Draft reflections on Socialist transformation: Soviet Union
A Muddled Understanding - Trotsky on the Soviet Union.

In examining the Soviet experience, Leon Trotsky's appraisal deserves and needs attention. His writings provided a major impetus for a genre of literature and political analysis often promoted as the major Left criticism of, and offering an alternative to, the policies enacted under Stalin's leadership.

If, as Trotsky argued, that a state and a bureaucracy existed because of the poverty of the transitional Soviet society, to the extent it was inevitable, they would continue to exist, no matter whether Stalin or Trotsky led the Bolshevik Party. To that extent it would only highlight the sterility of the Stalin-Trotsky dispute.

The merging of the Party with the state apparatus gave rise to problems that were not fully understood. Trotsky's position assumed the view that the Party enmeshed in the state's apparatus would involve it in administrative tasks which would eventually dilute and undermine its political purpose as the functions of administration came to dominate.

This raises a number of questions: would Party members take over bureaucratic manners from participating in the state apparatus? Would the Party succumb to the pressures of its environment and become the political organisation of the bureaucracy? How could such a process be checked?

Since there had been no significant institutional change between the one-party state under Lenin and that under Stalin, Trotsky could only argue that the Party was not the same Party which had taken power: bureaucratisation had changed it. Trotsky thought the process of 'degeneration' could be reversed chiefly by his leadership.

Lenin had said that the Soviet Union was a workers' state with bureaucratic deformations. That the bureaucratic twist got worse is not in dispute, the nub of the matter was whether the situation was aggravated by policies that failed to alter in light of the contradictions that came to the fore with changing conditions of Soviet Society?

In the following examination of Trotsky's views on the Soviet Union, from which he was expelled in 1928, there will be a focus on his views on what he characterises as the betrayal of the revolution by a ruling bureaucracy. This has been an enduring theme on the Left that has curtailed a marxist exploration of the problems involved in socialist construction.

The theoretical deficiencies of what eventual emerged as a new orthodoxy firmly embedded in treating political economy from the insular perspective of the "Socialist camp" were to become manifold, not least in the failure to proceed from the standpoint of taking the world-economy as the basic unit of analysis. That is not to detract from the correctness of choosing the developmental orientation in preference to "permanent revolution".

For all its failings, the attempts at socialist development in the USSR were a partial victory expressing the beginning of the political disintegration of the world capitalist system. The continual economic dominance of that system does not devalue the Soviet experiment but rather adds new factors to the revolutionary equation. The lesson to be learnt is that the socio-economic processes in a transitional socialist society must face the protracted challenge
of the attempt to impose a subordinate relationship by the dominant world capitalist mode of production. The Soviet Union under Stalin was the first to attempt to undertake socialist construction; it was not the only one to embark upon that path.

Trotsky ended his life isolated and reviled by the international communist movement. He had pockets of supporters, often active in social democratic parties of the 2nd International, who reflected in their stance towards the USSR the anti-Sovietism that was caught between the inconsistent message of political support for the Soviet Union in its confrontation with imperialism, but calling for the overthrow of the Soviet leadership that safeguard the country against imperialism.

In the process of re-evaluation the affinity between what was achieved in the Soviet Union under Stalin's leadership and Trotsky's own subjective aspiration questions were raised on what separated the two: "a river of blood" wrote Trotsky towards the end of his life. That was not how it was seen when Stalin's "left turn" in economic policies - towards industrialization and collectivization - was regarded as the Soviet leadership's adoption of the economic platform of the Opposition and thus its raison d'être: former supporters of the exiled Trotsky recanted in droves to support the proletarian policies.

Contrary to the version offered by Trotsky's defenders, the Left Opposition was not destroyed by Stalin's persecution. It was destroyed from within by its inability to formulate correct policies. With what could the Left Opposition oppose Stalin once he embarked upon wholesale collectivisation and industrialisation? Did not the policy change undermine the credibility of Trotsky's analysis, strategy and tactics?


eurocentrism and the Communist Movement pointed out, in spite of their political opposition, the common theoretical assumptions that were shared by both Stalin and Trotsky excluded the revolutionary dynamics of the (then) colonial world. For instance, when the revolutionary storms in China impinged upon their political dispute it was treated as another stick to which beat their political opponent within the Soviet leadership. Anti-trotkyism was regarded as the principle demarcation line within the communist movement while other, it could be argued, more fundamental errors flourished.

Today, while communists should be beyond the simplistic crudities of using the term 'trotskyite' as a mindless smear, it is still politically necessary to reject the flawed approach and bankrupt conclusions of Trotskyism if we are to understand the important lessons that can be drawn from an analysis of the process of socialist construction undertaken in the Soviet Union prior to the Second World War.

* Such was Trotsky's blinding hatred for the Stalin leadership that he was willing to appear before the United State Congress to denigrate that leadership. The Un-American Activities Committee - a forerunner of the McCarrhite witch-hunting body - was investigating the American Communist Party and the Third International with a view to making them illegal (1).
SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY

The possibility of building "socialism in one country" was a question of enormous practical and theoretical significance for the socialist revolution. It lies at the heart of the serious differences that arose regarding the development of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. It led to the ideological and organisational defeat of Trotskyism as a political force in the Soviet Union. Those who maintained that, in default of imminent international revolutions, it was possible to advance upon the basis of "socialism in one country" emerged victorious in the policy battles that decided the direction of future Soviet development.

"Socialism in one country" foresaw the prospect of the world revolutionary process as a sequence of national revolutions. The enhanced importance of the national and colonial question in the era of imperialism, that was inherent in the idea of "socialism in one country", was naturally never appreciated by Trotsky given his rejection of such a nation in the first place. He could not accept the concept of revolutions taking place at different intervals, each largely dependent on factors internal to the states and nations within which they occurred.

The original marxian model of the socialist revolution winning victory first, and more or less simultaneously, in the developed European nations had been superceded as the reality of revolutionary seizures of power proved more varied and complicated that the conceptual model. This hindsight was not available during the debate of the early 1920s: those who argued against it being possible to build socialism in the encircled USSR were trying to defend the model against the actual situation brought about in the Soviet Union by the revolution.

The October Revolution was the beginning of a world process: it opened up the revolutionary perspectives at odds with the schematic interpretation of marxism that hitherto different social formations, each more historically progressive than the last, succeeded one another in linear fashion. The divergences in revolutionary forms have failed to fit comfortably into Leon Trotsky's theoretical generalisations. The possibility of socialist forms emerging with their own laws of social development at variance with the model sketched out in the classics has taken a long time to be absorbed by revolutionary marxists. Such lessons have failed to penetrate the quotation laden dogmas of the adherents of whatever 4th international you care to choose.

With a recognition that was not Trotsky's alone - that national capitalism cannot be understood except as part of a world economy - went an erroneous political stance that assumed national culture and politics simply withers with the internationalisation of production, distribution and finance. The understanding of the importance of the existence of a world system is effectively neutralised by its association with the Trotskyist Permanent Revolution's notion of world revolution. Such a notion fails to understand the operation and consequences of the existence of a world system. It denies the historic reality that nation-states function as historic agents - associated yet autonomous - in the contradictory development of imperialism. This aspect of the nation question finds no place in Trotsky's schema.
The "supreme internationalist", Trotsky, like his latter day disciples, proved unwilling to take into consideration the national peculiarities of the class struggle. For all the rhetoric of international and permanent revolution could not disguise the lack of any sort of programme for revolution that actually met the requirements in the separate countries from which the world revolution could take shape.

The consequences of the uneven development of imperialism, with the uneven ripening of the revolution situations and opportunities dictating disruptions in the imperialist system at the level of individual national formations, failed to break through Trotsky's political understanding. Instead, shortly after the October Revolution, he put forward a scheme of "revolutionary wars" and "formenting" class struggle on an international scale by the Soviet Red Army. 'Revolution' from without is not seen as internationalist "deliverance" even by a working class that lives in conditions of capitalist exploitation and ideological hegemony. Such intervention, on the contrary, tends to stimulate cross class national unity against it. This lesson was not drawn from the Polish experience in 1920-21.

Admirst the stabilisation of Capital and the retarded tempo of the international revolution, "socialism in one country" tackled the objective and historical dilemma confronting the Bolsheviks. With the seizure and consolidation of political power, the needs of the immediate post-revolutionary period had been met: counter-revolution and imperialist attempts to strangle the Soviet state at birth had been beaten back at enormous cost. Facing the Bolsheviks was the dilemma set by a mechanical economistic interpretation that socialism could only grow out of the conditions of socialised production engendered by the development of advanced capitalist societies, and yet they had taken power in one of the most backward capitalist states. Although the collapse of tsarist structures saw the creation of the first socialist state power, the Soviet republic was far from the optimal technical and productive development previously thought essential for socialist society.

At this point, what was needed was a modification of the established marxist view that the transition to socialism would parallel the pattern of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This necessity was further demonstrated when the practical exigencies of laying the socialist foundations of the economy was superseding the 'New Economic Policy' were addressed by proponents of "socialism in one country".

Opponents of that vision laid themselves open to the charge of implying that the October Revolution had been mistaken or premature action, since it was now impossible to fulfil the purpose for which it had been made. It was an echo of the Menshevik argument that backward Russia was not yet ripe for socialism and first had to pass through an extended period of capitalist development. The policy of "socialism in one country" was recognition that with the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat the realisation of socialism as a practical task was put on the agenda: as a process of 'becoming' not as a state of being. By asserting the need to incorporate the further development of the historic process, Bolsheviks like Stalin came to symbolise the commitment to building the socialist future.

J.V. Stalin became identified as the main spokesperson for the line endorsed by the Party majority. Those engaged in the task of making revolution would sustain their commitment in relation to the circumstances of the Soviet Union, despite
the distortions engendered by external and internal forces. They would not stake the fruits of the October Revolution on possible future European successes.

At heart, Trotsky staked his revolutionary career on the general perspective that the Soviet Union could not maintain the socialist revolution on national foundations alone. This central idea he had absorbed from Parvus, who considered that the nation-state had become obsolescent as a result of the development of the world market. As expressed by Trotsky, it was a very eurocentric vision permeated with a horror of isolation from the developed West. Proceeding from his “unshakeable conviction” that fundamental class aims cannot be achieved within national boundaries, Trotsky saw a blind alley at the exact time when the October Revolution was on the threshold of a victory in terms of world history. Faced with the problems of the transitional period so that the socialist republic would stand secure as a torch of actual socialism, Trotsky objectively instilled the idea that owing to her backwardness, peasant population, dependency on the world imperialist economies, the construction of socialism was doomed within a national framework.

Trotsky’s perspective was that of a world revolution being the key to overcoming the (then) economic backwardness of the Soviet Union: overthrowing the bourgeoisie in the developed capitalist world would release the economic means by which to surmount internal Soviet economic and socio-political difficulties. If Trotsky was to be believed, economically underdeveloped lands lend themselves to socialist political revolutions but not to the construction of socialist economies or societies without substantial external aid.

Rather than acting upon the new equilibrium, what emerged as the Left Opposition operated in an outmoded historical framework made redundant by the failure of the workers to seize state power in the developed imperialist states. Stalin recognised that, with the events in Hungary, Germany and Poland, the revolution in Western Europe was not materialising, and that this undercut the intellectual structure Trotsky had erected. This raised the question of what kind of social order should the victorious proletariat establish?

Stalin emphasised what was at stake: "The only point at issue is, can we or can we not completely lay a socialist foundation for our economy by our own efforts? The Party affirms that we are in a position to completely lay a socialist foundation for our economy. The Opposition denies this, and thereby slides into defeatism and capitulationism." (2)

What trajectory could be offered by the Opposition when the starting point of their analysis was the degeneration of the leading element of Soviet State and society? Rather than prove capable of utilising the method of marxism and, in the marxist tradition, produce new strategic options to transform a changing world, the Opposition and Leon Trotsky in particular asserted a fundamentalist theory without practice: a central tenet of "permanent revolution" remained that the Soviet system could not survive without the contribution of the developed productive forces of the West.

This framework dominated and crippled Trotsky’s thinking in his bid for power as Party members foresaw the vegetative perspective inherent in the formulation of "permanent revolution". The Opposition seemed to offer little other than adventurism or to beat a retreat when the Proletarian revolution they had acclaimed in theory as imminent became an actuality. The attempt to build a
transitional socialist society within national boundaries was to Trotsky a
decidely retrograde step. He was to repeat his analysis ad infinitum so that
after over nearly two decades of Soviet power, Trotsky offered the "hope" that:
The World Revolution shall reinvigorate the Soviet working masses with new
courage and resoluteness (3).

One lesson that Trotsky failed to learn was that "socialism in one country"
expressed the continued allegiance of the proletariat to national identities, an
allegiance both challenged and reinforced by the process of creating a new
society of their own. As E.H.Carr observed as the USSR tried to build up working
class identification with the Soviet state — an identification transcending, if
not replacing, that with their specific nations and nationalities —
"The appeal of national sentiment was an appeal not to Russia of the
past, but to a new entity which would create a new world by its own resources.
Self-sufficiency was proclaimed, not as an end, but as a necessary means." (4)
"Historical analogies with the Great French Revolution (fall of the Jacobins) made by liberalism and Menshevism for their own nourishment and consolidation are superficial and inconsistent" argued Trotsky in one of his first major public pronouncements of political opposition. "The fall of the Jacobins was pre-determined by the lack of maturity of the social relationships... Our situation is incomparably more favourable. With us, the nucleus as well as the left wing of the revolution is the proletariat, whose task and objectives coincides entirely with the tasks of socialist construction." (5)

Ironically what emerged as the recurring theme in Trotsky's writings on the Soviet Union was precisely the analogous use of the French Revolution of which he had been so dismissive (6).

In drawing upon a history unrelated to the Soviet regime, Trotsky was able to manipulate a Thermidor analogy and through extensive use of a stylistic pejorative vocabulary assert that a "counter-revolution" had taken place in the Soviet Union on the basis of the new property relations introduced by the October Revolution. Trotsky's conceptual framework related events inside the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s with the consolidation of the class dominance of the 18th Century French bourgeoisie.

As one article critical of Trotsky's arbitrary modification and use of such a historical analogy noted:

"On many occasions, Trotsky said that it would be banal pedantry to attempt to fit the stages of the Russian Revolution exactly into the stages of the French. He would often pay lip service to dialectical materialism which analyzes the object in its process of development as opposed to 'a superficial idealistic mode of thinking that operates with ready-made norms, mechanically fitting living processes of development to them'. Unfortunately, he sometimes failed in practice to heed his own theoretical recommendations." [Thompson P. 'Trotsky's incorrect use of historical analogy' Communist Forum Bulletin Number 6 (Spring 1987): 5-19]

That the Thermidor thesis was primarily an instrument in the political struggle against the Soviet state, regardless of its applicability, comes from Trotsky's unpublished papers residing at that citadel of the proletariat, Harvard University. Replying to fellow oppositionist Karl Radek's 1928 criticism of the 'Thermidor thesis', Trotsky observed:

"What is the above-mentioned doubt about the applicability of the analogy between the Russian and French revolutions? Are we perhaps sitting in the Society of Marxist Historians, debating the problems of historical analogies in general? No. We are conducting a political struggle in which we used the analogy with the Thermidor hundreds of times together with the author of the (present) thesis. Analogies should be taken within the strict limits of the ends for which they are being made." (7)

There is no denying the theoretical convenience of such a seductive analogy, the true appropriateness of which left Trotsky indifferent. There are other instances which raise doubts about Trotsky's political consistency, such as when he argues, during an intercalary polemic in the American SWP in 1939 over the class nature of the Soviet state:
"It would...be a piece of monstrous nonsense too split with comrades who on the question of the sociological nature of the USSR have an opinion different from others, insofar as they solidarize with us in regard to the political tasks." [In Defense of Marxism, Pathfinder 1970:5].

Along with his analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy, Trotsky defended this central analogy of the Thermidor up to his death as the explanatory key to the ideological edifice he constructed in opposition to the Soviet state. The attractiveness of these twin assertions is made apparent in that classical indictment by Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed.

THE REVOLUTION BETRAYED

The Revolution Betrayed achieved a number of objectives for Trotsky. Firstly, it enumerated, what Trotsky attempted to claim as his own - the "old Bolshevik" Party and the October Revolution - of the responsibility for Stalinism.

However, Trotsky's attempt to don the cape of an "old Bolshevik" conveniently ignored the known historical record - that he had joined the Bolshevik Party in August 1917 and subsequently "parachuted" to prominent positions in the state machinery.

Trotsky's pre-1917 opposition to the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin was well documented. The 'Man of October', the popular image Trotsky promoted, began his political career vilifying Bolshevism, an outstanding example of which is Trotsky's 'Our Political Tasks' written in 1904.

In the pre-October days in the struggles on the important issues of the type of party to build and what role a small working class could play in the transformation of an underdeveloped, partly semi-feudal and capitalist empire like Tsarist Russia, Trotsky opposed the Bolshevik prescriptions.

Until August 1917 Trotsky vacillated between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, but more often stood between them, working for reconciliation between the two. It was this adoption of a stance "above" the party and not what was later to be presented as the important theoretical contribution of "permanent revolution" that was at the centre of pre-October differences. Trotsky's self-appointed role as unifier of revolutionary forces was subject to much criticism by Lenin, and Trotsky's view of the one he was intent on portraying as his comrade in arms, in later years, was far from what one would expect of an old Bolshevik.

It should be remembered that initially Trotsky had taken an anti-Leninist stance before he became anti-Stalinist. If one looks through the Collected Works of Lenin, one finds that he and Trotsky were continually at odds over questions of theory and practice (for example, Volume 20 pages 346-7, Volume 32:85).

While Trotskyists emphasize what they portary as the closeness of Lenin and Trotsky in the last stages of Lenin's life in an attempt to paint a picture of Trotsky, in Lenin's absence, as the foremost representative and embodiment of his recently adopted Party, those opposed to Trotsky could cite numerous examples of Lenin's criticism of Trotsky and, as damaging Trotsky's pre-1917 attitude towards the Bolsheviks. In a private letter to the Georgian Menshevik, Chkheidze, written in 1913, Trotsky expressed his view that "the whole foundation of Leninism at the present time is built on lying and falsification and carries within itself the poisoned element of its own disintegration." (8).
Even at the zenith of Trotsky's revolutionary life, when he placed himself under the discipline of the Bolshevik Party, Trotsky's opposition to the Party's policies was not easily forgotten. In the manoeuvring for power, Trotsky's advocacy of inner-party democracy to legalize factionalism was seen as the tactical move it was: an attempt to circumvent the centralist democracy of the Party, and contest the Party's democratic decisions. Trotsky's conversion to 'inner-party democracy' came after he had lost the argument in an extensive debate in the Central Committee and at all levels of the Party. As Stephen Cohen commented, in 1923:

"Trotsky's own motives and ambitions were not above suspicion, his sudden commitment to democratic procedures being suspect if only because previously he had been among the most authoritarian of Bolshevik leaders." (9)

Party members would be aware that Lenin's criticism in his 'Last Testament' included the observation that Trotsky relied overmuch on administrative solutions to practical problems. Trotsky's arguments for the militarization of labour were too recent to be forgotten. Trotsky had been in the forefront of the case against the Workers' Opposition demanding discipline, discipline and once again discipline at the 1922 Congress for his democratic credentials to be taken at face value. (Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921-1929 p.32)

Although fond of employing analogies from French revolutionary history, it was Trotsky who was seen in the early 1920s as a potential 'Bonaparte' because of both his army links and position in the debate over the role of Soviet trade unions. Trotsky's political honesty was also not beyond question:

"In his letter of 15 January 1925 to the Party Central Committee Trotsky wrote that 'the formula "permanent revolution" belongs wholly to the past' and that if he mentioned it on any recent occasion, this was 'a reversion to the past and not in the sphere of present political problems.' (10)

Secondly, the 'Thermidor thesis' provided a means by which to deny the Soviet leadership, and Stalin in particular, its Bolshevik pedigree. The apologetic function that sought to rationalise Trotsky's attempt to reduce Stalin, among others, to the status of mere instruments or personifications of bureaucratic reaction was essential. To do otherwise would be to weaken what Trotsky sought to establish: to deny that the Soviet state of the 20s and 30s was a legitimate product of Bolshevism.

That the Party's Politiburo cherished amongst its full members, until a couple of years before Stalin's death in 1953, no less than 13 leaders who exercised joint military and political authority in the Civil War, and whose class origins were predominately proletarian, meant little to Trotsky. Stalin's comrades like Kaganovich, Molotov, Kirov, Voroshilov, Zhdanov and Mikoyan had distinguished Party service behind them, often pre-dating Trotsky's own short membership of the Bolshevik Party. Yet Trotsky had only contempt for those he castigated as having occupied only "secondary posts throughout the history of the Bolshevik party." (11)

Trotsky seemed to regard the history and achievement of the Bolshevik party as identical with its prominent personalities. It is not surprising that the Party rank-and-file reciprocated Trotsky's contempt and agreed with Stalin's condemnation of Trotsky's "wrong conception of our Party. He regards our party in the same way as an aristocrat regards the 'rabble', or a bureaucrat his subordinate." (12)
Indeed Trotsky's conception of history was aristocratic: heroic individuals leading the way while the masses toiled on for their bread. The attitude that Lenin was the only revolutionary in the Bolshevik Party (himself aside) after April 1917 pervades his writings. As Lunacharsky portrayed him, Trotsky always had one eye in the mirror of history. He was forever:

"ready to make any personal sacrifice, not excluding the greatest sacrifice of all—that of his life, in order to go down in human memory surrounded with the aureole of a genuine revolutionary leader." (13)

What fuelled all the abusive rhetoric at his disposal was a life-long mission both to absolve himself and explain what he considered the incomprehensible: "How and why a faction the least rich of all in ideas, and the most burdened with mistakes, should have gained the upper hand." (14)
A FLAWED ENTERPRISE

The activities, no matter how flawed, of the first attempt to construct socialist relations of production in the period of the "revolution from above" consolidated and extended the socialist productive forces. Yet while the perceived threat of a Kulak Thermidor, along with private farming and the remnants of the bourgeois class were (as it was later to emerge partially) liquidated, Trotsky's view was that of the "film of revolution" running backwards when on the very verge of collectivisation and industrialisation.

Far from preparing a "Therimodian reaction", in any meaningful sense of the notion, the rapid industrialisation programme and the struggle for collectivisation were far from undermining the collective ownership of the means of economic life. But Trotsky took the opportunity to indulge in criticising Stalin from the right, at a time when Trotsky's former supporters were rallying to policies they regarded as their own. Trotsky demanded in the pages of his exile publication 'Bulutetl Oopozitsii' "that 'dekulakisation' and the whole adventurous offensive be stopped, forced collectivisation discontinued, and the whole program of industrialisation reformulated. His prescription recommended caution, realistic targets, refusal of orientation on full autarchy" (15).

Trotsky's demands were not aimed at preserving the worker-peasant alliance, which was to prove ruptured by evangelical zeal in applying the programmes, but out of his lack of confidence in the prospects for success.

However, amidst bitter struggle against internal and external enemies the first attempt at socialist development did achieve some success in a way that completely confounded all the prognostications of anti-Marxists. The Soviet Union, under Stalin's leadership, demonstrated the potential of socialist planning and socialist construction and raised the possibilities of replacing capitalism by a socialist orientated economic programme.

In the aftermath of this experience we can today observe that contradictions and failings in the first model raise a number of questions on the consequence of some of the traits in a socialist economic structure: we would not repeat blindly the programmes then enacted, but Trotsky would seize upon the failings of the system to indict the Soviet leadership whilst denying the achievements of socialist construction, the fruits of the October Revolution, to that same political leadership. It is ironic that the most publicised criticism of the Soviet Union under Stalin - Trotsky's polemical indictment in 'The Revolution Betrayed' - begins with a defence of Soviet economic achievement. It only goes to emphasise that he lived in the shadow of the Soviet experience.

In 'The Revolution Betrayed' Trotsky stated "the scientific tasks, as well as the political, is not to give a finished definition to an unfinished process". The Soviet Union was seen as a transitory society, and he claimed "we have above all avoided doing violence to dynamic social formations which have no precedent and have no analogies." (16).

If indeed, Trotsky had approached the subject in this manner then he would have accomplished something of lasting value in that classic of Trotskyism. But 'The Revolution Betrayed', while purporting to "understand what is coming to be", has running through the analysis a priori position that Trotsky sought to explain and justify: that of a ruling bureaucracy developing in the USSR.
A RULING BUREAUCRACY

It was to the Soviet bureaucracy that Trotsky allocated the responsibility for betraying the revolution. The importance of the concept of bureaucracy as the collective social designation for the main culprit in the usurpation of the October Revolution runs like a thread throughout Trotsky's writings. But it is 'The Revolution Betrayed' that is regarded as the most systematic and comprehensive critique to come from the prolific pen of Leon Trotsky.

However, far from being "the most coherent and developed theorization of the phenomenon within the marxist tradition" as some would have us believe (17), Trotsky's focus on 'the bureaucracy' is riddled with inconsistencies, and the validity of Trotsky's outpourings on the subject can hardly be written without self-interest: as a not-unpartisan observer, the former Trotskyist Bertram Wolfe described it, Trotsky lived his life "as a pretender denouncing a usurper".

It is fundamentally unproductive to use bureaucracy as a societal designation that describes the key element in a whole society. It cannot be used to denote a class formation like 'capitalism' which is a complete system of economic and social relations. Yet critics of the Soviet Union make references to the bureaucracy as a ruling elite to determine the whole character of Soviet society. It was Trotsky's proposition that "all power is in the hands of the bureaucracy. The person who rules is the head of this bureaucracy: Stalin." (18)

The obvious questions confronting Trotsky's analysis were: how can it be that a politically expropriated working class in the USSR was not necessarily one that had also lost its social and economic power? Why did Trotsky's critique remained fixed at the level of the superstructure?

The formalistic logic of Trotsky's characterisation of the USSR, whereby socialist legal forms determine the socialist content of society, led to glaring contradictions with his political objective. The self-righteous nature of his faith in his own judgemental definitions viewed 'bureaucracy' not as a set of functionaries but as the bad habits of his political enemies. When trying to objectify his basic hostility, Trotsky compounds his analytical error by seeing the Soviet bureaucracy simply as the product of backwardness. Economic backwardness may have created a need for an enlarged state machine but it was the spur of modernity that saw the mushrooming of economic and state organisation.

In Trotsky's scheme, the bureaucracy was not a consequence of the leadership giving priority to questions of administration stemming from the necessity of building and maintaining an effective centralised state apparatus. But planned industrialisation does entail a radical re-allocation of human and material resources, and the by-product of seeking a planned economy and the social mobilisation to achieve it, was an increase in the administrative machinery.

Trotsky failed to prove in any detail that the socio-economic interests of the various Soviet bureaucracies were unified. His only substantial point concerning the coalescence of the bureaucracy and its basis was his suggestion that "the norms of distribution preserving a bourgeois character lies at the base of a new differentiation of society." (19)

But Trotsky argued against deviant disciples who inferred at a later date that the USSR was ruled by a new class: "if the Bonapartist riffraff is a class this means that it is not an abortion but a viable child of history. If its marauding parasitism is 'exploitation' in the scientific sense of the term this means that
the bureaucracy possesses a historical future as a ruling class indispensable to the given system of economy." (20)

What Trotsky claimed was that leadership had been usurped by the representatives of an identifiable stratum but that the bureaucracy had no independent role in the economic structure; thus its relation to productive property was not that of a ruling class.

Trotsky argued that the bureaucracy had expropriated the proletariat politically and served a dual function: it had a progressive role in defending, by its own methods, the social conquests of the October Revolution. As a parasite requires a living body, so the bureaucracy needed the revolutionised economic base for its own continued existence, not for the welfare of the working class. Thus it was not an independent class formation but "it continues to preserve state property only to the extent that it fears the proletariat." (21)

The emphasis on the abuse of power as the source of the bureaucracy's privileges detracted from the search for any deeper understanding of the dynamics of socialist societal development. It led logically to an explanation that by not creating (or being able to create) social support for its political supremacy in the form of independent property, the bureaucracy was compelled to defend state property as the source of its power and income. The fate of the nationalised property and planned economy determined, for Trotsky, the quintessence of the USSR: "so long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the Proletariat remains the ruling class." (22)

The importance given to legal forms of property ownership meant that, for Trotsky, the socialist revolution in the economic and social sphere was carried out with the nationalisation of land, industry, the banks and the establishment of the state monopoly of foreign trade. The problem of explaining why if the foundations of the USSR were solid (which was not in doubt) such a society had Stalin as its acknowledged leader was confronted by Trotsky with a novel explanation.

"Where there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy. It 'knows' who is to get something and who has to wait." (23)

This 'need for a policeman' theory of Trotsky, says Perry Anderson, was anchored in the category of scarcity. But it is hardly the basis for a scientific understanding: the state, in regulating inequalities in the sphere of consumption, is involved in valuating priorities but the contradiction between what goods are available and the deficiencies in distribution are hardly immutably set in stone. Better economic performance and more rational distribution would lessen the need for a policeman; what was the alternative to the state regulation — distribution (and consumption) dictated by purchasing power?

A criticism of Trotsky (which incidentally is sometimes levelled, with some justification at Stalin) was that he viewed the economy as decisive, as if the struggle for socialism was reducible to national economic construction. There is no guarantee of linear development in the transitional state and society. The political superstructure plays a decisive role in developing socialist social relations, as well as the planned economy through the medium of state ownership.
In one throwaway line (at variance with his general position) Trotsky does state accurately that "a revolution in the forms of property does not solve the problem of socialism, but only raises it." (24)

This points to a more fruitful line of investigation, but one that Trotsky never followed through. Resolving contradictions that arise during the prolonged period of developing socialism is not accomplished by repeating historically outmoded formulae, but must be approached from the perspective of recognising actually what exists and seeing how to take it forward. Trotsky could, and did, use real errors made by the Communist Party to build himself up. Trotsky could draw upon the kudos of his important role in the October Revolution and Civil War, his only period of effective political practice, when he worked in the framework provided by Bolshevism. But very prematurely, just after the Civil war, Trotsky began to undermine confidence in the existing leadership and policies of the Soviet state.

The liquidationist recipe offered as a cure for the "bureaucratization (that) threatens to detach the leaders from the masses" was one that failed to recognise that the way out of the backward conditions was to build a powerful socialist state. As the proletariat realises its dictatorship through the Soviet state, that apparatus requires the best communist workers to work in it.

In 1922, Lenin thought that the bureaucracy — largely inherited from Tsarist times — had too much power, there needed to be greater political control:

"if we take Moscow with its 4,700 communists in responsible positions, and if we take the huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? ... To tell the truth, they [the communists] are not directing, they are being directed." (Political Report of the Central Committee. Selected Works Volume 3:692)

That young Soviet state needed the participation and political guidance from the Bolshevik Party to make progress towards a classless society and raise societal standards, satisfying the material needs and desires of its citizens. The importance of state power is recognised by Marxists, yet in his bid for power, Trotsky asserted that "with us, the essential sources of bureaucratism resides in the necessity of creating and sustaining a state apparatus that unites the interests of the Proletariat and those of the peasantry in a perfect harmony, from which we are still far removed. The necessity of maintaining a permanent army is likewise another important source of bureaucratism." (25)

The self-interest in Trotsky promoting the 'New Course' decision of the Party and State leadership did not go unnoticed. Even before Lenin's death, Trotsky's letter in 'Pravda' of December 8th 1923 denounced "the already ossified bureaucratic degeneration of Party morals and relations". As the dictatorship of the Proletariat is realised through the instrumentality of the vanguard of the class gather in the Bolshevik Party, and as that vanguard was in Trotsky's telling to be devoured by Stalinism, then where was Soviet society heading? But if one accepts that correct ideas come from and are tested in social practice, then practice repudiated the ideological platform that Trotsky fought on: the forging ahead, however flawed, of socialist construction gave the lie to the claim that socialism (as a transitional societal formation) cannot be built. In placing himself in opposition to the Party majority, Trotsky was to backpedal a long way from the position he once expressed:

"Comrades, none of us wants to be or can be right against the party. In the last analysis, the party is always right, because the party is the sole historical
instrument that the working class possesses for the solution of its fundamental tasks...It is only possible to be right with the party and through it since history has not created any other way to determine the correct position." (26)

THE MASSES MAKE HISTORY

The successful accomplishment of mobilising a people to undertake the rapid and radical economic and social transformation of society requires more than suppression of opposition. The role of ideas as a catalyst was crucial in the Soviet experience. B.H.Carr makes the same mistake as Trotsky when he described Stalin as "the man of a period when enthusiasm was exhausted, when ideas had lost their savour, and speech-making and pamphleteering had become pointless and ineffective." (27). Both failed to understand the solidarity and enthusiasm generated as the Soviet people were conscientiously building a new society; these were heroic days as they saw themselves building socialism.

Magnitogorsk, the great new steel complex was a symbol of that drive recorded by John Scott, an American worker there. "I was precipitated into a battle. I was deployed on the iron and steel front. Tens of thousands of people were enduring the most intense hardships in order to build blast furnaces, and many of them did it willingly, with boundless enthusiasm, which infected me from the day of my arrival." (28)

The achievements of that time were wrongly personalised as it was Stalin who emerged as the outstanding comrade by the late 1920s when he obtained the genuine support of most of the Party leadership and the confidence of the rank-and-file to mobilise the Soviet peoples for an attainable vision. All this was incomprehensible to Trotsky, who took the opportunity in 'The Revolution Betrayed' to reiterate his oft expressed contempt. Trotsky explained his defeat in part by suggesting that the masses were not ready for him: "the tired and disappointed masses were indifferent to what was happening on the summits." (29)

In spite of all the claims that their's was opposition to the bureaucracy as a retarding social phenomenon, the Trotskyist Opposition personalised the political struggle: increasingly their venom was directed at Stalin the individual. The attacks of the Opposition "by their very concentration helped to crystallize Stalin's position as the acknowledged party leader. Stalin became identified with the Party. As Molotov claimed, the persecution (travya) of Stalin by the Opposition was 'simply a means of masking its malicious attacks on the Central Committee and on the Party'." (30)

In Trotskyist mythology, the defeat of the Opposition is seen not in terms of politics but as the result of the deployment of the "Stalinist paraphernalia", "the falsification of history, the police spies at Party meetings, the slanders and vilifications, the mass explosions, the blackmail, assassinations and forced suicides." (31). The unjust repression of political opponents came in the aftermath of their political defeat after nearly six years of inner party struggle. In truth, when it came to the showdown the Opposition found itself without a political army. On the decisive strategic problems of the age it was the Communist Party majority, Stalin included, that was right.

One foreign participant in the struggle recalls that "the issues of the struggle were constantly on the agenda in our collective. These were discussed in our
classes, as they were in factories, schools and peasant organisations throughout the country." Veteran Black American communist, Harry Haywood, was there at one of the last overt acts of the Trotskyist Opposition when they attempt to make an appeal at the Tenth anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution in 1927 by dropping leaflets from the windows of a Moscow hotel. The Opposition hoped to rally support by calling for a rise in wages and a lowering of peasant income. The counter-demonstration was attended only by a handful of students and clerks. They, Haywood recalled, "appeared at the windows of the hotel shouting slogans of 'Down with Stalin!' They were answered with catcalls and booing from the crowds in the streets below. We seized the leaflets and tore them up. This attempt to rally the people against the party was a total failure and struck no responsive cord amongst the masses." (32)

It was the Fifteenth Party Congress, held in December 1927, that marked the final defeat of the Opposition's political platform within the Party. The Opposition's 'Counter-thesis', published as supplements to Pravda in pre-Congress discussion, was supported by some 6,000 as against the 725,000 who voted for the theses of the Central Committee. To explain why the Party had forsaken his claim to leadership, Trotsky complained of the changing social composition of the Party as it took on state responsibilities.

"The participation of workers in the state, co-operative and other apparatuses implies a weakening of the factory cells and an excessive increase of functionaries in the Party, proletarian in their origin or not." (33)

Trotsky had claimed (at the time in 1924/5) that the Lenin Levy - a huge Party recruitment campaign to honour the memory of Lenin - was a measure of proletarian confidence in the Party (see: Challenge of the Left Opposition:160) but now he castigated the Party membership adding the charge of a faction corrupting the Party.

"Is it at all possible to 'seize' power in a party a million strong, a party rich in revolutionary traditions?" Stalin sarcastically asked when addressing Trotsky's charge. "If it is, why has Trotsky failed to 'seize' power in the Party, to force his way to leadership of the Party? How is it to be explained? Does Trotsky lack the will and desire to lead? Is it not a fact that for more that two decades already Trotsky has been fighting the Bolsheviks for leadership in the Party?" (34)

What the Trotskyist Opposition could offer was an extremely narrow and politically useless critique of a Soviet administration from which they had been purged. The unproven assumption that monolithic conformity was imposed upon the Party and state through bureaucratic manipulation and intimidation was shattered by the period of wide, and often indiscriminate, actions against a perceived conspiracy to overthrow the Soviet state from within. The bureaucracy, during this period in the 30s, was, as Trotskyist Issac Deutscher described, "in a state of flux, renewing permanently its composition, and not allowing it to grow out of a protoplasmic or amoeboid condition to form a compact and articulate body with a socio-political identity of its own." (35)
The brunt of the purges in the 30s was borne by the bureaucrats Trotsky despised as the repression hit hardest at all levels of the Soviet system of power - even the "repressive apparatus" itself was not spared. The decimation of "Stalinists", while undermining the chronic overemphasis on 'bureaucracy' in Trotsky's analysis of the USSR, was used to bolster the 'Thermidor' explanation of a 'Bonapartist dictatorship' consuming the revolution. He understood what he perceived as the "degeneration" of the process began with the October Revolution by contrasting it with the classic bourgeois revolution. This analogy was modified as Trotsky sought to find close correspondence between the two events. So Trotsky moved from one misleading prognosis to another in a politically disorientated lurch as his analysis of events in the Soviet Union was dependent upon historical analogy incorrectly applied.

During 1926-27 it was Bukharin and his supporters of the 'New Economic Policy' who were identified as the main danger attracting Trotsky's condemnation as 'Thermidorians'. In October 1928, Trotsky raised the possibility that Soviet Bonapartism might take the form of a military coup against Stalin, and in "On Situation in Russia", he compared Stalin to Kerensky. He thought that dual power was in the offering, with the substance of power sliding back to the disenfranchised bourgeoisie, at the very moment the Stalinist leadership embarked upon the prodigious development of the country's productive forces that Trotsky had been calling for.

THE 'DEATH AGONY' OF TROTSKYISM

It is relatively easy to point out the failings of the first socialist transitional strategy, despite the real successes and progress made in the creation of a socialist economy, but what did Trotskyism offer to "regenerate" Soviet Society?

In October 1933, Trotsky had called for the 'Stalinist apparatus' to be isolated from its proletarian base. He argued for the idea that regeneration could only occur through political revolution, that is a transfer of political power without undermining the basic property relations of the Soviet Union.

The political prognosis offered by the 4th International (what Trotsky called "the most important work of my life - more important than 1917, more important than the period of the Civil War, or any other"), was contained in "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International" published 1938.

With regards to the Soviet Union the 4th International led by Trotsky predicted either capitalist restoration with the bureaucracy overthrowing the socialist forms of property, or the working class crushing the bureaucracy and opening the way to socialism. Naturally the ever-present delusions of leadership were present as it was claimed, "there is but one party capable of leading the Soviet masses to insurrection - the party of the Fourth International!". (This written in a document that, in a classic understatement, acknowledged "If we are to examine 'Trotskyism' as a finished program, and, even more to the point, as an organisation, then 'Trotskyism' is extremely weak in the USSR." (36))

Trotsky regarded his work, as recorded in his "Diary in Exile", as indispensable in the full sense of the word. He had called upon 'centrist' and independent revolutionary parties to join in the formation of the 4th International, his proposed international 'Leninist' party since 1933. Its origins were not
auspicious, racked by disputes and splits, but Trotsky foresaw revolutions taking place internationally through parties in the national states - parties directed by an international centre. That international centre would be guided by himself as the arbitrator in political matters. His supporters argue that his assassination on August 20 1940 denied him his historical destiny. They avoid the conclusion that the irrelevance of Trotsky's programme has been demonstrated by the fate of the political platform he wrote for the 4th International: half a century of history has shown that the programme "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International" is useless as a guide to action.

The exiled Trotsky repeatedly failed to appreciate the durability and strength of the regime brought into being by the October Revolution. Whilst acknowledging the immense achievements that gave proof to the superiority of socialist forms and methods in the 20s and 30s, Trotsky posited the omnipotence of imperialism, predicting in "The Revolution Betrayed" that in a European conflict "If it is not paralyzed by revolution in the West, imperialism will sweep away the regime which issued from the October Revolution." (37)

Trotsky could not but assert that the constellation of international forces was more important, more vital than the degree of internal strength. He claimed, in an echo of the early Twenties, "Only the European proletariat, implacably opposing its bourgeoisie and in the same camp with them the 'friends of peace', can protect the Soviet Union from destruction, or from an 'allied' stab in the back." (38)

For all his virulently oppositional opposition to the Soviet leadership, Trotsky was firm in the need to defend the Soviet Union against imperialism. On this point he faced opposition from his own supporters, in a real sense he could not relent on this issue. The historical analogy he used constantly to explain the nature of the Soviet state form an integral part of Trotsky's defence of the proletarian social character of the Soviet Union led by Stalin.

Trotsky's understanding was never without malice. It gave rise to ludicrous positions, such as that, in May 1940 "the stalinist bureaucracy has thus become the main source of war damage to the Soviet Union." (39) His inability to admit that the political measures taken under Stalin's stewardship to strengthen the social relations he praised blinkered Trotsky's ability to understand "what is coming to be".

He spoke of the pre-war Soviet Union as a transitional formation but treated it as if it were a hybrid subject to varying degrees of degeneration or deformation. With the call for legalised factional, in the guise of a return to the political organisation of the Soviet, contained in the programme of the 4th International, Trotskyism was returning to its starting point: "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership" wrote Trotsky (and that has been the Trotskyist position ever since). More than a change of leadership was required to alter the course of Soviet development, especially when that potential 'leadership' shared the same misconceptions as the existing leadership. Stalin would have agreed with Trotsky's view that:

"Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of "Das Kapital", but in an industrial arena comprising a sixth part of the Earth's surface - not in the language of dialectics, but in the language of steel, cement and electricity. " (40)
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3. The Age of Permanent Revolution: a Trotsky anthology Dell 1964:284
   That such national pride degenerated into an oppressive Russophile national
   chauvinism during Stalin's lifetime cannot be solely attributed to the Georgian
   Stalin. Such a simplistic treatment, as presented by Tetsuzo Fuwa's Stalin and
   Great Power Chauvinism, would be to deny the real material and social forces
   that operated during the Soviet experiment that came to support a Slavophile
   Great Nation chauvinism.

6. in the history of the French Revolution, the coup d'etat of 9th Thermidor
   (27 July 1794) ended Jacobin rule and inaugurating a very marked bourgeois
   reaction against both Robespierre's revolutionary concepts and the Parisian
   working class. The term was used by Trotsky in 1903 when he maintained that
   strong central control of the revolutionary Russian Social Democratic Labour
   Party as advocated by Lenin was preparing the ground for the 'Thermidorian
   social opportunism'. In the inner party struggle after Lenin's death, the theme
   was appropriated by Trotsky who alleged there was the danger of a new
   'Thermidor', that is, betrayal of the Russian Revolution from within the new state
   and party bureaucracy.

7. Deposit T3125 - Trotsky Archives. Harvard University
12. On The Opposition :855
13. Revolutionary Silhouettes:68
   Lunacharsky pen-portrait is confirmed by other observers, such as in the
   observations of British intelligence operative, Bruce Lockhart, on meeting
   Trotsky for the first time in 1918: " he is the very incarnation of the
   revolutionary of the bourgeois caricatures...His dignity has suffered an
   affront. He is full of belligerent fury against the Germans for the humiliation
   to which they exposed him at Brest. He strikes me as a man who would willing die
   fighting for Russia provided there was a big enough audience to see him do it."
   [Memoirs of a British Agent Macmillian 1974:226]

14. The Revolution Betrayed :44
15. Lewin M. Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debate
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Counter-posed to its progressive role, was the bureaucracy's supposed "reactionary political tendency which usurped the power of the workers in Russia, its functions as an agency of world imperialism" [Kerry T. The Anatomy of Stalinism. National Education Department. SWP (US) 1972:3]. But obviously Trotsky's analysis of the external role of the Soviet bureaucracy as counter-revolutionary is fatally flawed. That 'Stalinism' inspired and generated revolutionary class forces in a variety of societies was a phenomenon that Trotsky could not reconcile with his theories for all his talk of betrayal. Indeed, on the wider historical stage, in all those countries where the working class-peasant alliance overthrew bourgeois rule, where the trotskyist movement says (however qualified by "deformed") there is a workers' state -- in all those cases, trotskyism was defeated as a political force. Yet in all those places where imperialism is strongest, where opportunism leads the working class and revolution is weak -- there, trotskyism has some following.

23. The Revolution Betrayed:112
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37. The Revolution Betrayed:227
38. Ibid. 231
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