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Half socialist? Leon Trotsky and the Soviet Union

Issue: 149

Posted on 6th January 2016

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*A review of Paul Le Blanc, **Leon Trotsky** (Reaktion Books, Critical Lives series, 2015), £11.99*

Paul Le Blanc faced a daunting challenge when he agreed to write a book about Leon Trotsky and his life in exile for the *Critical Lives* series, which specialises in brief introductions to leading political and cultural personalities. How do you *briefly* introduce one of the greatest leaders of the world's first socialist revolution that then apparently rejected him? How do you summarise all the unanswered political questions that were intensified by Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union in February 1929? **1**

The most powerful chapter of the book is appropriately titled "Revolution Betrayed". This, of course, is also the title of Trotsky's most famous book of the 1930s, written as the crisis of Communism was reaching its climax: *The*

Book in George Orwell's 1984. Le Blanc's discussion of André Malraux, the gifted left wing French novelist, illustrates the difficulty of understanding Trotsky's betrayal by the Soviet Union. Malraux "personally witnessed the debacle of Stalin's policy in China, which resulted in the slaughter in 1927 of many idealistic revolutionary militants. He told their story... in one of the great novels of the 20th century, *La Condition humaine (Man's Fate)*".² The novel was highly valued by Trotsky, and mirrored his own devastating assaults on Stalin and the Comintern's policies in China. Now Malraux is introduced here very effectively to illustrate the great paradox at the heart of the 20th century's crisis of Communism. How could someone like Malraux, who had an unusually refined and detailed grasp of the treachery of Stalin and his policies, nevertheless rally to Stalin and desert Trotsky?

We will return to this question in a moment. But first we need to note critically that apart from two other sentences,³ this is the only reference to what was nothing less than the sabotage of a potential socialist revolution in China. This was the first major showdown between Stalin and Trotsky over an international question with parallels with the Russian Revolution itself. It was indeed part of the "decisive contest" between the two leaders, to use Isaac Deutscher's words.⁴ Failure of the Communist movement internationally to discuss the lessons of China in 1927 meant it was doomed to repeat similar mistakes in the 1930s.

The "Revolution Betrayed" juxtaposes Stalin's "People's Front" perspectives with "The Great Madness", a phrase originating in Prosecutor Vyshinsky's demand during the Moscow Trials that each of the "mad dogs be shot", but evoking the full weight of Stalin's internal policies for the period.⁵ Only the madness turns out to have a terrifying rational core. The tremendously positive reception to the People's Front perspectives internationally helped Stalin emphasise the rational core and somehow get away with minimising the scale of the Terror. This was despite the fact that nothing less than the total destruction of the aims and objectives of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, including its core cadre, was at stake, turning communism into its opposite, symbolised of course by the systematic persecution, and ultimate assassination, of the Terror's principal victim, Leon Trotsky.

The complexities involved in this process are impressively explained. So let me write now: buy this book! It provides brief succinct explanations for many of Trotsky's most important writings. It is very stimulating, often beautifully written and highly original. It pulls no punches in criticising Trotsky's earlier overcautious approach to Stalin. It describes the influence of workers' movements on the young Trotsky very well, there are rich and thoughtful insights into his personality as well as a good discussion of the continuing obsession with Trotsky among conservative scholars, the wider media and the art world, itself an unintended tribute.

The reader is drawn into and becomes absorbed in the nightmare world of Stalin's sinister and sickening hounding of Trotsky, including the meticulous destruction of Trotsky's family, often with the tacit support of "liberal" governments and Communist Parties everywhere. Notwithstanding the criticisms outlined here, in part driven by the severe restrictions imposed by the publishing format, it succeeds in introducing new readers both to Trotsky and particularly his life in exile.

However, there is one highly significant omission, which cannot be excused, in this case, by the cramped space within which the book was written, namely Le Blanc's failure properly and critically to assess Trotsky's interpretation of Stalinism and the debates this provoked. The issues involved here are of such magnitude that they will dominate this review.

In 1935, at the 7th World Congress of the Communist International, its new head, Georgi Dimitrov, "mapped out before the assembled leaders and representatives of the parties of world Communism a new strategic orientation", the People's Front: "The toiling masses in a number of capitalist countries are faced with the necessity of making a *definite* choice... not between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism".⁶ As Trotsky pointed out, this was "the traditional policy of Menshevism against which Lenin fought all his life. It signals the renunciation of proletarian revolution in favour of conservative bourgeois democracy".⁷

Le Blanc points out that:

The primary purpose of the People's Front was to form electoral coalitions of working class parties (Communists, Socialists or Social Democrats) with pro-capitalist liberal parties for the purpose of winning elections and forming governments that, while initiating social reforms, would preserve a democratic republic along with a capitalist economy, and maintain a pro-Soviet foreign policy—thereby (presumably) blocking fascism. In France and Spain such governments were established. The problem with this, Trotsky argued, is that fascism arose out of the crises of capitalism, just as imperialism and war arise out of the natural dynamics of capitalism. To preserve the unity of the People's Front, it was necessary to repress the uncompromising militancy of working class struggles—but this was the force needed to end both capitalism and the threat of fascism.⁸

But, Le Blanc argues, Trotsky's critical stance isolated him from the "the broad coming together of progressive forces" that the Popular Front policy produced. Le Blanc hails the historian Paulo Spriano, who describes the "great political turn which was welcomed... by masses of workers, peasants, the middle class (the last term referring to professionals, more or less declassé intellectuals, artists, small business people). Communism had acquired a new countenance: it spoke with a different voice, one which echoed the profoundly humanistic, rational, libertarian and egalitarian qualities of the Enlightenment—emphasising the virtues of 'the people'".⁹ Well, yes, "Stalin is better than Hitler,"¹⁰ as Trotsky ruefully observed.

Surely this is the most extraordinary moment in 20th century history? Communism becomes the worldwide rallying point for the defence of Enlightenment values against the threat of fascist barbarism as it openly opposes the politicisation of workers' struggles against capitalism. It is the moment it also intensifies its own barbaric orgy of self-destruction, the political accompaniment to its forced collectivisation of the land and catastrophic concentration of industrial development, literally only achievable at gunpoint.

The infamous "Moscow Trials" were triggered by the assassination in late 1934 of Sergey Kirov, a pro-Stalin

Communist leader linked to oppositionists associated with Grigori Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev headed a list of 50 people accused of being part of a “Trotskyite-Zinovievite Centre”. A new *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* would explain how the Trotskyite-Zinovievites were aiding both the Nazis and the Western capitalists, “fascism found faithful servants,” ready to commit “acts of terrorism... to defeat the USSR in order to restore capitalism”.¹¹

Further public trials would include Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Radek, Alexei Rykov and various other Bolshevik leaders of both the “right” and the “left”, all accused of similar conspiracies. But Conspirator No 1, Leon Trotsky, though constantly denounced as linked to all the different groups of traitors, couldn’t be brought to trial because for the moment at least he had a degree of protection abroad.¹²

The public confessions of the accused were and remain truly disturbing. True, the extreme methods of torture, the threats to family members—often carried out, the promises to avoid the firing squad—always broken—partly explain it, but not fully. Whatever their differences and earlier political weaknesses, these former Bolshevik revolutionaries had devoted their lives to the overthrow of capitalism and had often demonstrated unparalleled courage in the long years in the underground struggle against the Tsar. Victor Serge’s poem, *Confessions*, caught something in addition about their broken personalities: “We have never been what we are/The faces of our lives are not our own/Today our only truth is despair”.¹³ Trotsky developed this theme, describing the Stalinist “art” of breaking revolutionaries.¹⁴

The scale of the repression reached genocidal proportions: “It has been estimated that more than 2 million people were condemned from 1934 through 1938—with more than 700,000 executions and over a million were sent to increasingly brutalised labour camps where many more perished”.¹⁵

The “Revolution Betrayed” chapter, which so successfully contrasts Stalin’s People’s Front perspectives with the “great madness”, nevertheless disappoints when it comes to its discussion of Trotsky’s politics, which informed his book of the same name. Inexplicably, Trotsky’s argument is split into two separate parts of this chapter, which inevitably builds in quite unnecessary confusion for the reader wanting to grasp difficult and highly controversial arguments. Even more inexplicably, while the first part rests upon some very important passages from Trotsky’s *Revolution Betrayed*,¹⁶ the second part dispenses with Trotsky altogether, instead relying on a recent Stalin biographer Robert C Tucker and the author’s own commentary.¹⁷

In the first part of the chapter we have Trotsky’s analysis, which is partly based on Marx’s writings in *The German Ideology*: “A development of the productive forces is the absolutely necessary practical premise [of communism], because without it want is generalised, and with want the struggle for necessities begins again, and that means all the old crap must revive”.¹⁸

The unanticipated isolation of the socialist revolution in economically backward Russia meant exactly the old crap

reviving. Trotsky provided the memorable example: “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... the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy”.¹⁹ Trotsky added that nobody who has wealth to distribute ever omits themselves. He shows the new bureaucratic elite enriching itself, “limousines for the ‘activists,’ fine perfumes for ‘our women’”, to such an extent that such “socialism” could “seem to the masses a new refacing of capitalism, and they are not far wrong”.²⁰

Yet Trotsky insisted that capitalism had not been reinstated:

The Soviet Union is a contradictory society halfway between capitalism and socialism, in which (a) the productive forces are still far from adequate to give state property a socialist character; (b) the tendency towards primitive accumulation created by want breaks through innumerable pores of the planned economy; (c) norms of distribution preserving a bourgeois character lie at the basis of a new differentiation of society; (d) the economic growth, while slowly bettering the situation of the toilers, promotes a swift formation of a privileged strata; (e) exploiting the social antagonisms, a bureaucracy has converted itself into an uncontrolled caste alien to socialism; (f) the social revolution, betrayed by the ruling party, still exists in property relations and in the consciousness of the toiling masses; (g) a further development of the accumulating contradictions can as well lead to socialism as back to capitalism; (h) on the road to capitalism the counter-revolution would have to break the resistance of the workers; (i) on the road to socialism the workers would have to overthrow the bureaucracy.²¹

To help prepare for the overthrow of the bureaucracy would be the “task of the Soviet section of the Fourth International”.²²

But was the Soviet Union a contradictory society halfway between capitalism and socialism? The second part of the chapter, intentionally or otherwise, casts doubt on this perspective”. There was, as Le Blanc says, “a method in the madness. What Marx called *primitive capitalist accumulation* [emphasis in the original]—involving massively inhumane means (which included the slave trade and genocide against native peoples, as well as destroying the livelihood of millions of peasants and brutalising the working class during the early days of industrialisation)—had created the basis for a modern capitalist economy”.²³

It’s left for Tucker to explain that Stalin had undertaken something similar, “a policy of revolutionary advance in the construction of socialism, for which the speedy collectivisation of the peasants was a necessity. He thereby steered the state into a revolution from above”. Tucker is then quoted as showing how long it took for Stalin’s comrades to “divine what the apostle of socialism in one country” intended.²⁴ This is hardly surprising because Stalin hoped to achieve, in just a few years, an industrialisation programme which had taken capitalism at its origins centuries! A paragraph or two can hardly capture the impact this would have but they do at least underline that if this was indeed “socialism” then something had gone radically wrong:

Stalin's "revolution from above" ... remorselessly squeezing the working class, choking intellectual and cultural life, killing millions of peasants and culminating in purge trials, mass executions, and a ghastly network of prison camps (the infamous Gulag)... At the same time, an immense propaganda campaign proclaimed that socialism was being established... which involved a personality cult glorifying Stalin.²⁵

In the last part of the book we are introduced to Rae Spiegel or Raya Dunayevskaya, Trotsky's "devoted secretary" during his final exile in Mexico,²⁶ as well as the great Trinidadian intellectual C L R James.²⁷ What we are not told is that Dunayevskaya and James developed an important criticism of Trotsky's analysis, insisting that Stalin's "revolution from above" had indeed reintroduced capitalism albeit in the novel form of state capitalism. In 1942 Dunayevskaya, using official Russian statistics, argued that "the reality of the world market... would not permit Russia to tear itself out of the vortex of the world economy and build 'socialism in one country'".²⁸ She would later insist that the law of value operated in Russia because its state-run industries exploited alienated labour. The arguments were more fully developed in the book *State Capitalism and World Revolution* that she wrote with James and Grace Lee Boggs, published in 1950. At the same time Tony Cliff was developing his own theory of state capitalism.²⁹

This is, frankly, a startling omission particularly because the state capitalist analysis fits so well with Tucker's discussion of Stalin's "revolution from above". Tucker argues that the so-called "modernising" Tsar, Peter the Great, captivated by the beginnings of capitalism in Western Europe in the early 18th century, served as Stalin's role model:

Stalin followed Peter's example in looking to the West for aid in Russia's industrialisation... An exhaustive study concludes that "no major technology or major plant under construction between 1930 and 1945 has been identified as a purely Soviet effort." The foreign companies involved in this massive technological transfer... reads like a Who's Who of world capitalism.³⁰

Tucker sees the huge iron and steel centre at Magnitogorsk in the Urals as

a microcosm of the hierarchical new society taking form... The ordinary workers lived in wooden barracks, crowded into minuscule, barely furnished rooms... at the bottom, an underclass of convict labourers... went to work under police guard, and did the heaviest work... for next to no pay... Five miles away, in a small suburban world of which the workers had hardly any knowledge, lived the elite, and the foreign engineers working on contract, in... houses equipped with running water and central heating, served by a well-stocked special store... This suburb was informally called "American City"... Bolshevik theory envisioned the withering away of the state, but Stalin the Russian national Bolshevik saw things differently. Statelessness was no part of his intention, and socialist society... was not... classless. The revolution from above was creating a new privileged service class.³¹

Trotsky regarded as Stalin's "greatest crime" not simply that he carried his totalitarian "revolution from above" by smashing the opposition of workers and peasants, but that he did so in the name of socialism, thus potentially

compromising the very future of the revolution and communism itself.³²

Several generations later and well into the start of a new century, we continue to live in the shadow of that awesome prediction. It matters that we report frankly and fully the major controversies sparked by Trotsky and his writings. This is particularly true of the conclusion to the one controversy that might liberate us from a cumbersome and even, arguably, compromising defence that somehow the Soviet Union was “halfway between capitalism and socialism”. We have had the luxury of several generations in relatively tranquil circumstances, not afforded Trotsky, to debate this matter fully and reach a conclusion that is arguably intellectually, politically, morally and dare even be said, scientifically, superior to the original. Yes, there is a continuing argument but both sides need to be put. Trotsky would have expected nothing less. One of the greatest lessons politics had taught him was resistance to “dogmatic orthodoxies”.³³

Notes

¹: Le Blanc, 2015, pp58-62.

²: Le Blanc, 2015, pp100-101.

³: Le Blanc, 2015, p51. The two sentences do touch on the fundamental flaw of Comintern policy. “Close ties” with nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek which left the Chinese Communists completely unprepared for the nationalists’ murderous onslaught on them. But the crushing of the workers’ insurrection in Shanghai isn’t mentioned, nor is there any wider discussion of Stalin’s justification for an all-class alliance of workers and peasants with the Chinese nationalist bourgeoisie.

⁴: Deutscher, 1959, chapter 5.

⁵: Le Blanc, 2015, p113.

⁶: Le Blanc, 2015, p104.

⁷: Le Blanc, 2015, p105.

⁸: Le Blanc, 2015, pp105-106. Trotsky predicted with astonishing accuracy that the Popular Front “experiments” in France and Spain would end in disaster, precisely because of Stalinist connivance in the repression of working class activity. The restricted space in the book means that the example of France is ignored completely, while the three pages on Spain, the curtain-raiser to the Second World War (pp135-138), frustrate because of all the tantalising questions it raises that demand answers. To give just one example, Trotsky had a mass following in Spain. In 1936 a socialist revolution appeared momentarily to be gathering pace in response to Franco’s attempted fascist coup. But

Trotsky had a bitter falling out with the POUM, the organisation that contained many of his supporters but which nevertheless joined the Popular Front government. In fairness, the author partly resolves this problem with a strong recommended bibliography. I would like to add one reference to it, Andy Durgan's article "Trotsky and the POUM" (Durgan, 2006).

9: Le Blanc, 2015, p105.

10: Deutscher, 1963, p380.

11: Cited in Le Blanc, 2015, pp111-112.

12: In Norway—but hounded out even there—Le Blanc, 2015, pp125-126.

13: Serge cited in Le Blanc, 2015, p113.

14: Quoted in the fourth volume of Tony Cliff's biography of Trotsky—Cliff, 1993, p347-348.

15: Le Blanc, 2015, pp114-115. See also the author's chilling description of the extraordinary mass hunger strike at the Vorkuta labour camp, led by Trotskyists (pp121-124).

16: Le Blanc, 2015, pp106-109.

17: Le Blanc, 2015, pp115-120.

18: Cited in Le Blanc, 2015, p106.

19: Trotsky, 1936, cited in Le Blanc, 2015, p107.

20: Trotsky, 1936, cited in Le Blanc, 2015, p108.

21: Trotsky, 1936, cited in Le Blanc, 2015, p108-109.

22: Trotsky, 1936, cited in Le Blanc, 2015, p109. As Le Blanc says this was highly problematic. Unfortunately lack of space prevents a proper discussion of the Trotskyist Fourth International, except to note that its chronic weakness worldwide was partly attributable both to the success of Stalin's People's Front policies and the witch-hunts of "trotskyite-fascists" by Communist Parties everywhere. Nevertheless, however tiny, it helped carry the true significance of the Bolshevik revolution beyond Hitler and Stalin and the Second World War to a new generation of revolutionary socialists.

23: Le Blanc, 2015, p116.

24: Le Blanc, 2015, p115.

25: Le Blanc, 2015, p116-117.

26: Le Blanc, 2015, p147.

27: Le Blanc, 2015. p150.

28: Cited and sourced in Birchall, 2011, p105.

29: For a good introduction to this subject as well as the relations between Dunayevskaya, James and Cliff, see Birchall, 2011, pp105-108, and Callinicos, 1990, pp73-85. Cliff revisited his own theory of state capitalism in great detail in his own chapter "Revolution Betrayed" in the fourth volume of his Trotsky biography. It's an additional puzzle that Cliff isn't referred to by Le Blanc, especially as Duncan Hallas's *Trotsky's Marxism*, which relies heavily on Cliff's analysis, is referenced.

30: Tucker, 1990, p97.

31: Tucker, 1990, p113-114.

32: Deutscher, 1963, p103.

33: Le Blanc, 2015, p185.

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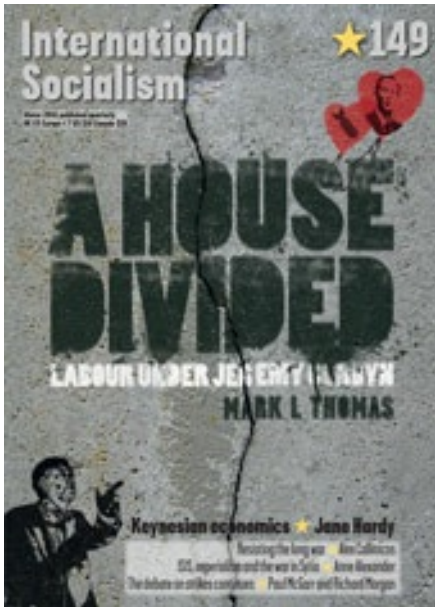
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