

Book Review

Leon Trotsky: *Terrorism & Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* With Foreword by Slavoj Žižek

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By Torab Saleth

This new edition of Trotsky's *Terrorism & Communism*, with a foreword by Slavoj Žižek, will surely lead to a revival of discussion on the question of revolutionary dictatorship. The book was written during the Russian civil war – ‘at the most intense period of the struggle with Denikin and Yudenich’² - in reply to a pamphlet of the same name by Kautsky which criticized the Bolshevik use of terror. There are, of course, those Trotskyists who wishing that the book had never been written, will not welcome its republication. How could a defender of soviet democracy, justify the use of political terror, militarization of labour, command economy, forced requisitioning, and a lot more besides? Žižek’s foreword sets out to dispel the ‘gentrified’ image of Trotsky developed by such supporters. On the contrary, he writes, in this book ‘resides the greatness of Bolsheviks’: the fact that they did not, in the face of adversity, withdraw and concede defeat, but persisted. Žižek thus makes his own position in this debate clear.

He is, of course, well aware that there are also those opponents who will once again find in *Terrorism and Communism* ample ‘proof’ that Trotsky was in fact the precursor to Stalin. As he points out, the book was found among Stalin's private papers. The justification Trotsky (and indeed the Bolsheviks in general) made was, of course, that terror and the other measures were necessary because of the exceptional circumstances of the civil war, ‘a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the state’. Thus Žižek considers this book to be a ‘key’ work of Trotsky’s, a kind of ‘symptomal’ text not to be ‘politely ignored’. If we are to win the battle for Trotsky, it follows, this must be done ‘on the very “Stalinist” terrain of terror and industrialized mobilization: it is *here* that a minimal, but crucial, difference between Trotsky and Stalin has to be demonstrated.’³

Whether or not Žižek succeeds is debatable. The ‘crucial’ difference he comes up with, although a valid one, is neither new nor substantial. We are told that during the pre-Stalinist period, ‘terror was openly admitted’, thus openly admitting its temporary and exceptional character, whilst in Stalin's time, ‘terror turned into the publicly non-acknowledged obscene shadowy supplement of public official discourse.’⁴ So, in the first period, terror was a matter of temporary necessity, whilst, in the second, it became a systematic method of rule. But surely, by the same logic, those who justify the terror of this second period can also claim – and have claimed - some other set of necessities.

¹ Published in Critique 37, February 2009.

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Ibid., p. ix.

⁴ Ibid. p. xxiv.

There is more than an element of truth in the argument that many of the measures forced upon the revolutionaries under 'exceptional circumstances' were later canonized by Stalinism into official tenets of its version of the dictatorship of proletariat. But the continuity was purely formal. Stalin's single-party rule had grown out of Lenin's party of 1924, but the latter was the sole remaining instrument of a proletarian revolution defending itself in a civil war imposed by the class enemy, both from within and without, whilst the former was the instrument of a counter revolution in the process of setting up a police state.

In the last analysis, Stalinism triumphed not because of these measures but because of the defeat of the German revolution. The 'necessary' measures were 'temporary' only in the sense that the revolution in Russia itself was to be but an episode in the unfolding European revolution. If one misses this crucial distinction it is easy to fall for the Lucasian apology for Stalinism, which considered the Thermidorian reaction in Russia to be a sort of sobering up of the revolution: 'the day after' the heroic period, when revolutionary enthusiasm has to be replaced with a recognition of reality. The fact that many of the basic Marxist lessons of the Paris Commune about proletarian rule (abolition of the standing army, election and recallability of all officials, salaries not higher than skilled workers', unification of legislative and executive powers, etc.) could not be put in practice in Russia was simply because Russia on its own could not implement them. A revolution isolated is a revolution defeated.

But leaving this last point aside, is what Žižek considers crucial the real - or even the main - issue today? Do we still have to prove that a revolution has the right to defend itself by whatever means it has at its disposal at the time? Do we still have to win this argument; or today should we not concentrate on the more basic question of the nature of proletarian rule and a re-assessment of the whole Bolshevik experience? For a start, accepting that the Bolsheviks had the right to use revolutionary terror does not automatically imply that it was used wisely. For example, was the closing down of the Constituent Assembly and the banning of other political parties or indeed, internal factions inside the Bolsheviks' own ranks, wise? Surely these are the issues we should be able to discuss and debate.

From a more general angle, how do we assess the well-documented fact that even from 1921 to 1924 – that is, after the 'exceptional circumstances' (after the civil war had ended and the New Economic Policy had been introduced and had partially revived the economy), and during a period that Žižek says, the Bolsheviks came 'to their senses' - the Russian Communist Party did not make any serious attempt at reviving soviet democracy? On the contrary, it moved further in consolidating a system of one-party rule. In this sense, there is a great deal of evidence that the Bolsheviks never 'came to their senses' - at least not until it was already too late, when Stalin and his 'middle cadres' had already usurped the same apparatus of rule to turn the dictatorship of proletariat on its head. Is it not curious that right after these 'exceptional circumstances', none of the leading Bolsheviks wrote even a short brochure on the character of political rule during the dictatorship of proletariat? If anything, they even tried to rationalize and generalize their experience in the Comintern's 'Theses on the Role of the Communist Party'. The Bolshevik literature of this period carries much material that even gets dangerously close to a redefinition of

the term "working class" itself to suit the new form of rule. How many times were non-Bolshevik worker-opponents labeled as 'not really workers'?⁵

Thus the fact remains that Bolsheviks, in practice, equated the role of the party (as the embodiment of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class) with the class itself, which had the leading, indeed the sole, claim to political power. Either the Bolsheviks really believed in the 'bureaucratic fantasy of imposing communism by decrees', or, despite themselves, they did not prepare the communist cadres for what was to come in the shape of Stalinist reaction. Given their revolutionary history and background, and given all the well-documented historical evidence - as there is plenty in this work by the leader of the Red Army - you have to say that, at the very least, they were not aware of the importance of this problem as they should have been. Surely the reasons behind this lack of foresight is more crucial for us today than reassuring ourselves by stressing the obvious difference between revolutionary terror during the civil war and the Stalinist terror during the counter-revolution. It is all the more vital today, after the collapse of the whole Stalinist system and with the continuation of the crisis of credibility that socialism has suffered globally, to reformulate and summarize our understanding of the very nature of politics in the period of transition to socialism.

We still lack a systematic Marxist critique of the experience of Bolshevism, particularly in relation to the nature of the dictatorship of proletariat. And an even more fundamental question – concerning the relationship between the fight for democracy and the fight for socialism before and after the expropriation of the bourgeoisie - still needs a re-examination in the light of this experience. How, for example, can the non-proletarian layers be drawn into the process of transition to socialism? Where is our Marxist analysis of the role - if any - for a Constituent Assembly after the socialist revolution, especially in backward capitalist countries with their numerically huge petit-bourgeois layers? How can a soviet form of rule maintain the veto rights of the 'dictatorship of proletariat' whilst voluntarily drawing an ever wider sections of the population into the entire decision making process? Indeed, what are the limits of this soviet rule?

A republication of this 'symptomal' work should bring these questions even more sharply to our attention than before. Of course, there is nothing wrong in basking in the glory of the distinction between 'open' revolutionary terror and 'obscene' or 'shdowy' counter-revolutionary terror; but, please, not at the expense of forgetting the real tasks ahead. By 1924, the Bolsheviks had - whatever the circumstances and however accidental or temporary the measures they carried out before - transformed soviet rule into a one-party rule. This can be given a variety of names, but it was definitely not the 'revolutionary dictatorship of proletariat' Marx had in mind. Are we still not clear about this? Understanding how they got there, why they got there and how to avoid getting there in future is particularly crucial for Marxists today when we are witnessing the first signs of a new wave of international socialist offensive almost everywhere. We can no longer simply say the entire question of transition to socialism will be resolved by the future actions of the class itself. We have had the experience of the Russian revolution and our programme, accordingly, must shed much greater light on what the dictatorship of proletariat would actually look like.

⁵ Simon Pirani, unpublished doctorate thesis.

No one can write effectively about such this period in history without touching on democracy and dictatorship and the role of the conscious element in changing objective circumstances. Yet in Žižek's foreword the references are very tangential and vague. It is an excellently readable review, but in so far as it leaves all the most crucial questions up in the air, it is disappointing; and when Žižek does offer views, his approach itself is problematic. For example, counter-posing democracy to socialism has always been a theoretical trick of Stalinism. The former is always treated as bourgeois (or social democratic) and the latter as something superior, which supersedes the former and therefore does not need it. Žižek's break with this false dichotomy is not at all clear. He seems to forget, or to ignore, revolutionary socialist critiques of Bolshevism such as Rosa Luxemburg's, which is particularly focused on the question of democracy. Elsewhere he rightly refers to the role of radical political intervention in changing objective conditions, but leaves entirely open a voluntarist interpretation that can justify anything. When such radical political interventions end in disaster, views such as Žižek's invariably lead to blaming the very same objective conditions which had created the need for such radical change in the first place.