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L. Trotsky's Theory of Imperialism and the Universal Crisis of Capitalism

I

Com. Stalin's letter, 'About a Few Questions on the History of Bolshevism' and the speech by Com. Kaganovich at the tenth anniversary of the ICP with extreme clarity and Bolshevik sharpness characterise the role of Trotskyism as the frontline of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie and reveal the specific new form of its sorties. They draw attention to Trotskyism and to the danger of an unhealthy liberalism towards this contraband theory, which borders on the betrayal of the working class. Com. Stalin's letter also calls upon communists – workers of the theoretical front to raise all our theoretical work to a new and higher level.

The realisation of this task requires, first of all, a basic positive reworking of the actual problem of socialist construction in the USSR and the fight of the international proletariat. At the same time a deep critique and exposure of each and every bourgeois, social-fascist, Trotskyite and opportunist theory is a must. In particular, a

detailed exposure of the theoretical views of Trotskyism is necessary, which, to date, has unfortunately, received very little attention in our theoretical work.

The present work should be considered as one of the links in the chain of the works exposing counter-revolutionary Trotskyism. Before getting down in earnest to an exposition of the theme, it is necessary to take into consideration three moments.

Firstly, my report is not the only one being presented here on this topic. That is why it does not seek to completely exhaust the theme. In particular, I am not dealing with the last work of Preobrazhensky, to which Com. Kosharsky's report is dedicated. Secondly, that circle of questions, which my report will touch upon, will not be exhaustively treated. I look upon this work only as an introduction to the exposure of the views of counter-revolutionary Trotskyism on the question of contemporary capitalism. This introductory work should be followed up with a more detailed and intensive critique. In this context it is also necessary to pay attention to the fact that the evolution of Trotskyism, having now become the front line of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie, is also linked to specific developments in its theoretical viewpoints. Trotsky has gone far ahead of those utterances which had a place then, when Trotsky

was a still a leader of the opposition in the VKP(B). However, I will not here trace the development of Trotsky's views in detail, all the more so since the general thrust of his views on modern capitalism has not undergone any change.

The last observation is related to the point of whether Trotskyism has a system of theoretical views at all, and views on the nature of imperialism and the universal crisis of capitalism, in particular. There is no argument over the fact that in Trotskyism there is a lot of eclectics, simple mazes and so on. Apart from that, a systematic 'theory' of Trotskyism has not been developed anywhere by its founder.

Nevertheless, I propose that by tearing into the 'fictive writings' of Trotsky and his accomplices it is possible to reveal a well-known system of views, ultra-revolutionary in appearance and capitulatory in essence which are, in a specific sense, bound together. This is what I shall try to demonstrate here.

I will first deal with Trotsky's positing of the problem of imperialism. This position is different at the core from Lenin's, but is therefore very close to Kautsky's. In this there is nothing surprising. Kautskyism and Trotskyism have proved themselves to be two variations of centrism; they have a great deal in common in methodology, in separate theoretical utterances,

as well as in tactical objectives.

The definition that Trotsky gives imperialism stipulates: 'What is imperialism? It is – the aspiration of capitalism to stop the existence of small governments'.¹ It is not difficult to see that here is a pure Kautskian formulation. The Kautskian theory of imperialism glosses over the more entrenched and core contradictions of imperialism that are tied up with the supremacy of monopoly. The contradiction between the social character of production and the private form of appropriation, the contradiction between monopolies and non-monopoly milieux, the contradictions between the monopolists themselves, etc., which are manifested in monopoly capitalism and which gives rise to them, are ignored by this theory.

It is precisely this ignoring of the contradictions of imperialism that Lenin had underlined with all his might, that is characteristic of Trotskyism. In the works of Trotsky and the Trotskyites imperialism is not interpreted as the last stage of capitalism, prepared by the march of the development of contradictions of capitalism and representing the stage of their further extreme sharpening and heating up, but only as some kind of a representation of actions, 'born of the international pretensions of the national capital of the great powers'.² Imperialism appears further not as a special stage of capitalism, but

only as a specific political tendency, the temporal limits of which are quite blurred, and the spatial – very narrow. The monopolistic character of capitalism is either completely ignored or is left in the shadows.

To the extent that Trotsky speaks of the contradictions of imperialism, he completely identifies them with the contradiction between world economy and national states. The whole sum of deep contradictions and antagonisms of imperialism, according to his theory, is just an elaborate stating of the fact that national-state boundaries stand in the way of international economic relationships. ‘Imperialism’, formulates Trotsky, ‘is that capitalist-predatory expression of this tendency of the economy – to finally break out of this idiotism of national limitations as it had in its time got out of the idiotism of the village and regional boundaries’.³ It is not difficult to see how vague, unclear, limited and one can say toothless such an understanding of imperialism is. And it is not difficult to notice that the role of imperialism, in Trotsky’s view, essentially leads to the fulfillment of the progressive task of ‘breaking off from the idiotism of nationalist limits’ and to build a global economy. If this is felt clearly in the above quotation then this is even more obvious in other formulations of Trotsky. ‘Imperialism’, he writes, ‘is a capitalist-predatory expression of a

progressive tendency of economic development: to build a human economy in global framework, freeing it of the embarrassing fetters of the nation and state'.⁴ And Trotsky posits this as a sign of equality between imperialism and the fight for international self-realisation.⁵

In all his formulations of the problem of imperialism, Trotsky ignores the contradictions of imperialism, fully identifying it with the theory of contemporary social fascism and decisively parting with the Leninist teaching on imperialism. For Trotsky the deep contradictions between the productive forces and capitalist relations of productions, the contradictions in the very base of capitalism, do not exist at all.

He accepts in the best instance, only the presence of contradictions between the production forces and the state superstructure, even though this contradiction is interpreted as not being of a deep or core order.

Even when Trotsky acts directly against Kautsky, he formulates the matter in the following way: 'The powerful productive forces, this decisive factor of historical movement choked in those backward superstructural organisations in which they were enclosed by the preceding development'. (It must be noted that Trotsky does not see at all the active role of productive relations - V.S.)

There is no doubt that between the growth of productive forces of global economy and its partition into state, there exists a sharp and deep contradiction, the direct result of which was the World War (1914-1918). But firstly, one cannot separate this contradiction from the whole system of contradictions of imperialism. One cannot take it as anything but as an expression of the general conflict between the social character of production and the private form of appropriation, between production forces and production relations, which become fetters to their development. Secondly, it is not possible to formulate the deep contradiction between the growth of world production forces and national-state boundaries as an apologetic thesis that imperialism is the struggle for world assertion and is directed precisely towards the aim of breaking economy from the 'the idiotism of national limitations'.

This apologetic thesis with pleasure repeats, on the heels of Trotsky, one of the more intelligent and cunning representatives of social-fascism, Karl Renner. In a special article 'Nationalwirtschaft und Weltwirtschaft' and later in the brochure 'Nationalwirtschaft, Weltwirtschaft und Sozialismus' Renner, in a verbose manner, expands theses which are not dissimilar to those of Trotsky. The basic contradiction of the contemporary world

according to Renner – is the contradiction between the world economy and national states. The struggle of these two forces according to Renner will lead to the victory of capitalist international economy and the establishing of a new free developing international order. Whether this order will be of capitalism or socialism, Renner does not wish to elaborate.

‘State sovereignty’, writes Renner, ‘became a brake for the development of economy’.

‘National economy is staging a desperate battle against international economy, a battle with a doubtful, but often indisputable, outcome’.

National economy and international economy have become two poles of antagonistic development. ‘We are experiencing a dialectical process, from which will emerge a new world order.’ And from this chain of judgements, Renner comes to the conclusion that the working class should strive towards parting with the framework of national governments by supporting the League of Nations, pan-European union etc., and that the working class should fight for the development of the capitalist world economy.

Trotsky’s well-known slogan ‘United States of Europe’ is a slogan, according to Lenin, deeply reactionary, substituting the task of the struggle for socialist revolution with the struggle for the creation of a capitalist federative government.

This idea corresponds closely to the statements of Renner and Hilferding.

If we follow the genesis of the theory, according to which the decisive and sole contradiction of the modern world is the contradiction between world economy and nation-state boundaries, then we will reach the 'father' of this social-fascist theory, Kautsky. And in the works of Kautsky we will read that the solution to this contradiction is not socialism, but ultra-imperialism.

Even Trotsky cannot get out of this conclusion. This conclusion flows out of Trotsky's general positing of the problems of imperialism. And its outline even more concretely appears in Trotsky's interpretation of specific problems.

Endnotes:

1. III Congress of the Communist International, Stenographic Report. GIZ, 1922, p. 42.

2. L. Trotsky, Basic Questions of Imperialism, GIZ, 1923, p. 44.

3. L. Trotsky, War and Revolution, Vol. II, p. 498. Trotsky's schema of the village, regional and world economy has nothing in common with the historical materialism of Marx and Lenin and is only a rather bad copy of the bourgeois schemas of Byukher and Maslov.

Trotsky – together with the other Kautskyite Mr. Spectator – stands firmly on the base of these

schemas. It is not surprising, therefore, if in the article 'Le projet de programme du Comintern. Critique des fondements essentiels' (Contre le courant, December 1928) Trotsky openly identifies imperialism with 'the epoch of world economy and world politics'.

4. L. Trotsky, War and Revolution, Vol. I, p. 162, Trotsky's emphasis.

5. Op. cit. p. 288.

6. Private property with Trotsky is located in the superstructure, i.e. it is reduced to a juridical category.

Translated from the Russian by Rashmi Doraiswamy

II

Let's move further: the thesis of stagnation of contemporary capitalism naturally leads to the perception of disappearance of international imperialist contradictions. On the background of the general and pervasive stagnation there is no possibility of intensification of the struggle between the imperialists. Everybody in Europe wants nothing else but peace. 'thus, on the one hand, Briand and, on the other, Germans who have shed rivers of blood in order to expand and defeat their competitors are all talking about the United States of Europe. This indicates *a total decline, a disbelief in any possibility of*

*development and also cognizance of one's powerlessness in the face of the might of the United States. The petty bourgeoisie cowardly dreams about unification not to fight back, but just to survive: where is the need to talk about luxuries when it is a matter of just staying alive. Such is the psychology of the contemporary rulers of Europe.*¹

Thus the power of imperialist Europe happens to fall into the hands of the *petty bourgeoisie*. Aristide Briand has taken on the role of a kind householder who just dreams of 'staying alive', as a result of which all intra-European struggle comes to an end.

The situation is no less satisfactory, according to Trotsky, when it comes to contradictions between America and Europe and between America and Japan. The USA have put everybody on ration, having in the meanwhile taken care that nobody angers or ravages anybody else. The very process of taking over the world and exercising hegemony also is proceeding very calmly and peacefully. '*The United States have won the top place not having once unsheathed their sword, not having fired a single shot but only through the Washington conference.*'² The United States are establishing *peaceful coexistence* with England.³ Finally, with the Japanese too no fight is foreseen as the United

States can take care of them in the blink of an eye.

This is how imperialist contradictions in the epoch of the general crisis of capitalism, in the epoch of unprecedented aggravation of all imperialist antagonisms appear to be by a sleight of Trotsky's hand. This is how the 'left' renegade counters the platform of the Comintern which emphasizes the rapid aggravation of antagonisms within the capitalist sector of the world economy, the immense conflict between USA and England, and the two nodes of contradictions - Versailles and the Pacific ocean etc.

We have here two opposite and absolutely irreconcilable perceptions. The Programme of the Comintern, step by step, unearths the gigantic growth of all contradictions of capitalism, in particular the antagonisms between the imperialist states. Trotsky, in his turn, step by step, under the veil of 'left' phraseology smudges all the contradictions of contemporary capitalism.

The difference in the two presentations of the problem of international imperialist contradictions also affects, by the way, the question of the threat of a new war. According to Trotsky, who obstinately keeps reiterating about the disappearance of international antagonisms, such a threat does not arise from any quarter. He

even allows himself in his 'Permanent revolution' to ridicule Comintern's 'war mania' and its hallucinations of a threat of war.

Such ridicule can serve only one purpose – that of a smoke screen which conceals the war, that is actually gathering pace.

It is not enough for Trotsky to establish the disappearance of international contradictions between imperialists. He must also, at the same time, smudge the grave contradictions in relation to the revolutionary and national liberation struggles of the working people in the colonies and semi-colonies.

In the colonial and dependent countries we confront extremely complicated mesh of contradictions. The imperialist bourgeoisie of the metropolis is in competition with native capitalists. The native bourgeoisie is competing with the feudal class. The working masses of the colonies are fighting both the imperialist bourgeoisie and the native capitalists as also the feudals and the gentry. In general, a complicated maze of severe antagonisms is created.

But, according to Trotsky, the situation is totally different and is by far more '*simple*'. First of all, he rejects all antagonisms between the feudal class and the bourgeoisie. He painstakingly ignores the large remnants of feudalism, disputes their existence and does not impart any

importance to the class positions taken up by the bonded labour in the colonies and semi-colonies. Trotsky, further, obfuscates the contradictions between the metropolitan and native bourgeoisie. Trotsky does not acknowledge the existence of any internal grounds and internal basis for capitalist development in the colonies. *'In the colonies, he says categorically, capitalism developed not on its own, but through intervention of foreign capital.'*⁴

Further, while mentioning czarist Russia, Trotsky even manages to present her as a colony of foreign financial capital where bourgeois development was determined by the dominance of imperialism of other countries. And even more categorically he approaches the question of the motive forces of capitalist development in the colonies. The natural result of such an exposition is the obscuring of the role of the native bourgeoisie, its exclusion and consequently denial of all the antagonisms of which it forms a part.

On the other hand, according to Trotsky, foreign capital is in a position to provide economic development in the colonies. Trotsky speaks of 'unbridled industrialisation' of the colonies and the role of large buyers of machines that the latter plays and, finally, of the fact that the financial capital in the colonies is destroying all that is old and is ripping apart all the pre-

capitalist forms etc.⁵ In the writing of Trotsky the social-fascist theory of decolonisation is exhibited in all its splendour.

By doing so, the interrelation between the actions of the imperialists and the interests of the development of the productive forces in the colonies is distorted. In reality, foreign capital does not introduce heavy industry in the colonies, does not assist the transformation of the colonies into harmoniously developed and economically independent capitalist countries and certainly does not promote expeditious and unhindered development of the productive forces. On the contrary, imperialism mutilates the economic development of the colonies. It exclusively orients this development along those paths that are determined by the imperialist race for profits and markets. They transform the colonies into distorted agrarian-raw material corollary of the metropolis. It places innumerable obstacles in the development of the productive forces in the colonies. Like a predator it lays waste these productive forces etc., etc.

By ignoring feudalism in the colonies, Trotsky obscures that very circumstance which is so important for the intertwining of class contradictions in the colonies i.e. that imperialism in the metropolis blends amazingly in the colonies with feudal elements, puts them to unique use and, to a certain extent, even uses

these elements as its foundation etc.

Extremely gross and, in essence, apologetic distortions of the class struggle in the colonies are perpetrated by Trotsky when he speaks about the conditions and objectives of the working people in the colonies. He conceals the struggle of the working masses against the feudal elements and excludes from it the most important objectives of the revolutionary movement in the colonies. He ignores the national bourgeoisie as an important constituent of class struggle in the colonies which should be taken into account by the revolutionary movement of the masses and in relation to which the movement must formulate a set of important aims. Finally, by applying his 'theory of permanent revolution' in conditions of the colonies he conceals the objective of establishing unity of the colonial proletariat with the peasantry, he prefers that the proletariat acts in isolation and ignores the specific characteristic of the national-colonial revolution that is, by and large, a peasants' revolution. What we have here is an expression of adventurism of the most damaging and dangerous sort. Once more, as in all other of Trotsky's expositions, the other side of his adventurism, which may appear at a first glance to be quite revolutionary, is his capitulation. Indeed, the proletariat in the colonies, small in number, alone cannot be

victorious by bypassing the bourgeois-democratic and peasants' revolution and the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. And Trotsky, by his rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, pushes onward on a course towards... a Constituent Council.

I have very shortly dwelt on how Trotsky perceives the struggle between the metropolis and the colonies in the revolutionary movement in the colonies in conditions of post-war capitalism. But even these short observations show that Trotsky, in essence, obscures the inherent contradictions in the same manner as he does with all the other contradictions of capitalism in the epoch of its general crisis.

Endnotes :

1. *Mirovoe Khozyaistvo*, p. 118.

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

3. L. Trotsky, *Where is England Heading*, p. 11, and A. Ioffe, *England in Our Times*, p. 22 and 58.

4. L. Trotsky. *East and West*, p. 31.

5. *Op cit.*, p. 33.

Translated from the Russian by Tahir Asghar.

V. Serebryakov, L. Kasharshii, 'Protiv trotskistskoi kontseptsii imperializma,' Leningradskoe otdelenie kommunisticheskoi

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Partiinoe izdatelstvo, Moscow, Leningrad, 1932,
pp. 3-7, 26-29.*