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Moscow, 1990: When Trotskyist travellers met Soviet reality

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A brief moment of cooperation amid the Soviet collapse reminds us of the need for international solidarity.

Thirty years ago this month, Russian students, researchers, representatives of a newly formed independent mineworkers' trade union and political activists gathered in Moscow for a seminar to resurrect the memory of Lev Trotsky.

They were joined by Trotsky's devotees from western Europe, who arrived in the Soviet Union hoping to make their hero's ideas relevant, just as democratisation, movements for national rights and a headlong rush to the market economy melted the country down.

I was one of them. I flew into Moscow Sheremetyevo airport, my suitcase loaded with Trotsky's pamphlets denouncing Stalinism, reprinted by Hungarian Trotskyists exiled in France. The customs officials who inspected it were more concerned that I might be a black marketeer than that the pamphlets could be seditious.

For decades, Trotsky had been labelled the ultimate traitor to the Soviet Union he helped to found. But since the mid-1980s, Soviet journalists and historians, given licence by Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "openness" ("glasnost"), had publicly questioned the official myth that Trotsky was an agent of the Soviet Union's imperialist enemies.

The event, held in the Sputnik Hotel on Moscow's Leninsky Prospect, marked the 50th anniversary of Trotsky's assassination in Mexico in 1940 - which Soviet citizens were only just learning, thanks to "glasnost", had been by the hand of a Stalinist agent. Along with Lenin, Trotsky had led the first Soviet government, commanding the Red Army to victory in the civil war of 1919-20, only to be later elbowed aside by Stalin in a power struggle. He was driven into exile in 1928.

"For the first time since 1929, Trotsky's followers gathered here. Completely legally," one of the largest-circulation Soviet newspapers, Komsomolskaya Pravda, reported.

"But, Lord save us, aren't Trotskyists the last thing we need, with their hatred for private property, their leftism and their hopes of world proletarian revolution?"

The nominal aim of the Sputnik Hotel event - to establish a Soviet section of a revolutionary international, the political organisation founded by Trotsky in 1938, shortly before his death - was unachievable.

The Trotskyists, having everywhere been expelled from the Moscow-controlled Communist parties for dissent, saw a revolutionary international as continuing the work of the Third International, formed in Moscow in 1920 as the "world party of socialist revolution".

The logic underpinning our 1990 event - that if only the reactionary Stalinists and Labourites who dominated the workers' movement could be replaced by true revolutionaries, the 1917 overthrow could be replicated internationally - was false. A revolutionary international had never gained a mass following; the ["death agony of capitalism"](#) on which it was predicated had, during the postwar boom, been superseded by a new surge of brutal and violent capitalist expansion.

But still, the ideas of international solidarity and working-class self-organisation that western Trotskyists had grown up with resonated as the Soviet Union's terminal illnesses took hold.

Historian Alexei Gusev, who attended the Sputnik Hotel event as a student, recalls that the European activists "demonstrated that 'the west' - to which many Russians opposed to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union then looked - was not only capitalism, Thatcher and Bush."

"They showed that there was also an active left that opposed Stalinism as well as capitalism," Gusev remembers.

The idea of world socialist revolution was inspiring - and the sectarianism of the Trotskyist visitors, who could not agree among themselves, noticeable, Gusev adds.

After the seminar, Gusev and his friends formed a Trotskyist group that "stood for an anti-bureaucratic revolution in the USSR, for soviets of working people and for a democratically-planned economy. Our immediate aims were workers' control over production, the liquidation of the KGB [security police], democratisation of the army, expropriation of the CPSU's property, and the right of Soviet peoples to self-determination".

Our attempts at international solidarity opened up another "west" - not only for young Moscow activists, but also for the independent mineworkers' union militants also in attendance.

"These pages, or perhaps footnotes, in the history of international and Russian civil society seem important for completely different reasons than those I imagined at the time"

The year before, miners had participated in the largest strike wave in Soviet history. They had spontaneously downed tools, demanding improved pay and conditions and political reform. The Soviet government-sponsored "official" miners' union had opposed this revolt. Workplace strike committees and local assemblies had banded together to form the new, independent union - the first in the Soviet Union since the 1920s not to be strangled at birth by police action.

But the independent mineworkers' union representatives were suspicious of the British National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), whose leaders had breathed no word of support either for their strikes or for Polish miners who had joined the Solidarność movement in the 1980s. The NUM was formally linked to the "official" Soviet miners union: it seemed, from the Soviet strikers' point of view, to be quite literally on the bosses' side.

Soon after our Sputnik Hotel meeting, and thanks to links made through it, British mineworker militants who had been in the forefront of the great 1984-85 miners' strike arrived in the Soviet Union. Unlike the NUM's national officials, they sought cooperation with Russian, Ukrainian and Kazakh counterparts no less than with those in South Africa.

When Dave Temple, a Trotskyist mineworker from Durham, reached the mining town of Pavlograd, eastern Ukraine, the local mineworkers nicknamed him "Columbus" in a wry comment on empire. A larger delegation from the Durham coalfield soon followed. "Shocking," the late David Hopper, then Durham mineworkers' union general secretary, told me after an underground pit visit. "The safety

regime was diabolical. Those were the conditions our grandfathers had told us about.”

It was a troubling view of the “workers’ state” that many British trade unionists thought lay behind the iron curtain. In this sense, Durham learned from Pavlograd, and vice versa.

Back in Moscow, in August 1991 - a year after the Sputnik Hotel seminar - the revanchist wing of the CPSU tried, in panic, to reverse Gorbachev’s reforms in a coup that collapsed after three days. When thousands of protesters gathered at the Russian federation parliament building, we Trotskyists joined them, our red flags alarming the overwhelmingly liberal crowd. Asked “what are you communists doing here?”, my Russian friends replied: “We are communists, but we favour democracy and civil rights.”

Gusev, now a professor of history, says there was “no small degree of utopianism” and “idealisation of Bolshevism” among Russia’s Trotskyists in the 1990s. Nevertheless, “I can’t say now that our activity was useless,” he adds. In that first post-Soviet decade, Trotskyist groups participated in Russia’s independent union movement, and recovered unknown histories of Soviet dissidence through seminars and publishing projects. In Moscow, a new library was established, named after Trotsky’s collaborator and critic Victor Serge. Anarchist and syndicalist groups undertook parallel, and sometimes joint, activity.

After the Soviet Union was dissolved, on 26 December 1991, Boris Yeltsin drove Russia’s headlong rush to privatisation and opening to foreign capital. It brought poverty and pain to millions. The CPSU’s successor, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, joined with the nationalist right in an opposition “red-brown front”. The independent left, in which my friends were active, offered an alternative way to oppose the neoliberal onslaught in Russia without embracing statism and nationalism.

These pages, or perhaps footnotes, in the history of international and Russian civil society seem important for completely different reasons than those I imagined at the time. On a personal level, many of my illusions about the Soviet experience - shared, I am sure, with many western leftists - were shattered. These illusions were not about Stalin’s crimes, at which I had always recoiled in horror. It was current stuff: the everyday heartlessness of this “workers’ state” to its citizens. The cattle-like conditions on public transport; the complete absence of sanitary towels for women; the callous indifference of workplace safety regimes that so struck the Durham miners.

Then there was the sense of community. We assumed a general “Soviet working-class consciousness” that just did not exist after three generations of brutalisation and atomisation. And there was Soviet history, so neatly shoehorned into western leftists’ ideologies, but so messily and viscerally present for Russians who could study it uncensored for the first time.

To prepare this article, I contacted Alexei Zverev of the Memorial association, who presided at the Sputnik Hotel event. As he tells it, he was glad to have helped to “rescue the historical truth about Trotsky from the wreckage of Stalinism”, and to examine both the “bright” and “dark” sides of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s characters. (In 1989, Memorial, the association devoted to remembering the victims of Stalinist repression, held a packed public meeting entitled “Give Comrade Trotsky The Floor”.) Politically, though, the Sputnik Hotel event was “more problematic” for Zverev: Russia’s experience “serves as an antidote to any kind of leftism”, he says, pointing to the “colossal number of victims of the Lenin-Trotsky period, after which followed Stalinism”.

Our conversation reminded Zverev of a letter to one of the Bolshevik leaders from Vladimir Chertkov, a close collaborator of Lev Tolstoy. The Bolsheviks’ mistaken idealism would have been merely touching, had it not “by way of violence, done so much evil and injustice, had it not

compelled millions of people to suffer so much”, Chertkov wrote.

These discussions - about what the 1917 revolution meant, why it was pushed back, and how it related to the Stalinist disaster that followed - were suppressed in the Soviet Union for decades. Its citizens could not talk with each other, let alone with people from other countries, about any of this.

Our meeting in 1990 was an attempt - albeit illusion-fuelled and naive - to carry on that discussion, in civil society rather than academia. And it continued in seminars, conferences and publications under the difficult conditions shaped by Russia’s economic crash of 1993-1995.

We did not know that the long winter, in which Soviet history is used as a bludgeon to reinforce nationalist, statist reaction, was on the way. But our seminar turned out to have been some sort of preparation for that.

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