

Violence in the Political Construction of Trotskyism

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Often the most brutal explosions of violence are admissions of impotence. Keeping this in mind, the author would like to bring to light the political terror of Joseph Stalin which was systematically disseminated on the Socialist Opposition lead by Leon Trotsky. In order to understand the brutal nature of the false trials and the numerous murders in the name of revolution, it is imperative to understand the degeneracy of the Soviet Union which has been analyzed very dialectically by Leon Trotsky. Paul Le Blanc notes that the socialism in one country perspective caused for all practical purposes a downgrade in the seriousness with which the Communist International was taken. Initially, established by Lenin and his comrades to build parties in countries all over the world, this theory was now being vulgarized and being transformed into a tool for the foreign policy of the bureaucratic brand of socialism which was being practiced by the Soviet Union. It is because of this theory that people who are not aware of the history and do not have a proper knowledge of dialectical analysis fail to analyze the Soviet Union. My paper talks about the violent construction of the myth of Trotskyism as a signifier signifying the betrayal to the big br(other) that is Stalin and exposing the bankruptcy and impotence of Stalinism.

Keywords: degeneration of the Soviet Union, political falsification, myth of Trotskyism

Lying and forgery were inherent in the very situation of the Soviet bureaucracy. In words, it fights for communism. In actual fact, it fights for its own income, its privileges and its power. With the fear and malice of a social parvenu, it exterminates all oppositionists. In order to justify this ferocious terror in the eyes of the people, it is forced to ascribe to its victims ever more monstrous and fantastic crimes.-Trotsky (Rogovin, 2009, p. 189)

Slavoj Zizek, in his book *Violence* notes that outbursts of impotent violence are fundamentally reactive, a reaction to some disturbing intruder¹. In the case of Stalinism, which was the dialectical (not logical) development of Bolshevism, this disturbing intruder was Leon Trotsky² representing the ideas of Revolutionary Internationalism against the slogan socialism in one country. His role in the Russian Revolution was so immense that even Stalin wrote in his pamphlet *The Role of the Most Eminent Party Leaders*, on 6th November 1918, which appeared in the *Pravda*³:

All the work of practical organization of the insurrection was conducted under the immediate leadership of the chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, Trotsky. It is possible to declare with certainty that the swift passing of the garrison to

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¹ Quoted from <https://socialecologies.wordpress.com/2013/02/26/slavoj-zizek-on-violence/>.

² Trotsky became Stalin's nemesis and his left opposition can be seen as the intruder as it continued its criticism on the revisionist Stalinist policies. Abraham Ascher on page 109 of his book *The Russian Revolution* writes that at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party Lenin put forward Trotsky's name for election as the chairman of the People's Commissars, the highest position in the new government. Trotsky had refused it saying that Lenin had been the real strategist who made Lenin go on to say "there is no better Bolshevik than Trotsky".

³ This text was later banned by Stalin.

the side of the Soviet and the bold execution of the work of the Military Revolutionary Committee, the party owes principally and above all to comrade Trotsky. (Wollenberg, 2010, p. 96)

The defeat of the German revolution led to the isolation of the Soviet Union and its backwardness was responsible for the rise of a privileged bureaucracy which wanted to conserve their newly attained political power which was, in principle, an antagonism to the democratic soviets that had been formed keeping in mind the example of the Paris Commune⁴. The main opposition that was being faced by the bureaucracy was from the camp of Trotsky who was carrying on the struggle which Lenin had instigated during the latter's last phase. Lenin clearly talked about removing Stalin from the post of General Secretary. This can be seen in his letter:

Stalin is too rude and this defect, although quite tolerable in our midst and in dealings among us Communists, becomes intolerable in a Secretary General. That is why I suggest that the comrades think about a way of removing Stalin from that post and appointing another man in his stead who in all other respects differs from Comrade Stalin in having only one advantage, namely, that of being more tolerant, more loyal, more polite and more considerate to the comrades, less capricious, etc. (Lenin, 1977, p. 676)

In an article named "How We Should Reorganize the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate", Lenin connected the question to the bureaucratic deformation of the worker's state apparatus. He wrote:

With the exception the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, our state apparatus is to a considerable extent a survival of the past and has undergone hardly any serious change. It has only been slightly touched up on the surface, but in all other respects it is a most typical relic of our old state machine. (Woods, 2007, p. 190)

Yuri A. Buranov, a professor of history of the Department of Research at the former Central Archives of the CPSU, published a book called *Lenin's Will*, which republishes hitherto unknown material connected with Lenin's last struggle against Stalin. Allan Woods notes that despite his crippling illness, Lenin was planning to launch an attack on Stalin's faction at the Twelfth Congress:

From December 23 to 31, writes Buranov, "Lenin kept working diligently on his report for the CC at the Twelfth Congress. Buranov reproduces a letter from Kamenev to Stalin written on or shortly after December 22, 1922:

Dear Joseph,

Tonight, Trotsky phoned me, saying that he had received a note from Starik (The Old Man Lenin), who, though he is happy with the congressional resolution on Vneshintorg (The Ministry of Foreign Trade), wants Trotsky to deliver a report on this question to a faction of the Congress and to prepare the ground to put this question to the Party Congress.

Stalin replied immediately in terms that betray his alarm:

Comrade Kamenev!

I have received your note. I think we should confine ourselves to the statement in your report without bringing up this faction. How did Starik manage to organize this correspondence with Trotsky? (Woods, 2007, p. 196)

Therefore, it is clear that Lenin wanted to form a bloc with Trotsky to combat the ugly head of bureaucracy which was notoriously raising its head but this did not materialize because Lenin was laid to rest by a third and catastrophic stroke which left him incapacitated and paralyzed. Taking advantage of this position, Stalin with his intimate circle deliberately concealed Lenin's last documents from Trotsky who then became the

⁴ The Paris Commune of 1871 was one of the greatest and most inspiring episodes in the history of the working class. In a tremendous revolutionary movement the communards replaced the capitalist state with their own organs of political power until their downfall in the last week of May. Lenin and Trotsky modeled the Russian Revolution on the Paris Commune. Later revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam were modeled not on the Paris Commune but on the Stalinist bureaucracy of the U.S.S.R.

target of a malicious campaign of disinformation organized by the apparatus. The myth of Trotskyism⁵ was invented in an attempt to drive a wedge between Lenin and Trotsky and the process of this construction of the myth involved a violent process which was the expression of the triumph of the counter revolution. The change that had taken place after the death of Lenin has been very beautifully summarized by Victor Serge in his book *From Lenin to Stalin*:

Everything has changed. The aims: from international social revolution to socialism in one country. The political system: from the workers' democracy of the soviets, the goal of the revolution, to the dictatorship of the general secretariat, the functionaries and the GPU. The party: from the organization, free in its life and thought and freely submitting to discipline, of revolutionary Marxists to the hierarchy of bureaus, to the passive obedience of careerists. The Third International: from a mighty organization of propaganda and struggle to the opportunist servility of Central Committees appointed for the purpose of approving everything, without shame or nausea. The leaders: the greatest militants of October are in exile or prison. The ideology: Lenin said, "We shall see the progressive withering away of the state, and the soviet state will not be a state like the others but a vast workers' commune..." Stalin proclaims that "we advance toward the abolition of the state by way of the strengthening of the state". (Serge, 1974, p. 57)

The politics of deceit therefore is what the author wants to relate to as the powerlessness of Stalinism⁶ to its Leninist counterpart which was being represented in the politics of the left opposition spearheaded by Trotsky, who correctly termed the Soviet Union as a degenerated worker's state. The violence of this degeneration can be summed up by another reference to the words of a factory worker who said:

They are squeezing us, and how! 25 percent increase in the productivity of labor and 1.9 percent increase in wages. For three years, wages have not varied, though production has very much increased. Five men to the brigade instead of six, without change of equipment. The system of bonuses is applied in such a way that allowing for 20 to 30 percent a month, they should be paid every six months, but in reality, no one hopes to receive any. We live on 55 rubles a month. (Serge, 1974, p. 63)

Distinction however has to be made between what is the exact nature of the violence imposed during a revolution and the structure of violence during the triumph of the counter revolution. It should be noted that revolution which was made in October 1917 was literally a bloodless revolution⁷. It was what followed after, that scenes became the sight for the blood bath which began with the attack on the newly formed Soviet State by 21, so-called, democratic countries. It was here that Trotsky precisely built the militia style Red Army from the scraps of the peasantry. In his reminiscences of Lenin, Maxim Gorky talked about a conversation which he had with the former. When in the course of it, he mentioned the hostility shown by certain Bolsheviks to Trotsky, Lenin banged his fist upon the table and said: "Show me another man who could have practically created a model army in a year and won the respect of the military specialists as well. We have got such a man! We have got everything!" (Wollenberg, 2010, p. 103).

The Marxist project always had its roots in Internationalism. The most interesting element is that the theory of socialism in one country which was the slogan representing the interests of the bureaucracy was not

⁵ John Molyneux defines Trotskyism in five pillars. The first pillar stands for his theory of permanent revolution as opposed to the two-stage theory, the second pillar depicts his Internationalism, the third is his theory of Fascism as representing the petit-bourgeois frustration in Capitalism and the failure of social democracy, the fourth is his theory of the United Front as opposed to the popular front, and lastly is his Marxist indictment of the bureaucratic stagnation of the U.S.S.R.

⁶ Trotsky in a short video made in Mexico 1937 defines Stalinism as the irresponsible despotism of the bureaucracy over the people.

⁷ The power base of the Provisional Government had shrunk practically to nothing. Even the conservative regiments drafted in from the front became infected by the mood of revolution Petrograd. The support for the provisional government in the capital collapsed immediately after the workers began to move. The insurrection in Petrograd was virtually a bloodless affair.

supported by Stalin himself. In February 1924, Stalin wrote in his *Foundations of Leninism*:

...can the final victory of socialism in one country be attained, without the joint efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible...For the final victory of socialism, for the organization of socialist production, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient. For this the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries are necessary.⁸

But within nine months, we have the birth of an alternate discourse where the same man says: “The party always took at its starting point the idea that the victory of socialism in that country and that task can be accomplished with the forces of a single country”.⁹

This trait of Stalin can be highlighted in a conversation between Kamenev and Bukharin when the former told the latter: “Stalin is a Genghis Khan, an unscrupulous intriguer, who sacrifices everything else to the preservation of his power...He changes his theories according to whom he needs to get rid of next” (Radzinsky, 1997, p. 235).

To preserve the power of this bureaucratic tendency a political construction was necessary which would define Trotskyism as an enemy to this tendency and which would be represented as enemy of the ruling caste and therefore an enemy of the Soviet Union. The violent process of falsification has been summed up aptly by Trotsky:

Tens of thousands of thousands of newspaper articles in tens of millions of copies, the transcripts of innumerable indictment speeches, popular pamphlets in press runs in the millions, and thick books have spread and continue to spread from day to day the most repulsive lies which the thousands of hired writers, without conscience, without ideas and without imagination are capable of preparing. (Rogovin, 2009, p. 189)

Letters from Radek, Piatakov, Preobrazhensky, Rakovsky, and Eltsin would do justice to this case. Preobrazhensky in his letter dated December 29th, 1927, writes:

I confirm everything brought out in the above document. Only Lashevich said: “We invented Trotskyism ourselves, etc” without using the words “together with you”. Because as I recall it, the two Leningrad comrades were quite honestly perturbed about Trotskyism and could hardly have been informed of the entire plan of the struggle against neo-Trotskyism from its inception... (Trotsky, 1972, p. 92)

Piatakov in his letter to Trotsky, on 2nd January 1928, had written:

Dear Leon Davidovich:

You ask me to inform you what I am able to recall about the speeches of Lashevich and Zinoviev on the occasion of a discussion with Leningrad comrades on “Trotskyism” which took place at Kamenev’s home. I no longer remember all that was said. But since I have always been deeply disturbed by the question of so-called Trotskyism, and since the attitude of the opposition of 1925-1926 towards this question was always of enormous political interest to me, I remember quite clearly what Zinoviev and Lashevich said to us. I do not recall the exact words but the sense of what they said I remember well, namely: “Trotskyism” had been invented in order to replace the real differences of opinion with fictitious differences, that is, to utilize past differences which had no bearing upon the present but which were resurrected artificially for the definite purpose mentioned above. This was told to the comrades from Leningrad who were wavering on the question of Trotskyism and to whom it had to be explained how and why the legend of Trotskyism had been created. (Trotsky, 1972, p. 94)

Karl Radek’s letter, written on 25th December, 1927, throws light on how Stalin, together with Kamenev

⁸ If we read the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky we would see that everywhere they talk about the International Unity of the Working Classes. Even Stalin did not believe that socialism in one country is a Marxist slogan.

⁹ The slogan represented the essence of conservatism which characterized the bureaucracy.

and Zinoviev had agreed to utilize the old differences¹⁰ between Trotsky and Lenin so that Trotsky could be prevented from the leadership. The letter says:

But I was present at the conversation with Kamenev when L. B. [Kamenev] said he would openly declare at the Plenum of the Central Committee how they, that is Kamenev and Zinoviev, together with Stalin, decided to utilize the old disagreements between Trotsky and Lenin so as to keep comrade Trotsky from the leadership of the party after Lenin's death. Moreover I have heard repeated from the lips of Zinoviev and Kamenev the tale of how they had invented Trotskyism as a topical slogan. (Trotsky, 1972, p. 95)

C. G. Rakovsky in his in his letter dated December notes:

Dear Leon Davidovich:

I was not present at the conversation to which you refer. However, on my return in the autumn I heard from you—as well as from Preobrazhensky in Paris—concerning both the conversation with Zinoviev and Lashevich's remarks in particular. Both of them (Zinoviev and Lashevich) stated themselves that the argument from "Trotskyism" and the "permanent revolution" was dragged in by the hair for the sole purpose of discrediting the 1923 Opposition.

With greetings

C. Rakovsky (Trotsky, 1972, p. 95)

V. Eltsin in his letter dated on 2nd January, 1928 noted:

To a question put by Leon Davidovich as to whether the discussion against "Trotskyism" would have taken place if *The Lessons of October* had not appeared, Zinoviev replied: Certainly, it would have taken place, for the plan to begin this discussion was already decided upon in advance and they were only looking for a pretext. None of the supporters of the 1925 group who were present raised any objections to this. Everyone received this information of Zinoviev's as a generally known fact. (Trotsky, 1972, p. 96)

Slowly and steadily all the members of Lenin's Politburo, with the exception of Stalin were framed as conspirators and traitors—even when power was concentrated in their own hands. According to the picture presented at the trial, the greatest Soviet diplomats and politicians namely—Rakovsky, Krestinsky, Karakhan, Iurenev, and Bogomolov had served foreign intelligence services. The overwhelming majority of people's commissars of the U.S.S.R. and all the heads of government for 30 union and autonomous republics who had been advanced by national liberation, according to Rogovin had tried to dismember the Soviet Union and place its people under the yoke of fascism. This almost resembled the theme of hopelessness and the macabre dance of absurdity as seen in Samuel Beckett's theatre as one must remember that it was Stalin who had previously lent critical support to the Kerensky government, who wanted to have a mutual understanding with Kornilov the potential Russian fascist.¹¹ The allegations were very incongruous. For example, all the heads of industry, transport, agriculture, and finance were almost entirely saboteurs. People who had given the revolutionary movement 30, 40, even 50 years, such as Rakovsky, was supposed to have conducted subversive work for the sake of restoring capitalism.

¹⁰ At the 1903 Congress, it is true that Trotsky found himself in the camp of the opponents of Lenin but it is also true that Plekhanov who was to become the future social patriot stood together with Lenin. Allan Woods on page 42 of his book *Lenin and Trotsky: What They Stood for*, writes that the differences caught everyone by surprise including Lenin himself. In later years Trotsky who was always honest in relation to his mistakes admitted his hamartia and stated that Lenin was correct in his view of the Party.

¹¹ General Lavr Kornilov was an adventurer who unlike most other members of the officer caste was not an aristocrat but the son of a Cossack smallholder. Personally, he was brave but he was also a maverick with a habit of disobeying orders. He was narrow in his outlook, a political illiterate and believed that everything in Russia could be solved by a whiff of the grapeshot and the crack of an officer's whip.

In preparing for the massive purges, Stalin promoted the idea of a new constitution which would be the most democratic in the world. His plan was to present world public opinion with the picture of a country which after harsh years of struggle and deprivations had finally begun to raise the welfare of its people and allow democracy to flourish. Against this optimistic background, the diabolical figures of the Trotskyists were supposed to appear sinister as they destroyed the economy, organized famine and poisoned the workers. Rogovin notes that resting on the totalitarian apparatus and unlimited material resources, Stalin conceived a unique plan: to do violence to the world's conscience and with the approval of all mankind to deal once and for all with any opposition to the Kremlin clique. Trotsky pointed out that no statistical calculations are able to give an exhaustive portrayal of the process of the economy, politics, and culture, which in the final analysis are relations between people and social groups. The Moscow Trials had proved to be judicial tragedies which reveal the unbearable relations existing at that time. The Stalinist regime had resorted to organized violence which had transformed the social relations which had been generated by the October Revolution. According to Trotsky:

No class ever in history has concentrated in its hands in such a short time such wealth and power as the bureaucracy has done during the period of the two five-year plans. But by doing so it has placed itself in increasing contradiction to the people who have passed through three revolutions and overturned the tsarist monarchy, nobility and bourgeoisie. The Soviet bureaucracy is now concentrating within itself, in a certain state, the traits of all these overthrown classes without having either their social roots or their traditions. It can defend its monstrous privileges only through organized terror, just as it can base its terror only on false accusations and frame ups. (Rogovin, 2009, p. 115)

It is important to mention the drastic change in the composition of the Central Committee which will throw a light on the transformation to the totalitarian state that the Soviet Union was tending towards. A Bolshevik member named Postyshev had said to Vareikis that

if the price of saving socialism is the execution of the party which guided its construction and imprisonment for millions who built it, then I spit on such socialism. In addition, we still have not constructed socialism...Yes, Ilich said that we have all that is necessary to build socialism but Stalin has proved that we also had, it turns out, everything necessary to create a one-person tyranny which depends on executioners from the NKVD, prostitutes from the party and criminals from society. (Rogovin, 2009, p. 183)

Rogovin notes:

In the 1950s, the former oppositionist S. Smirnova told how in the summer of 1937, Miagkova, as well as other Trotskyists, were brought to Magadan from the distant camps in order to face new charges. They put the prisoners in a large barrack with two-tiered bunks. At night, a team of guards would appear in the barracks and read a list of those sentenced. On one of those nights, they called out Miagkova's name. The last letter from Miagkova to her relatives is dated the eighteenth of September. A month later she was sentenced to death on the following charges: while in prison camp she systematically established contact with imprisoned Trotskyists...At the end of 1937, massive measures began to be taken to liquidate the organizers and instigators of delays among the Trotskyists...The camp administration was given an assignment to create a particularly harsh regime for the Trotskyists. Insofar as the Trotskyists did not conceal their convictions and carried out collective acts of protest, they were subjected to savage extermination on orders from Moscow. (Rogovin, 2009, p. 277)

The Moscow Trials were theatrically staged to justify this design. It was the harsh and ruthless squashing of the opposition that represented Marxist-Leninist principles of workers democratic distribution of production and Internationalism. Deutscher in a chapter named "The Hell-Black Night" in his book *The Prophet Outcast* talks about an eye-witness account by an inmate at the Vorkuta concentration camp of the last activities the Trotskyists:

There were he says in his camp alone about a thousand old Trotskyists, calling themselves Bolshevik-Leninists. Roughly five hundred of these worked at the Vorkuta colliery. In all the camps of the Pechora province there were several thousands of orthodox Trotskyists, who had been in deportation since 1927 and remained true to their political ideas and leaders till the end...One morning, towards the end of March 1938, twenty-five men mostly leading Trotskyists, were called out, given a kilogram of bread each, and ordered to collect their belongings and prepare for a march. After a warm leave-taking with friends, they left the shanties; there was a roll call and they were marched out. In about fifteen or twenty minutes a volley was suddenly fired about a half kilometer from the shanties, near the steep bank of a little river, the upper Vorkuta. Then a few disorderly shots were heard, and silence fell. (Deutscher, 1963, p. 417)

Trotsky in his essay “Psychoanalysis and Marxism” contained in his book *In Defence of Marxism* conspicuously illustrates with the help of an image of a mechanic, what was required to be done after the triumph of the bureaucracy. He says that:

When an emotional mechanic considers an automobile in which, let us say, gangsters have escaped from police pursuit over a bad road and finds the frame bent, the wheels out of line and the motor partially damaged he might quite justifiably say: “It is not an automobile—devil knows what it is! Such an estimate would lack any technical and scientific value, but it would express the legitimate reaction of the mechanic at the work of the gangsters. Let us suppose, however, that this same mechanic must recondition the object which he named devil-knows-what-it-is. In this case he will start with the recognition that it is a damaged automobile before him. He will determine which parts are still good and which are beyond repair in order to decide how to begin work. The class-conscious worker will have a similar attitude toward the U.S.S.R. He has full right to say that the gangsters of the bureaucracy have transformed the workers’ state into “devil-knows-what-it-is”. But when he passes from this explosive reaction to the solution of the political problem, he is forced to recognize that it is damaged, but which still continues to run and which can be completely reconditioned with the replacement of some parts. (Trotsky, 1972, p. 31)

The terror that was launched on the Marxist oppositionists in the Soviet Union led by Trotsky as its spear was therefore the violence of a kind of impotence of the working class to capture power in Germany and other parts of Europe which led to the alienation and consequent degeneration of the worker’s state and Stalinism was the dialectical product of this degeneration. This impotence was noted by Trotsky when he said that Stalinism was rooted in the backwardness of Russia and the congenital incapacity of the proletariat to become the ruling class. Here, Trotskyism was constructed, made a myth and installed in the people’s minds by distortion and falsification of history and the most terrorizing purges that 20th century was witness to. In November 1937, Stalin gave his directive to Dimitrov that “Trotskyists must be driven out, shot and destroyed. They are world-wide provocateurs and the most vicious agents of fascism” (Rogovin, 2009, p. 306). It would be a mistake to think that the totalitarian caricature of bureaucratic socialism as the failure of Communism as the main victims of this purge were communists. Rogovin in his book gives a statistical data of the number of repressed communists:

At the time of the Seventeenth Congress (February 1934) the party had 1,872,488 members and 935,298 candidate members; at the time of the eighteenth congress (March 1939) there were 1,588,852 members and 888,814 candidate members. If in 1934-1938, there had not been mass party purges and repressions, and all candidates had been promoted to full members of the party, then by the time of the eighteenth congress the party would have had around 2.8 million members...Since most of the people expelled from the party in 1933-1938 were subjected to political repression, it is not hard to come to the conclusion that the communists made up according to the most conservative calculations, more than half of the victims of the Great Terror. (Rogovin, 2009, p. 449)

Isaac Deutscher in his book *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929-1940* goes on to say:

For over ten years Stalin had kept the Trotskyists behind bars and barbed wire, and subjecting them to inhuman persecution, demoralized many of them, divided them and almost succeeded in cutting them off from society. By 1934 Trotskyism seemed to have been stamped out completely. Yet two or three years later Stalin was more afraid of it than ever. (Deutscher, 1963, p. 413)

Trotsky was thus accurate when he analyzed that to establish the regime which is correctly called Stalinist, what was needed was not the Bolshevik party but the extermination of the Bolshevik Party (Deutscher, 1963, p. 449). These brutal explosions of violence can thus be seen born out of the impotence of the bureaucracy to cause of proletarian and worker's emancipation. The perspective of socialism in one country caused for all practical purposes a downgrade in the seriousness with which the Communist International was taken. Initially established by Lenin and his comrades to build parties all over the world, this theory was now being vulgarized and being transformed into a tool for the foreign policy of the above mentioned bureaucratic brand of socialism. The construction of Trotskyism in a violent process was thus the crystalline expression of the impotence of Stalinism.

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