself there remained a "state capitalist" faction. During the Korean War, Healy's support for the Stalinists was so uncritical that this faction broke away and formed Socialist Review (now International Socialism), while another group broke away to re-form the RSL, which was at first half in and half out of the Labour Party. Healy was then so deep inside that in 1957 he criticised Tribun for being sectarian because it published letters by people who had reservations about Bevan and advocated workers' control which Bevan opposed.

Healy picked up significant support from the Communist Party after Hungary, including Peter Fryer, the deputy Editor of the Daily Worker, and the foremost authority in the party on Marxist philosophy; Brian Behan, a noted industrial militant; Alasdair MacIntyre, the philosopher (who had only been a fellow traveller, not a party member); Peter Cadogan, one of the party's historians; and so on. They founded The Newsletter. This grew fast, and in 1959 they launched the Socialist Labour League. This was proscribed by the Labour Party, but for some time after it still controlled the Labour Party's youth section, the Young Socialists. Eventually the Labour Party expelled the entire YS and formed a new organisation the LPYS.

Later in 1959 a lot of members of the SLL broke with Healy, primarily for reasons of internal organisation, but this was symptomatic of other differences. Healy's organisations have, since 1949, been more authoritarian than the Communist Party, so after a time associates come to think of him as a small-time Stalin. I will omit personal examples of this in practice, but there are many. From this 1959 split Fryer and Cadogan ceased to be organisationally linked with Trotskyism, but the International Marxist Group and the Institute for Workers' Control are both descended from the other dissidents, though they were in IS for a time. The next year saw the industrial wing of the SLL behind Behan expelled, and also a large section of the most loyal party membership around Grainger and Pennington were expelled. This last group disintegrated but formed the origins of the Solidarity group with Pennington running the IMG. This pattern has been repeated every so often since. The latest expulsion was at the end of 1974 when the industrial members centred at Cowley were expelled and formed the Workers' Socialist League. Each new generation seems to discover what Healy is like when it begins to ask questions. Alan Thornett, the founder of the WSL, has recently published a very revealing book on his experiences, though he is under the mistaken impression that his group were the first people to meet these problems, and that Healy had been right on earlier occasions when he had split with rivals. This is The Battle for Trotskyism: Documents of the Opposition expelled from the Workers' Revolutionary Party in 1974 (Folrose Ltd., 31 Dartmouth Park Hill, N.W.5. £1). There have since then been more crises in the WRP, and its daily paper Workers Press (founded in 1969) ceased publication on February 13th 1976.

Further copies from Fr Ken Leech, St Matthew's  
Rectory, Hereford Street, Bethnal Green, E2 6EX

June 1976.