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# Lenin and Trotsky confronting the bureaucracy - Russian revolution and transitional societies

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**This rigorous but accessible study was prepared for a training course and presented in the summer of 1989. The French version has been published on Europe solidaire website [1] on January 21, 2016 on the occasion of the 92<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Lenin's death, followed by an English translation. The last part of the text titled "The struggle of Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and the Fourth International for a Socialist Democracy" has been added in January 2017.**

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## 1. Preliminary observations

Firstly let us look at the how Marxists understood the problem of the transitional society between capitalism and socialism. When the Bolsheviks faced the question of the construction of a workers' state after the insurrection of October 1917 they did not have much of a theoretical basis they could use. This was actually the first large-scale historical and practical attempt to build a socialist society.

Marxist writings before 1917 addressed the problems of the transition. These were the writings of Marx and Engels, especially the 'Critique of the Gotha Program' and 'A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891' (Erfurt Program), as well as the lessons they and later Lenin drew from the Paris Commune events. The latter was the first historical experience of the dictatorship of

the proletariat, though it was short-lived and encompassed a very small geographical area, that was not particularly comparable to Tsarist Russia. Finally, Lenin himself wrote an extremely important book in 1917, namely "The State and the Revolution." This text expands on Marx's analysis and proposes a method of political leadership for the transitional society, but does not pose the problem in economic terms.

How was the problem of the transition between capitalism and socialism, the problem of the dictatorship of the proletariat conceived up to 1917?

The Marxists of that period, especially Lenin, posed this problem in a triangular manner. Triangular, since three major social classes were put into the equation: the bourgeoisie, the industrial proletariat and the peasantry. The task was to form a proletariat-peasantry alliance for overthrowing the bourgeois dictatorship. The proletariat had to lead and sustain this alliance after the seizure of power if at one and the same time it was necessary to fight the vestiges of the old order, repel the attacks of the imperialist bourgeoisie, carry out the tasks of the democratic revolution and undertake socialist transformations.

Lenin gave much thought to the problem of the worker-peasant alliance. The stumbling block in this plan was that, in reality, the construction of a transitional society does not take place in a triangular but quadrangular manner. A fourth actor joined the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and the peasantry: the bureaucracy. None among Marx, Engels, Lenin and the other Bolsheviks leaders immediately after the uprising of 1917, saw the problem of the bureaucracy as a social layer that was to play a specific role independent from the three other major social forces.

However the problem of the entire transitional society was that the working class allied with the peasantry not only needed to fight the bourgeoisie at the international and national levels, but bureaucratic deformations as well. In the event of those becoming greater and greater, they needed to fight against a consolidated bureaucratic layer. For the period 1919-1923, we find a series of texts written by Bolshevik leaders who denounced bureaucratisation and bureaucracy, but we do not find any analysis of bureaucracy as a layer, which can function independently when consolidated. Within the "Trotskyist opposition", it was not until 1928 that a text was written, analysing the bureaucracy from this angle. This was the famous text by Christian Rakovsky entitled "The 'Professional Dangers of Power'".

## **2. The first five years of the Soviet workers' state.**

Five years after the revolution, in 1922-1923, much thought was given to problems of bureaucratisation and how to combat them. It was mainly Lenin, the party's principal leader, who systematically raised the question of bureaucratic deformations and tried to formulate a series of specific solutions. The minority tendencies within the Bolshevik party, particularly the Workers' Opposition (since 1920-21) and the Democratic Centralism Tendency also denounced bureaucratisation.

What happened in the first five years of the Soviet workers' state? The new state was at the helm of a country with an overwhelming majority of peasants. At the time of the revolution, there were only 3 million industrial workers and 5 years later, they were not more than 1.2 million.

The revolution made land accessible to the peasant majority, it was given to those who tilled it. The peasantry was not organized into state-controlled farms or cooperatives. It was essentially made up of 25 million peasant families, each cultivating its own plot of land. Agricultural workers were few; state-controlled farms and cooperatives represented a little less than 2% of the cultivated land.

Between 1917 and 1922, the Soviet economic policy underwent three phases:

The first phase initiated socialist transformations by “despotic” incursions of the dictatorship of the proletariat into the domain of private property, to paraphrase Marx. In the Russian scenario, this involved land transfer to the nation and its allocation in usufruct to those who tilled it; the nationalization of credit and banks; the introduction of state monopoly on foreign trade; generalization of workers’ control etc. In his speech at the Extraordinary All-Russia Congress of Soviets on December 4, 1917, Lenin listed some of the measures cited above explicitly affirming their socialist character:

*“ This revolution is socialist .. The abolition of private property in land, the introduction of workers’ control, the nationalisation of the banks—all these are measures that lead to socialism. They is not yet socialism, but they are measures that will lead to socialism by gigantic strides. We do not promise the workers and peasants milk and honey immediately, but we say that a close alliance between the workers and the exploited peasantry, a firm, unwavering struggle for the power of the Soviets would lead to socialism, and any party that really wanted to be a people’s party would have to state clearly and decisively that the revolution was a socialist revolution.” [2].*

The radical nature of the measures adopted immediately after assuming power did not mean that the Bolsheviks held any illusion that socialism would soon be established in Russia. Instead, they believed that Russia could not achieve socialism without the help of the proletariat from the major imperialist countries of the time, starting with the German proletariat. Moreover, the Bolsheviks believed in retaining a large private capitalist sector, at the, industrial and commercial levels during a transitional phase. However, this plan was to be abandoned in less than a year, because imperialism and the domestic counter-revolution led very rapidly to a foreign policy of aggression and civil war. For example, the conditions set by Germany in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty greatly weakened the Soviet economy. [3]

Germany and Soviet Russia ratified the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in March 1918. This was a separate peace treaty between the two countries while war raged in the rest of Europe until November 1918. The revolution paid the following price for peace: the loss of 1/3 of the Russian population, 1/3 of cultivated land, 1/2 of industry and 90% of the active coal mines. Ukraine was annexed from Soviet Russia when it represented 75% of coal production, 2/3 of iron ore, 80% of sugar, 75% of manganese, 90% of exportable wheat and 2/3 of salt.

At the domestic level, the industrial bourgeoisie carried out systematic sabotage. The owners locked out factories, particularly those where workers exercised workers’ control. It is to be noted that one of the first decrees of Soviet power provided for the general option of workers’ control. The lock out by the owners and the willingness of the workers to see their employers expropriated led the Soviet leadership to nationalize most factories in July 1918.

Bogged down by imperialist aggression and the domestic counter-revolution the Bolshevik leadership decided to adopt war communism, investing all their economic efforts in it while the losses incurred by the Brest-Litovsk had already thrown the economy in dire straits. To give an example of what this meant, in 1920, the Red Army absorbed 50% of industrial production, 60% of sugar, 40% of saturated fat, 90% of men’s shoes, 40% of soap and 100% of tobacco.

The policy called war communism created certain illusions for some of the Bolshevik leaders. Obligated to control the economy with an iron hand, the Soviet government withdrew monetary exchanges between industry and the countryside. At the rural level, wheat was requisitioned to feed the cities and the army. At the urban level, the working class was directly paid in kind. This gave some of the Bolshevik leadership (Bukharin, Preobrazhensky) the idea that socialist forms of

exchange were already under way because the currency had been virtually eliminated.

Obviously it was a form of socialism of impoverishment in which rations for famine were distributed. It was completely unviable in the long term. Moreover, at the military level, when the Red Army managed to subdue the counter-revolution (end of 1920 - early 1921) the Bolshevik leadership immediately plunged into a debate over adopting a different plan of economic development. All resources no longer had to be given over to the war effort. Economic development, more precisely, economic recovery could now be considered. In fact, whereas the index was 100 for large industrial productions in 1913, it fell to 18 in 1920! The task of the hour, therefore, was to slowly increase production.

Along broadly the same lines as Trotsky, Lenin proposed the New Economic Policy (NEP), which essentially said, "Now we must make a retreat. The pressure of the requisitions etc. under which we put the peasantry cannot continue. The peasants must be convinced to voluntarily increase their production. We are doing away with requisitions and replacing them with a tax payable in kind. We will now allow the farmer to sell the surplus of their agricultural production and we are reinstating private trade". It was a retreat from the early years of the revolution because the Soviet government made concessions to private medium-sized farmers and private trade. Lenin himself said that it would introduce a very dangerous dynamic. One where the private economy would grow and private accumulation be restored which could turn into capitalist accumulation within the transitional society. However, he stressed that this retreat was absolutely necessary in the short-term: a period required for consolidating the worker-peasant alliance.

So that was a simple summary of the three successive stages of economic policy since 1917.

By 1921-1922, the situation was quite distinctive for a society wishing to build socialism under a working class leadership. In fact, there were only 1.5 million industrial workers, while the army had 5.5 million members (which had just been decommissioned).

The apparatus of officials had almost 6 million members. Remember that the peasantry consisted of 25 million families.

The following table provides the figures for the evolution of the farmers' families and agricultural employees, industrial workers, military staff and officials between 1917 and 1922:

	Industrial Workers	Army	Officials of Soviet Institutions	Peasant Families	Agricultural Workers
1917	3,024,000	50,000 (Red Army)	—	—	2,000,000
1918	2,486,000	800,000	114,539	18,000,000	—
1919	2,035,000	3,000,000	529,841	—	34,000
1920-21	1,480,000	5,500,000	5,880,000	24,000,000	—
1922	1,243,000	—	—	—	—

The huge contribution of the industrial workers towards defending their Workers' State explains the sharp drop in their number: they had enlisted massively in the Red Army.

Moreover, a significant portion of the workers was now part of the new Soviet state apparatus. This weakening of the industrial proletariat was not a favourable starting point for a socialist society's

development, particularly since the civil war and the World War I had a terrible impact on the Soviet state's population. Nearly 8 million people died during the civil war of which more than 7.5 million deaths were caused by hunger, cold and epidemics, while deaths due to the war counted 350,000. The number of deaths during the civil war was higher than that during the war of 1914-18 in Russia (about 7 million).

### **3. The Trade Union Debate (1920 - 1921)**

The debate on the trade unions continued from December 1920 to the spring of 1921 within the Bolshevik party. It was during this debate that Lenin came to highlight the bureaucratic deformation of the Soviet workers' state and to conclude that the trade unions must form an organ for defending the workers against the State. Trotsky was one of the main protagonists of this debate. His position was different from Lenin's and was a handicap for his later anti-bureaucratic struggle.

Under which conditions did the debate start? In early 1920, civil war was still raging but the Red Army had largely regained control of the territory. The question of reorganizing production arose once the war ran out of steam. The Soviet Central Executive Committee (February 1920) and the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (April 1920) decided to organize a national labour service and constitute "labourarmies". This implied mobilizing, organizing and allocating requisite manpower to reconstruction work. The Politburo put Trotsky at the helm of conducting discussions as well as executing some of the decisions. Reorganizing transport was prioritized and Trotsky was given charge of a new department in March 1920. He became the Commissar for Transport while retaining his post as the Commissar for War.

Once again he demonstrated his organizational skills by completely reorganizing the railways using a portion of the decommissioned army. However, to achieve this, he had to put aside traditional trade union leadership and create a new one, alienating trade union leaders and some workers in the process.

Confronted with the depletion of the working class and the disastrous economic situation, Trotsky proposed the militarization of the working class and the trade unions. He considered that military discipline was essential for production: an absentee at the workplace was equivalent to an absentee from the battle field. He proposed to replace the trade union leadership by a more competent leadership which would be more working class in nature (which meant that they would be able to appeal to cadres from outside the enterprise). This would act as the communication channel between the party, the state and the working class. He criticized the unions' automatic reflexes of defending workers' immediate interests.

At the beginning Lenin strongly supported Trotsky's position. Subsequently grappling with protests from the trade union leaders and some working-class cadres of the party (which included the Workers' Opposition), Lenin addressed the pitfalls of Trotsky's argument and became increasingly critical of it from December 1920.

However, he was careful to keep a rein on his criticism of Trotsky (supported by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky). He did not break with Trotsky, contrary to his stand regarding Stalin two years later. Lenin knew how to assess the extent of divergences within the Bolshevik leadership. He repeatedly said that Trotsky was one of the best Bolsheviks! In fact, Trotsky led the insurrection of October 1917. He led the Red Army to victory: an army which was built with great contributions from him. He was the one to play a stellar role at the helm of the Communist International founded in 1919.

Let's go back to the Trade Union Debate. Trotsky held at that time that the trade unions had no reason to speak against the state because the state belonged to the workers. Lenin's response was that the workers' state was a state with bureaucratic deformations. Workers must therefore have a tool to defend themselves against the deformations and the possible mistakes arising from them. He regarded the trade unions as schools of communism which not only could steer the working class to perform better, but also defend it, without resorting to strikes driven by the precarious economic situation.

Lenin was right against Trotsky. He was also right against the Workers' Opposition. Trotsky and the Workers' Opposition invoked the line of the party programme which implied that trade unions should manage the economy. However, their views differed insofar as the Workers' Opposition was immensely distrustful of the bureaucratic state and consequently rejected the merger between the state organs and the trade unions, which is what Trotsky proposed.

According to the Workers' Opposition, the trade unions needed to be in power and run the factories because they truly represented the workers contrary to the bureaucratically deformed State. But ensuring that the trade unions became directors of the factories would not amount to a safeguard against the bureaucracy; instead it would ultimately catalyze the bureaucratisation of the trade unions and the workers' State.

In fact, if the trade unionists became managers, they would be unable to control the management because they would be a part of it and very likely they would become a cog in the bureaucracy. Entrusting the trade unions with factory administration would favour the bureaucratisation of the trade unions and the workers' State. There must be a dialectical relationship between public or state management on the one hand, and workers' control on the other. The positions of Trotsky, Bukharin, Preobrazhensky, Rakovsky and Pyatakov on one hand, and those of the Workers' Opposition, on the other hand, were not conducive to the dynamics of workers' control.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to present Trotsky's policy as bureaucratic since his proposals were aimed at expanding workers' democracy. He believed that the masses should play the key role in rebuilding the economic apparatus devastated during the civil war. The problem was that he did not see the need to assure the trade unions' autonomy from the apparatus for economic management and more generally from the State. That his motivation was not bureaucratic is also demonstrated by the fact that he was supported by Bolshevik leaders like Preobrazhensky, Rakovsky and I. N. Smirnov who relentlessly led the anti-bureaucracy fight throughout the 1920s. But even though Trotsky did not start from a bureaucratic viewpoint, the positions he defended in the debate on trade unions could have nourished and accelerated bureaucratisation.

#### **4. Lenin's last struggle (end-1922 to early 1923)**

In October 1921, Lenin said: "the industrial proletariat in our country, owing to the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin, has become declassed... and has ceased to exist as a proletariat." [4]. He also spoke of a workers' State with distinct bureaucratic deformations and clearly said the following at the Bolshevik Party's 11<sup>th</sup> Congress (1922): "if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed." [5]

Then who led this bureaucracy? This was the bunch of officials largely from the old now dismantled tsarist state apparatus. The Soviet government had to retain a set of officials and even employees from the tsarist offices. The number of the tsarist officials in the new State apparatus was

staggering.

Lenin asked Stalin to conduct a study on this issue, which produced the following results: in the Vyatka region, no less than 4430 out of 4766 permanent officials had previously served the tsar. Naturally it was difficult to lead such an assembly of officials from a communist perspective.

In late 1922/early 1923, Lenin embarked on a hard battle on this issue. In a series of texts written for the Central Committee (CC) and the whole party, and in articles published in Pravda, he proposed radical ways out of "the bureaucratic swamp in which the revolution is mired."

#### **4.1. The party : anti-bureaucratic safeguard**

First, he regarded the Bolshevik party as a safeguard against bureaucratic deformations. The party required protection from deformations and in a part of his "testament", written in late 1922-early 1923, he mentioned that it was essential to expand the CC: its size should be doubled by bringing in dozens of factory workers.

Lenin specified that these workers should not come from the Soviet apparatus (itself bureaucratized) nor should they have been a long time out of their workplaces. It was also necessary to include some small peasant farmers: the need of the hour was for workers and communists working in production.

#### **4.2. The workers' inspection: in need of reform because it was bureaucratized**

Second, Lenin observed that the government and the party had started to overlap. Apprehensive that they will soon run on empty he wanted a radical reform of the country's governance so that the boundary between the party and the government could be better defined by assigning specific responsibilities and establishing the best devices for supervising the apparatus. Lenin said that the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection system as well as the Central Control Commission must be thoroughly reorganised. Two years earlier, in 1920, a Soviet institution had been established for investigating all bureaucratic deformations. All Soviet citizens had been enabled to complain to this, including against any Soviet official up to the highest rank. Lenin noted in late 1922 that this institution of 12,000 officials, led by Stalin, had become thoroughly bureaucratic; it had become a cog in the wheel of bureaucracy, necessitating an absolute reform of the Inspection. Otherwise it would definitely not serve its purpose.

#### **4.3. Lenin attacked Stalin for his disastrous role in the national question**

Third, Lenin's reflections concerned the nationality question following the tsarist empire's forceful "integration" of a series of oppressed nationalities. Without elaborating on this point, it should be noted that Lenin focused not only on achieving equal rights for the oppressed peoples, such as the Ukrainians, Georgians, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Armenians, etc. but also on ensuring a situation that would allow them to rise to the same level as the traditionally dominant Russian nationality. He deemed it essential for the various oppressed nations to develop their own culture and communicate with the central authority at Moscow in their own language. In this context, it was necessary to form a Federation of Soviet Republics and not a single multinational republic. The person in charge of the national question within the party and state was Joseph Stalin. First Lenin confronted him with the Georgian question. Stalin was embroiled in a clash with the Georgian Bolshevik leadership who had been demanding some autonomy for enforcing communist policies in Georgia. Stalin, himself a Georgian, sent Ordzhonikidze, one of his "representatives", to bring the Georgian leadership in line. Ordzhonikidze's methods were particularly brutal such as striking a Georgian communist leader during a leadership meeting. When Lenin heard this, he sent a letter to the Georgian communist leadership expressing total solidarity with them and decided to deal with the crux of the matter. He

wrote a text, denouncing Stalin's methods and calling him the "Great-Russian chauvinist."

On December 30 and 31, 1922, Lenin wrote the following: "I think that Stalin's haste and his infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious "nationalist-socialism", played a fatal role here. In politics spite generally plays the basest of roles.... internationalism on the part of oppressors or "great" nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation... the inequality which obtains in actual practice.... The Georgian[Stalin] who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of "nationalist-socialism" (whereas he himself is a real and true "nationalist-socialist", and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity.." [6]

#### **4.4. The composition of the leadership**

Fourth, Lenin decided to come down against the Political Bureau's composition. At first sight it was somewhat bizarre to see the leader of the party addressing the Central Committee and the entire Party Congress evaluating other leaders and apparently giving them with positive and negative marks. Naturally the party's future was partly at stake after Lenin's death. He had been extremely ill for several months. Bedridden, he wrote what was soon to be called his "testament". He feared a split in the party if he were to die. As the party was the last safeguard against the dangers of the State's bureaucratic deformations and as the party leadership was a vital area, Lenin wished to evaluate the Politburo. This is why he chose to judge the people in it and particularly asked for Stalin's removal from the post of the Party's General Secretary. He justified his position by criticising Stalin's brutal behaviour, perhaps tolerable at the personal level but intolerable when coming from someone with his responsibilities. Furthermore, he highlighted Trotsky, calling him "personally perhaps the most capable man in the present central committee". (Moshe Lewin, Lenin's Last Struggle, University of Michigan Press, Pg 80) although his administrative vision of things was a weakness, which according to Lenin had already been demonstrated in previous discussions on trade unions and the militarization of labour.

#### **4.5. Developing the cooperatives and the cultural revolution in the countryside**

Fifth, Lenin was in favour of establishing and developing a system of agricultural cooperatives which the peasants would voluntarily join and where the experience of this system of social relations would steer them to socialism. "Strictly speaking, there is 'only' one thing we have left to do and that is to make our people so 'enlightened' that they understand all the advantages of everybody participating in the work of the cooperatives.... There are now no other devices needed to advance to socialism" [7]

Lenin's idea of a cooperative system envisaged the collective marketing of farmers' products. It was therefore not yet necessary to move from cooperatives to collectivised production. Lenin's programme included the launch of a "cultural revolution" among the backward peasantry, elevating its cultural level by carefully avoiding a schematic and dogmatic propaganda for communism. It was not the immediate task as the minimum material and cultural conditions were not yet met. "Under no circumstances must this be understood to mean that we should immediately propagate purely and strictly communist ideas in the countryside. As long as our countryside lacks the material basis for communism, it will be, I should say, harmful, in fact, I should say, fatal, for communism to do so." [8] Lenin wanted to spread Soviet ideas in the countryside through voluntary labour groups, free from a paternalistic and bureaucratic mindset, simultaneously improving the life and the work of village teachers.



## **5. Limitations of Lenin's view**

Thus Lenin identified the dangers of bureaucratic deformations within the Bolshevik leadership with great insight and decided to fight them. However, his arguments had certain limitations. For him, bureaucracy was the legacy of the tsarist past (which is true to some extent). He added that the problem would not have existed had there been a transition through developed capitalism.

Lenin saw bureaucracy mainly as a legacy of the tsarist heritage while it was also the a consequence of a transitional society after the Tsarist system was uprooted. Bureaucracy had a role in the Workers' state. To illustrate, let's take an example later used by Trotsky: during a food shortage if there is a queue in front of a shop a policeman would be required to maintain order and very often he is the first to use the store.

The second limitation of Lenin's position involves the party. He had always encouraged an extremely lively and democratic debate inside and outside the party. Party activists had political fights within the party and in the print media. This was also true in 1918. Not only was there debate in the official party newspaper, Pravda, but even Bukharin, a Bolshevik leader, was allowed to launch his own publication along with other leaders from a faction (Preobrazhensky etc.). It was the Bolshevik Party's tradition to acknowledge the need for spirited discussions. However, once the decision was made it had to be applied in a unified way.

The problem was that in 1921, Lenin made a "turn" regarding the manner of discussions within the party. Precisely at the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the party leadership and the "Workers' Opposition" tendency debated robustly. The latter was a minority tendency, composed of 60 delegates from the total number of 690. Before the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Workers' Opposition announced its position in 250,000 copies of the Pravda and also in another brochure. This shows that democratic debate was deemed important.

But on the last day, when hundreds of delegates had already left for home, Lenin tabled the following motion: "The Congress, therefore, hereby declares dissolved and orders the immediate dissolution of all groups without exception formed on the basis of one platform or another (such as the Workers' Opposition group, the Democratic Centralism group, etc.). Non-observance of this decision of the Congress shall entail unconditional and instant expulsion from the Party." [9]. He added that two Workers' Opposition leaders should be members of the Central Committee.

Lenin's resolution, which was adopted with only 30 votes against it, did not mention that prohibiting the right to form factions and tendencies was temporary. This text further included a secret provision for banning splinter groups and the Stalinist faction would later use it for an indefinite period.

## **6. How to explain Lenin's changed attitude?**

He held that the extreme tension developing in the country (the Kronstadt uprising took place during the Congress) called for a curb on the party's internal democracy to help it pull together. Undoubtedly Lenin saw the change as temporary but he was not prudent enough to put it in writing. Two years later this error would have terrible consequences when the Stalinist faction would use the text of the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress to condemn the opposition of 1923 and thus consolidate its power over the party.

Later Trotsky would return to this question with the following comment:

*"It is true that the Bolshevik party forbade factions at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, a time of mortal danger. One can argue whether or not this was correct. The subsequent course of development has in any case proved that this prohibition served as one of the starting points of the party's degeneration. The bureaucracy currently makes a bogey of the concept of "faction," so as not to permit the party either to think or breathe. Thus was formed the totalitarian régime which killed Bolshevism". [10]*

Lenin's third limitation involved his response to the multi-party issue during the transition to socialism. Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership enacted a policy and developed ideas that would respect multi-partyism (the Bolsheviks formed a government in alliance with the left-wing Socialist-Revolutionaries at the end of 1917-early 1918) in the months following the seizure of power, but his attitude gradually changed from 1918 onward. All the opposition parties were systematically banned or suppressed. The prohibition of opposition parties hugely curtailed the democratic life in the USSR.

## **7. A Lenin-Trotsky bloc against Stalin?**

In late 1922 and early 1923, Lenin proposed a bloc to Trotsky regarding the conflict on the events in Georgia and the national question in general. Apparently Lenin and Trotsky had reconciled just before this. In fact, in late 1922 Lenin had repeatedly expressed to the Politburo and in letters to the CC that he was in agreement with Trotsky on the key issues under discussion.

Thus he led a battle with Trotsky against the Bolsheviks leaders, including Stalin, who wanted to end the monopoly of the Soviet workers' State on foreign trade. At the same time, he agreed with Trotsky's positions on the strategy that the Communist International needed to adopt for winning a majority in the working class. This strategy involved other issues which Lenin wanted to propose at the same conference: the Central Committee's expansion [11], the reform of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection and Stalin's removal.

In December 1922, when Lenin made a proposal to Trotsky for forming an anti-bureaucracy bloc, the latter replied that the anti-bureaucracy fight had to take off from eliminating that evil from the party, particularly its highest bodies. Lenin accepted this proposal by entrusting Trotsky with fighting his own battle at the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress and declaring in his Testament that Stalin had to be dismissed as General Secretary.

Only the Politburo members and some close associates of Lenin and Trotsky were aware of the latter proposal. A few months later, Lenin was paralyzed and unable to attend the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress. Trotsky did not lead the battle that Lenin proposed to him. Other Bolsheviks leaders, such as Bukharin and Rakovsky, led the battle on the nationality question. Preobrazhensky, the leader who had been one of the three secretaries of the Bolshevik party, took the mantle of the fight against bureaucratic deformations.

On the occasion of the preparation for the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev-the famous triumvirate- formed a faction within the Politburo. They secretly met before the Politburo's regular meetings so that Trotsky could soon be relegated to a minority position. Preobrazhensky was the first Bolshevik leader to publicly denounce the triumvirate's formation at the Congress.

During the preparation for the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress of spring 1923, Stalin wanted to appease Trotsky. Feeling threatened by the bloc proposed by Lenin to Trotsky, Stalin proposed to the Politburo that Trotsky present the Central Committee Report in Lenin's absence. Trotsky refused. He believed that Lenin could not be replaced and suggested that no such report be prepared. He took the

responsibility of preparing the report on Industry.

Trotsky thought that it was possible to recreate the material conditions through a proper economic policy allowing, on one hand, the industrial proletariat to regain its vitality and, on the other, “bridging the gap” between cities and villages. Therefore Trotsky focused on economic transformations in the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress. Lenin, had he been present, would have for good reason focused on a series of policy measures-including Stalin’s dismissal from the post of the Secretary General - so that the party could confront its bureaucratic deformation.

Afterwards, Trotsky wrote the following on what could have happened had he joined a bloc with Lenin or, in Lenin’s absence, waged a battle in his name: “Our joint action against the central committee at the beginning of 1923 would without a shadow of doubt have brought us victory. And what is more, I have no doubt that if I had come forward on the eve of the Twelfth Congress in the spirit of a ‘bloc of Lenin and Trotsky’ against the Stalin bureaucracy, I would have been victorious even if Lenin had taken no direct part in the struggle. How solid the victory would have been is, of course, another question”. [12]

He continued by stating what would have happened had he embarked on the battle as desired by Lenin: “Independent action on my part would have been interpreted, or, to be more exact, represented as my personal fight for Lenin’s place in the party and the state. The very thought of this made me shudder. I considered that it would have brought such a demoralisation in our ranks that we would have had to pay too painful a price for it even in case of victory”. [13]

During the Congress of March 1923, Trotsky declared in his speech that he endorsed the Politburo’s line, thereby distancing himself from the opposition’s interventions. Trotsky’s opinion on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Bolshevik Party’s role was unequivocal: “We fought unanimously in 1917 for the party dictatorship, we fight today against all perceptible attempts to curb the monopoly of leadership at all levels” [14].

Lenin himself had adopted this formula in 1922. What it meant for Trotsky and Lenin was not the same as for Stalin (who would use this analysis to his own advantage with Zinoviev’s support in 1924-25) and this formula was not a good example for the party. Certainly the party was the vanguard of the proletariat allied with the peasantry, yet it was the workers’ and peasants’ councils which had exercised power since October 1917 with the Bolshevik Party holding a majority position within them. The formula was dangerous from this angle. One of the terrible effects of the civil war after October 1917 was that the soviets’ activities declined (which was unintended by the Bolsheviks) while power was transferred to the party. Trotsky’s (and Lenin’s, a little earlier) formula did not adequately emphasize the fact that party’s exercise of power was a consequence of the Civil War and not of October 1917.

## **8. Trotsky takes up the cudgel against the Party’s bureaucratisation (Autumn 1923)**

After the Congress of March 1923, the opposition within the Bolshevik Party gained momentum in the absence of a very ill Lenin.

The months of July to September 1923 witnessed strikes in the country and agitation within the Bolshevik Party, staged mainly by the members of the former Workers’ Opposition and Democratic Centralism (known as the DCers) and by the Workers’ Group and the Workers’ Truth. Dzerzhinsky was the head of the GPU (later known as KGB) whom Lenin had earlier unsuccessfully wanted to be punished for his fatal role in the Georgian affair. He was the one to propose to the CC in September

that it intervene against the party members found guilty of squabbling against the party line. Trotsky decided to initiate the battle and wrote a long letter to the CC on October 8, 1923 declaring that Dzerzhinsky's proposal portrayed the party's deterioration and he wrote: "A lot of the members, if not the majority are alarmed by the methods and processes used to prepare for the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress". He went on to state that the economic proposals he had presented to the said Congress had been adopted but not applied. He explained the consequences: a profound dissatisfaction of farmers followed by workers, contributing to the growth of opposition groups.

Trotsky then questioned the functioning of the party denouncing the organizing bureau headed by Stalin: "In appointments, removals, transfers, party members are evaluated above all from the point of view of the degree to which they can promote or counteract the maintenance of the intra-party regime which - quietly and unofficially, but all the more effectively - is being set up through the Orgbureau and the Secretariat of the CC" (...) "The bureaucratization of the Party apparatus has developed to unheard-of proportions by means of the method of secretarial selection. There has been created a very broad stratum of Party workers, entering into the apparatus of the government of the Party, who completely renounce their own Party opinion, at least the open expression of it, as though assuming that the secretarial hierarchy is the apparatus which creates Party opinion and Party decisions. Beneath this stratum, abstaining from their own opinions, there lies the broad mass of the Party, before whom every decision stands in the form of a summons or a command. In this foundation-mass of the Party there is an unusual amount of dissatisfaction. . . . This dissatisfaction does not dissipate itself by way of influence of the mass upon the Party organization (election of Party committees, secretaries, etc.), but accumulates in secret and thus leads to interior strains....".

Trotsky proposed what will later be called a "new course" for the party: " "party democracy must have the place it merits in order to prevent the threat of ossification and degeneracy. The party rank and file must be able to say within the framework of party life what they are dissatisfied about, and get a real chance, in accordance with the party statutes and especially with the whole spirit of our party, to create its organisational apparatus(...)"

Then he announced his plan to express his disagreement outside the Central Committee: "It is known to the members of the CC and CCC that, struggling with all resoluteness and determination inside the Central Committee against a false policy, especially in economic and intra-party matters, I firmly avoided carrying the struggle inside the CC to the judgement of even the narrowest circle of comrades. (...) I must state that my efforts of a year and a half in direction have had no results (...) I now consider it not only my right but my duty to tell it like it is to every member of the party whom I consider sufficiently prepared, sober and mature , and therefore capable of helping the party get out of this blind alley without factional convulsions and upheavals." [Trotsky, 8.10.1923.]

Thus Trotsky took the initiative to launch an offensive against the party's bureaucracy and decided to pursue it with other party leaders. At the same time, his self-criticism was not tactical. Many of his biographers have not given the text its due importance. Trotsky declared that the attitude he had been adopting for 18 months in the party had produced no results (see above quote).

## **9. What are the factors that led Trotsky to change his approach?**

First, the extent of workers' dissatisfaction (a number of strikes) and the severity of repressive measures which resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of activists, some of whom had been expelled from the Bolshevik Party a few months earlier.

Second, the hope for a triumphant German revolution. An insurrection was planned in Germany for late October 1923 and while the Stalin-Kamenev-Zinoviev bloc strongly opposed the German

communist leadership's request for sending Trotsky out there, nevertheless both the Soviet representatives Radek and Pyatakov happened to be very close to him. Trotsky hoped that a German victory would greatly revive the revolutionary enthusiasm of the youth and the Soviet working class: requisites for a big change in the political line of the Bolshevik Party's regime.

A week after Trotsky's letter, a confidential text signed by 46 significant Bolshevik cadres including Preobrazhensky, a former party secretary, Pyatakov, one of the most promising people as per Lenin's Testament and Antonov Ovseenko, one of the organizers of the insurrection of 1917, was sent to the Politburo. Many of the signatories had been, in the recent past, closely associated with Trotsky. Others were part of the former Decemist opposition. Three more Soviet leaders, who were abroad on diplomatic missions, joined the '46': Rakovsky, old Bolshevik, leader of the Ukrainian Republic; Radek, leader of the Communist International; and Krestinsky, former party secretary. They demanded a special conference of the CC with "the most prominent and active party workers." The '46' challenged the majority of the Politburo for their disastrous economic policy and the bureaucratic regime imposed on the party.

## **10. Debate on the New Course (Dec 1923-Jan 1924)**

The mutual response of the Stalin-Zinoviev-Kamenev triumvirate was twofold: a violent condemnation of the letters of Trotsky and the "46", combined with opening a public debate in Pravda practicing presented as allowing workers' democracy within the party. The carrot was combined with the stick - Trotsky was accused of "wanting to exercise personal dictatorship at the military and economic levels" and there were bogus reports of his past differences with Lenin.

The CC denounced the '46' on October 25, 1923 for factionalism (prohibited since the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress).

Trotsky sharply replied to the criticism hurled at him in another letter to the CC and pointed out that he had reconciled with Lenin between late 1922-early 1923. As I said, a public debate was launched as a safety valve against the dissatisfaction within the party. This debate raised the party base's level of interest in the discussions. Interest soared: the circulation of Pravda, which published a daily forum for extensive discussions, doubled in November-December 1923. In public, neither Trotsky's letter to the CC nor the letter from the '46' was mentioned. It seemed as if the Politburo was under no pressure to introduce workers' democracy within the party, but this impression was false. In fact the triumvirate launched the debate so that they could control it.

The debate became radicalised towards the end of November: Preobrazhensky explained the criticisms of the '46' in Pravda on November 28, 1923. Moreover, in the meetings of the party base in Moscow, the opposition gained a wider audience.

The discussions of November-December 1923 resonated in the party press (for the last time before the Stalinist takeover). Until mid-December 1923, the Pravda published accurate reports for the Soviet readers on the ongoing discussions in the party's Moscow meetings. The opposition's speeches and Trotsky's articles were reported verbatim as well as the arguments of the triumvirate and its supporters. Things changed from December 11, 1923: only the triumvirate's statements were published from the minutes of a Petrograd meeting. Pravda was brought to heel [15] and the two young people responsible for the column resigned in protest. Subsequently, Trotsky's articles rounding up his series on the "New Course" were published but they were accompanied by other articles virulently opposing him and representing the Triumvirate's statements, while not being attributed to it. In early January 1924, Trotsky, Radek and Pyatakov vehemently protested against this transformation that reflected the Triumvirate's growing rigidity. On the one hand, the

Triumvirate took stock of the large audience gained by the opposition even if the latter was only able to intervene significantly in Moscow, and on the other hand they realised that Trotsky's standpoint was posing a danger that could go up a notch if he went for an open alliance with the '46'.

Therefore until December 11, 1923 the Triumvirate did everything it could to avoid this coalition. Based on Pravda's reports, we can fairly easily map out how the attitude of the debate's protagonists evolved. On December 3, 1923 Stalin, while speaking in a working class neighbourhood in Moscow, said that an anti-bureaucracy struggle was required within the party. To pull the rug from under the feet of Trotsky and the '46', he particularly stressed the need to discontinue nominations and return to the elective principle. Such words displayed a break with his stand in the Spring 1923 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, when he said that the party was healthy compared to the bureaucratically deformed state apparatus. Furthermore, he declared that the views of Trotsky and the rest of the Politburo were identical: his slings and arrows were directed at the '46'.

On December 5, 1923, the Politburo adopted a text written by Trotsky (apparently with Bukharin) and amended by Stalin and Kamenev, in which the leadership announced the need for a new course for changing the party's internal structure. Stalin particularly insisted on the text's adoption and agreed to take a look at the series of Trotsky's arguments prepared in October 1923. Stalin thought that if the Pravda published the news of that document's adoption two days later, he would succeed in dissociating Trotsky from the '46' while it would appear as if the movement for the New Course was his own.

As for Trotsky, he sensed a victory for the advocates of change. However, to test the reliability of the agreement with the Troika, on December 8, he sent a letter to the Party meetings in Moscow and described his take on the Politburo's resolution. Published on December 11, this letter dropped a bombshell because it highlighted the danger of bureaucrats pretending to accept change only to better prevent it: "And now the bureaucrats are ready formally to "take note" of the "new course," that is, to nullify it in practice".

This was an implicit attack on Stalin who said on December 3 that the New Course mainly concerned the issue of a new pedagogy. On the contrary, Trotsky stated: "The question must be approached not from the pedagogical but from the political point of view. The application of workers' democracy cannot be made dependent upon the degree of "preparation" of the party members for this democracy. A party is a party. We can make stringent demands upon those who want to enter and stay in it; but once they are members, they participate most actively, by that fact, in all the work of the party". He added: "It is necessary to regenerate and renovate the party apparatus and to make it feel that it is nothing but the executive mechanism of the collective will". He presented the resolution of December 5 as a break with the recent past while the Triumvirate wanted to present it as the logical consequence of the CC's decisions made in October 1923. Trotsky's letter pointed out the danger of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Old Guard which could evolve in the same way as the Second International on the eve of the First World War. It would soon become the subject of a major controversy.

Several general assemblies were held in Moscow's neighbourhoods following the Politburo's resolution adopted on December 5. Trotsky had been under the weather since late October and could not be present (the Politburo meetings also had to be held in his apartment in the Kremlin). The spokespersons of the '46' who attended those meetings supported the December 5 resolution as well as the key points from Trotsky's letter. The opposition won a large majority in a series of big meetings held in Moscow. At one of them, Kamenev (who was representing the CC) could muster only 6 votes against an overwhelming majority in favour of Preobrazhensky. Two-thirds of the Red Army's Bolshevik cells in Moscow voted for the opposition. A large number of the leaders of the Communist Youth and the cells of the higher educational institutions, consisting mainly of young workers who were receiving student grants, also supported the opposition. On the other hand the

opposition was weaker in Moscow's factory cells. Out of 346 cells, 67 voted in favour (we do not know the percentage of votes won by the opposition in the cells where it was a minority). As historian E. H. Carr noted: "The failure of the Opposition to base itself on the proletariat was a symptom of the weakness, not merely of the Opposition, but of the proletariat itself." [16]. In fact, in 1923, the Soviet proletariat was merely a shadow of its old self during the seizure of power in 1917.

In all, 36% of the party's base units in Moscow voted for the opposition. That is an impressive figure, given that the Triumvirate supported the New Course while vehemently attacking the opposition for its factionalism and when we know that the opposition sympathisers were aware of the danger of isolation if not expulsion. The Triumvirate did not depend on threats for long: Antonov-Ovseyenko, political leader of the Red Army and the Opposition, was removed and 15 leaders of the Communist Youth either suffered the same fate or were relocated to the provinces. A few months later, a wave of expulsions swept other members and supporters of the opposition.

The Triumvirate was assured of a landslide victory during the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of mid-January. It was in the driver's seat in the provincial organizations except in Ryazan, Penza, Kaluga, Simbirsk and Chelyabinsk where the opposition won a majority owing to the oppositional cadres who had been cut off from Moscow and relocated a few months earlier.

## **11. A review of the debate on the "New Course"**

Firstly, the party's bureaucratic system of control proved to be very effective. The debates were unsettling for the system but it stood its ground.

Secondly, the ebb tide within the party, momentarily foiled by the prospect of a German victory - and to a lesser extent by the launch of November's debate- remained strong.

Thirdly, the positions of Trotsky and the '46' generally converged both at the level of reforms proposed for the party's internal operation and at the economic level. The limited nature of this review does not allow for an elaborate presentation of the opposition's economic proposals. Still it is noteworthy that Trotsky as well as Preobrazhensky and Pyatakov emphasised the need for the planned development of a nationalised industry under the NEP. This was consistent with one of Trotsky's concerns, expressed in 1922 and with which Lenin had finally agreed in very clear terms. Trotsky, Preobrazhensky and Pyatakov emphasized that without a planned development the NEP's outcome would be increasingly disastrous, but the Triumvirate and Bukharin disagreed. Obviously if the party adopted the opposition line it could have avoided the economic collapse of the late 1920s.

The battle waged by Trotsky and the '46' was the first concerted public offensive from a Politburo member and an impressive group of party cadres against the Stalinist faction and its allies. In his fascinating biography of Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher was wrong to question the connection between Trotsky and the '46'. E. H. Carr, another authoritative historian, has rightly argued that Trotsky's letter of October 8, 1923 could not have been written without consulting the leaders of the '46'. However, he did not sufficiently point out that the '46' relied wholeheartedly on Trotsky's stand during the period October 1923-January 1924. If we read their public speeches there is no doubt about it [17]. In his recent book "Trotsky", Pierre Broué presents a correct version of the events.

Nevertheless, Preobrazhensky and Trotsky adopted a different strategy on one issue (which Broué doesn't mention). The former proposed to withdraw the prohibition of factions and groups as approved by the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress. He argued that if the activists were allowed to exercise their right to form a group espousing the same ideology, it would put an end to secret coalitions which hinder a debate's progression and contribute to an explosive situation. He stated that these groups would

have lasted only for a short duration had they been allowed to exist, spanning only the period of preparatory discussions in different conferences and congresses, and their composition could have changed according to the agenda of discussions.

Trotsky fundamentally shared Preobrazhensky's position but it's also true that he did not table any proposal for withdrawing the ban on groups and tendencies. On the other hand, Stalin insisted on the ban, which led to outmanoeuvring Trotsky when the Politburo was drafting its text on December 5. According to E. H. Carr, Stalin later wrote that

" he and Kamenev determinedly brought the question of groups to the forefront but Trotsky protested with an ultimatum, declaring that he would not vote in favour of the resolution under such circumstances. After that, we limited ourselves to referring only to a part of the resolution of the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress that without doubt, Trotsky had not read on that occasion and in which it was mentioned that not only factions, but also tendencies were banned. " [18]

Trotsky, whether he was duped or not, had in any case decided not to openly fight against the decision of the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress. Obviously he thought that it would be impossible to win a majority on such a sensitive issue, particularly because the Triumvirate would peddle it as challenging Lenin's wish. Nevertheless, the fact that the opposition could not officially launch a group reduced its chances of winning more supporters.

A controversial decision revolved around another tactical question, namely Trotsky's option for signing the Politburo's text of December 5 along with the Triumvirate. For example, E. H. Carr felt that this proved Trotsky's satisfaction with a victory on paper, while Stalin and his allies were not prepared to keep their commitments. This analysis seems to be inaccurate because if Trotsky was so satisfied with the text, his immediate decision to write a public letter on his version of the agreement remains to be explained. In fact, I believe that on this occasion Trotsky was armed with a key lesson learnt from the debate on the Georgian question. He was not content with merely a compromise, even if it was 90% satisfactory, and continued the public offensive for bringing about a genuine change of regime. By doing this, he averted the isolation of the '46', as desired by the Triumvirate. As for the '46', their spokespersons supported the text strongly, believing it to fortify their position. [19].

However, Trotsky's strategy had its downside: the text of December 5 gave the impression that the Politburo had reached an internal agreement and that the Triumvirate was indeed willing to apply the New Course. Stalin decided to make the most of the situation. Momentarily vexed by Trotsky's stance on December 8, Stalin decided to change his strategy in a Pravda article dated December 15: for the first time, he publicly denounced Trotsky and reproached him for his duplicity. After accusing him of trying to turn the young against the old, Stalin concluded his article with the question "who benefits from the crime?".

*" What was the object of this attempt to discredit the old guard and demagogically to flatter the youth if not to cause and widen a fissure between these principal detachments of our Party? Who needs all this, if one has the interests of the Party at heart, its unity and solidarity, and is not attempting to shake this unity for the benefit of the opposition?*

Is that the way to defend the Central Committee and its resolution on internal Party democracy, which, moreover, was adopted unanimously?

But evidently, that was not Trotsky's objective in issuing his letter to the Party conferences. Evidently there was a different intention here, namely: to diplomatically support the opposition in its struggle against the Central Committee of the Party while pretending to support the Central Committee's resolution.



That, in fact, explains the stamp of duplicity that Trotsky's letter bears.

Trotsky is in a bloc with the Democratic Centralists and with a section of the "Left" Communists—therein lies the political significance of Trotsky's action." [20]

We can never know if Trotsky would have succeeded with a different strategy at the end of 1923. Another scenario can be imagined. First, Trotsky could have publicly and unequivocally taken charge of the opposition of the '46' and proposed to withdraw the ban on groups.

He could have refused to sign a text with the Triumvirate. The choice between two lines and two groups of leaders could therefore have been clearer. But we do not know if such a strategy would have been more effective, and for several reasons. First, the CC would have condemned the official creation of such an opposition group and punished it. Second, neither Trotsky nor the '46' considered that it was the right moment to propose an alternative leadership; they even declared that they did not want a change in the composition of the leadership. Third, in any case, the majority of the Politburo, the secret Triumvirate would have projected itself as the guarantee for the party's unity, as the best representative of the old guard and would have declared its desire for internal democracy... except for groups and factions, in short, everything posed the danger of a party split. To form an opinion on Trotsky's stand we must also take into account the fact that no leader of the '46' criticized it. It was quite the contrary.

## **12. Lenin's death**

Lenin's last intervention as a party leader dates back to the first quarter of 1923. His absence severely affected the party. His death on January 21, 1924, occurred a week after the opposition's defeat. The funeral ceremony was highly symbolic. Stalin managed to prevent Trotsky from participating. Trotsky was on his way to the south as advised by the doctors of the Kremlin and the Politburo when Stalin informed him of Lenin's death, but he communicated a false date for the funeral so that Trotsky would find it impossible to return to Moscow in time. With Trotsky not around it was the right time for the Triumvirate members to present themselves as Lenin's bona fide successors. The form of the ceremony completely contravened Lenin's wishes. In fact the Triumvirate decided to embalm him.

This heralded a cult of the dead which under the pretext of pursuing the fight distorted it completely and sought to justify all of the Triumvirate's tactical decisions [21].

After Lenin's death, his document on the composition of the leadership (written in two phases: in December 1922 and January 1923) known as his "Testament" came to light. He had entrusted it to his wife and asked for its publication in the next Congress. In Trotsky's absence, the Politburo decided not to publicize the text. Nevertheless, they wanted to disclose it to the CC before the May 1924 Congress. The text was forwarded to the CC. It was a bombshell for most of the CC members lined up behind the Triumvirate. According to a witness at the scene, Zinoviev declared: " Comrades, every word of Illych (Lenin) is a rule for us. We have vowed to accomplish whatever Lenin ordered us to carry through while in death-bed. (...) but we are happy to say that one aspect of Lenin's apprehensions has not been found true. I want to speak to you about the case of our General Secretary. " [22]. Despite a significant minority (including Krupskaya, Lenin's widow) it was then decided that the text would not be disclosed to the Congress. It took 60 years for the Soviet people to officially know the contents of the said Testament. Trotsky remained silent during the discussion; he believed that the disclosure of the text could not change the situation.

### **13. Conclusions : how Lenin and Trotsky approached bureaucratisation**

Before offering a critical analysis of Trotsky's standpoint in 1923, I find it necessary to take stock of Lenin's in his last struggle. Lenin decided in late 1922- early 1923, as we have seen, to take up the gauntlet for defeating the Stalinist faction and its allies, meting out punishment by ousting Stalin from the general secretary's post. Moreover, he envisaged a series of reforms in the governing bodies of the Party and the State. Finally, he considered it essential for Trotsky to hold a key position in the leadership of the workers' State (Lenin offered him the post of Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, which would have naturally made him Chairman if Lenin died).

Consequently, he declared to the party leadership that he intended to form a bloc with Trotsky. Lenin took this step after reviewing his stand regarding the distribution of tasks within the Political Bureau (particularly the predominant role of Stalin in Lenin's absence due to his control over the organizing bureau) and the administration of the State.

The fact remains that Lenin was the one to assign Stalin to his posts which allowed him to assemble his faction and dole out a series of key positions. It should also be recalled that Lenin proposed the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress ban factions and tendencies without specifying the duration. Of course Lenin cannot be held responsible for the formation and consolidation of the Stalinist faction. In his last fight, Lenin invested all his energy into the anti-bureaucratic struggle.

Stalin and Stalinism are the antithesis of Lenin's thoughts and actions.

Trotsky, in several compelling texts, recorded a self-criticism on his conciliatory past before 1917 [23] but he did not mention his standpoint for the first half of 1923. But I believe that during Autumn 1923 too he made a mistake of reconciling with the Stalinist faction and its temporary allies (Kamenev and Zinoviev until 1925). Could this be another of his positions that could have changed the course of history? It is very difficult to reply in the affirmative, though I am convinced that the opposition's fight of 1923 would definitely have sped up, had Trotsky conducted an open battle at the Spring 1923 Congress.

During the debate of Spring 1923 on the Georgian issue he did not foresee that the Triumvirate would momentarily step back only to reinforce its position later (he realised this in December 1923). In the spring of 1923 Lenin supported another battle. Trotsky knew it but he could not assess its full reach. Lenin refused to agree with Stalin over the Georgian question and other issues. He wanted to enforce a complete political defeat sanctioned by an organizational one: Stalin's dismissal. At several decisive moments in the party's history Lenin had known how to settle political problems organisationally. Trotsky was yet to grasp this vital aspect of political struggle at that particular time.

Would it have been possible to oust Stalin in the absence of Lenin? It's difficult to answer, but the battle needed to be fought. Had Stalin been dismissed from the General Secretary's post, the anti-bureaucratic struggle would have been easier. However, it could not have been won because Stalin (as Trotsky stressed later) was merely the product and the spokesman of the bureaucratic layer gradually stabilising and crystallising in the pores of Soviet society, the State and the Bolshevik party since the early 1920s.

The fight for eradicating the bureaucratic sore implied overall changes including a resumption of the self-activity of the masses accompanied by a revival of the Soviets (the Unified Opposition would propose this in 1926-27), the reinstatement of the right to form tendencies in the party and multipartyism. Therefore, Stalin's removal would not have signified a resolution of the anti-bureaucratic struggle but it would have been a favourable turning point.

From October 1923, Trotsky changed his previous stance and joined the '46' in the first public and concerted offensive of significant Bolshevik cadres against the party's internal bureaucracy. Lenin could not do this before. Trotsky's articles (see "New Course") were the year 1923's best explanations of bureaucracy and the ways to counter it. The '46' fought and succeeded in exerting a significant influence in the party by solidly supporting Trotsky's New Course. After the Opposition's defeat in January 1924 Trotsky took two precious years to regain the initiative in the struggle. He was politically paralyzed between January 1924 and end of 1925. This was a crucial time for the party when it witnessed the progression of significant bureaucratic deformations. Trotsky was politically paralyzed in the sense that he was not calling the shots in a political and organizational war that aimed to put Stalin and his allies into a minority.

Also, 'politically paralyzed' does not mean that he ceased to think and discuss with other key officials of the party who shared his objection to bureaucratisation; instead, he analyzed it step by step and openly expressed his disagreement in the Politburo (where he was completely isolated) and through confidential letters to his allies. On the other hand, he believed that it was not possible to engage in an open battle either in the party or in the International.

Trotsky resumed a determined battle in 1926 against the Thermidorian bureaucracy. Before it could impose a forced collectivization and a mass repression that literally destroyed the Bolshevik party, Trotsky launched a united opposition.

Before concluding this study I wish to return to one of the lacunae in the Bolshevik leadership's understanding of the transitional problems during the early years of the revolution. I mentioned it in the introduction.

Trotsky's articles, the interventions of the '46' and Lenin's last texts did not perceive bureaucracy as an independent social and political process, which was simultaneously the offshoot of a Tsarist past and the product of specific conditions in the development of the Soviet workers' State. Certainly it was very difficult for the protagonists to predict the role of bureaucracy. In 1923-1924, and in the following years, the left-wing opponents (Trotsky, Rakovsky, Preobrazhensky, Pyatakov etc.) considered that bureaucracy ran the risk of strengthening the pro-capitalism social forces, namely the Nepmen, the Kulaks, etc. by dint of the wrong policy it imposed on the party.

They did not realise that the bureaucracy had a specific purpose of monopolising power and consolidating its privileges without having to restore capitalism. This error of perception (which is easy to understand in retrospect) partly explains why Preobrazhensky rallied behind Stalin in 1929 when his turn from the NEP looked like a return to a socialist proletarian policy.

Rakovsky and Trotsky gradually figured out the specific role of bureaucratisation in the Soviet state starting from 1928. It fell upon Trotsky and the activists who shared this fight to the end to lead a tireless battle against the Stalinist bureaucracy and produce a comprehensive analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet workers' State (see "The Revolution Betrayed"). As we take stock, it is absolutely essential to take a note of that.

#### **14. The struggle of Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and the Fourth International for a Socialist Democracy**

The struggle of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition profoundly contributed to the struggle for democracy during the transition to socialism. This holds true both practically and also analytically, if the course of the dictatorial shift following the seizure of power is considered. Without understanding the process of degeneration a policy cannot be chalked out for dealing with it. From

this point of view, the book “The Revolution Betrayed” written by Leon Trotsky in the mid-1930s is an indispensable instrument.

Trotsky and the Fourth International spared no effort for a genuine political Revolution in the USSR, so that the masses could overthrow the power of bureaucracy and reconstruct democratic organs of power. Here are some excerpts from one of the crucial texts adopted by the Fourth International at its Founding Congress (1938):

*“The Soviet Union emerged from the October Revolution as a workers state. State ownership of the means of production, a necessary prerequisite to socialist development, opened up the possibility of rapid growth of the productive forces. But the apparatus of the workers’ state underwent a complete degeneration at the same time: it was transformed from a weapon of the working class into a weapon of bureaucratic violence against the working class and more and more a weapon for the sabotage of the country’s economy”.* [24]

The text contained a series of tasks and demands towards restoring socialist democracy:

*“A fresh upsurge of the revolution in the USSR will undoubtedly begin under the banner of the struggle against social inequality and political oppression. Down with the privileges of the bureaucracy! Down with Stakhanovism! Down with the Soviet aristocracy and its ranks and orders! Greater equality of wages for all forms of labor!”*

*“The struggle for the freedom of the trade unions and the factory committees, for the right of assembly and freedom of the press, will unfold in the struggle for the regeneration and development of Soviet democracy”.*

(...)

*“It is necessary to return to the soviets not only their free democratic form but also their class content”.*

(...)

*“Democratization of the soviets is impossible without legalization of soviet parties. The workers and peasants themselves by their own free vote will indicate what parties they recognize as soviet parties”.* (Ibid)

To understand this text of 1938, we must recall how Stalin and his compatriots destroyed the feats of the October revolution by unleashing forced collectivization, deteriorating working conditions in factories as a consequence of the Stakhanovite movement, increasing inequality, repression of the right to express, repression and indoctrination of artists, creation of the gulag, conviction and execution of the Bolshevik leaders of 1917 and the leaders of the October uprising and so on. From 1936 to 1938 there were four rounds of trials known as the ‘Moscow Trials’. Three of those convicted, on the orders of Stalin and his gang, the party’s main leaders. Zinoviev, Kamenev, Smirnov, Piatakov, Radek, Bukharin, Rakovsky, Preobrazhensky, Antonov-Ovseenko, Krestinski ... all the main leaders named in the text were implicated. Most of them were executed, and only those who admitted their ‘betrayals’, in some cases under torture, were allowed a trial. Hundreds of thousands of activists or persons regarded as adversaries, were executed with a bullet in the head without any other form of trial.

The trial of May-June 1937 targeted Soviet military leaders, including leaders of the Red Army of Civil War (e.g. Mikhail Toukhachevsky, Marshal and Deputy Commissioner of Defense; and Iona Yakir, Commander of the Kiev Military Region). Following this trial, the Red Army was debilitated just before the Second World War.

Trotsky was assassinated by one of Stalin's agents in August 1940 in Mexico City.

### **The strife for democracy in art and culture**

The *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* (written in July 1938 by André Breton and Leon Trotsky, published version signed by André Breton and the Mexican painter Diego Rivera) remains a very pertinent reference:

*“True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time -true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it, and to allow all mankind to raise itself to those heights which only isolated geniuses have achieved in the past. We recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture”. [25]*

*“We recognize, of course, that the revolutionary state has the right to defend itself against the counterattack of the bourgeoisie, even when this drapes itself in the flag of science or art. But there is an abyss between these enforced and temporary measures of revolutionary self-defense and the pretension to lay commands on intellectual creation. If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralized control, to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history.*

It should be clear by now that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called ‘pure’ art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction”. [26].

This 1991 brochure from the Fourth International, as well as Trotsky's theories from the late 1920s echo the positions adopted by the Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg in 1918. She had warned the Bolsheviks against certain measures curbing freedom of expression. She asserted that “without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable”. [27]

*“Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of “justice” but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when “freedom” becomes a special privilege”. [28]*

*“The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes. When all this is eliminated (.....) life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element”. [29]*

Trotsky struggled relentlessly against the Soviet Union's degeneration. He gave his all and paid for it with his life in August 1940. Trotsky spearheaded an invaluable battle. His proposals and demands for reinstating the transition to socialism incomparably inspire the undaunted: ready to continue the struggle for an eco-socialist revolution.

## **Eric Toussaint**

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## **P.S.**

\* Translated by Suchandra De Sarkar in collaboration with Sushovan Dhar and further edited by Dave Kellaway.

\* Eric Toussaint, historian with a PhD in Political Science has been active with the Fourth

International since the early 1970s. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89ric\\_Toussaint](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89ric_Toussaint)

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 37007), [Lénine et Trotsky face à la bureaucratie - Révolution russe et société de transition](https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37007):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37007>

[2] V. I. Lenin, The Extraordinary All-Russia Congress Of Soviets Of Peasants' Deputies,

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/12.htm>

[3] For the Brest-Litovsk Treaty see : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_Brest-Litovsk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Brest-Litovsk)

[4] V. I. Lenin, The New Economic Policy And The Tasks Of The Political Education Departments, Report To The Second All-Russia Congress Of Political Education Departments October 17, 1921

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/17.htm>

[5] V. I. Lenin, Eleventh Congress Of The R.C.P.(B.), March 27-April 2, 1922

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/27.htm>

[6] The Question of Nationalities or "Autonomisation"

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/autonomy.htm>

[7] V. I. Lenin, On Cooperation, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/06.htm>

[8] V I Lenin, Pages From A Diary <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/02.htm>

[9] Preliminary Draft Resolution Of The Tenth Congress Of The R.C.P. On Party Unity

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch04.htm>

[10] Trotskyism and the PSOP, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/07/psop02.htm>

[11] According to Isaac Deutscher (Trotsky, Vol 3, Pg. 131) Trotsky himself proposed that a project be undertaken for reorganising the CC and its different bodies in January 1923.

[12] Tony Cliff, Trotsky: The Sword of the Revolution 1917-1923, Chapter 16. Trotsky and the triumvirate

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1990/trotsky2/16-triumvirate.html#f32>

[13] Trotsky, My Life, Pg. 482. Dover Publications, INC. Mineola, New York.

[14] In Trotsky, La Lutte antibureaucratique en URSS, t.1, p.77, 10/18

[15] Bukharin (Editor of Pravda, soon to become a permanent Politburo member replacing Lenin) abandoned his critical positions after December 23 and sided with Stalin's camp, remaining there until the late 1920s. He contacted Trotsky at the end of 1925 asking him to join the Stalin bloc that came into being following a rift in the Triumvirate, with Zinoviev and Kamenev returning to the opposition. In his letter to Trotsky, he described how he shuddered at the thoughts of the bureaucratic and arbitrary methods prevailing in the party. Trotsky flatly turned him down, reminding him that he, Bukharin, shared responsibility for the consolidated internal regime in the



anti-Opposition offensive of 1923. Nevertheless, Bukharin maintained his alliance with Stalin (see Trotsky's letter in Cahier L. Trotsky, June 88).

[16] E. H. Carr, *The Interregnum*, pg. 328.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/broue/1971/ussr/ch08.htm>

[17] see Preobrazhensky, Sapronov, Pyatakov , op. cit.

[18] Stalin , quoted by Carr, op cit p 304.

[19] see the interventions of Preobrazhensky, Sapronov, Piatakov from December 23- January 24 reproduced by New Park Publications

[20] J. V. Stalin, *The Discussion, Rafail, the Articles by Preobrazhensky and Sapronov, and Trotsky's Letter*, December 15, 1923  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1923/12/15.htm>

[21] Stalin's speeches at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviets make this issue absolutely obvious, quoted by Deutscher in his "Stalin" p 333

[22] Bajanov cited by Deutscher, op.cit. p 335

[23] particularly see Cahiers Leon Trotsky - June 88

[24] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tia38.htm> The USSR and Problems of the Transitional Epoch, Leon Trotsky

[25] *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*.  
[https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit\\_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm](https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm)

[26] *Ibid*) (see Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 10-18, Paris, 1971, pp. 502 and 505).

It is indeed necessary to champion the artist's freedom, so that if either the revolutionary state or a revolutionary vanguard pretends to regulate cultural creations before or after the rift with capitalism, it can be seen through.

### **A socialist, pluralist and throbbing democracy**

The Manifesto adopted by the 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Fourth International (February 1991) synthetically presents the issue of democracy in the post-revolution phase:

*"Pluralist and living socialist democracy, the free confrontation of different priorities, the independence of political and social organizations from the state apparatus are not luxuries reserved for the richest countries that the poorest countries must put off until better times. For all socialist revolutions they are a functional necessity for overcoming contradictions in the economy, reducing inequalities and conquering injustices by developing the means to overcome difficulties through collective awareness. Men's and women's civic and social rights, a state based on law, unrestricted political democracy, democracy of the associated producers, democratically-centralized planning and the necessary but limited recourse to market mechanisms are all complementary for building a socialist society. Just one missing link in this chain is enough to pervert the whole process".* [[A Manifesto: Only socialism can ensure the survival of humanity, 1991 World Congress, Paris <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article136>

[27] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, Chapter 5, The Question of Suffrage.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch05.htm>

[28] Ibid, Chapter 6, The Problem of Dictatorship,  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch06.htm>

[29] Ibid