

Thermidorianism and Bonapartism

By LEON TROTSKY

Historical analogies must be dealt with ably, otherwise they are easily converted into metaphysical abstractions and do not help the orientation but, on the contrary, lead one astray.

Some comrades in the ranks of the Opposition abroad see a contradiction in the fact that we sometimes speak of the Thermidorian tendencies and forces in the Soviet Union and sometimes of the Bonapartist features of the régime in the C. P. S. U., and they even draw the conclusion that we have revised our evaluation of the Soviet state. This is a mistake. It flows from the fact that these comrades conceive the historical terms (Thermidorianism, Bonapartism) as abstract categories and not as living, that is, contradictory processes.

A successful socialist construction is developing in the U. S. S. R. But this process advances in an extremely contradictory manner: and because of capitalist encirclement, the counter-action of the internal anti-proletarian forces and the incorrect policy of the leadership, it falls under the influence of hostile forces.

Can the contradictions of socialist construction, generally speaking, reach a degree of tension under which they would blow up the basis of socialist construction laid by the October revolution and strengthened by the subsequent economic successes, particularly by the successes of the Five Year Plan? They can.

Possible Successors to Soviet Rule

Under such a condition, what would come as a substitute for the present Soviet society taken in its entirety (economy, class, state, party)?

The present régime, a transition from capitalism to socialism, could give way only to capitalism under the condition mentioned above. It would be a capitalism saturated with contradictions which exclude the possibility of its progressive development. Because all these contradictions which, according to our hypothesis, might bring about the blowing up of the Soviet régime, would immediately reconstitute themselves into internal contradictions of the capitalist régime, they would very soon acquire even greater acuteness. This means that inside of the capitalist counter-revolution there would be the elements of the new October revolution.

The state is a superstructure. To consider it independent of the character of the productive relations and the forms of ownership (as Urbahns, for instance, does in relation to the Soviet state) means to renounce the foundation of Marxism. But the state no more than the party is a passive superstructure. Under the influence of the convulsions emanating from the class basis of society, new processes occur in the state and party superstructure which—within certain limits—have an independent character, and when combined with the processes of the economic foundation itself, may acquire a decisive significance for the class nature of the whole régime, turning developments in one or the other direction for a considerable period.

It would be the worst form of doctrinarism, "Urbahnsism" turned inside out, to consider that the fact of the nationalization of industry, supplemented by the high tempo of development, in themselves assure an uninterrupted development to socialism, regardless of the processes in the party and the state. To think this means not to understand the functions of the party, its double and treble function in the only country of the proletarian dictatorship, at that an economically backward country. If we assume for a moment that those in charge of industry, on the one hand, and the leading strata of the workers, on the other, break loose from party discipline, which is fused with that of the state, then the road to socialism will be blocked: nationalized industry would begin to be differentiated between the struggling groups, the conflicts between the trust administration and the workers would begin to assume an open character, the trusts would acquire an ever greater independence, the beginnings made in planning would naturally be reduced to zero, dragging along with them the monopoly of foreign trade as well. All these processes leading to capitalism would inevitably amount to the crushing of the proletarian dictatorship.

Does the present party régime, in spite of economic successes, threaten the party with the disintegration of bonds and discipline? Undoubtedly. To underestimate the dangers of the decay of the party and state fabric, because of the economic successes, would be criminal. The party, as a party, does not even exist today. The Centrist apparatus has strangled it. But the Left Opposition, which the Centrist apparatus fears like fire and under whose lash it performs its zig-zags, does exist. It is precisely this correlation between the Left Opposition and the Centrist apparatus that is a substitute

Even with a complete and open disruption of party bonds, the party will not disappear. Not because there is an apparatus: it will be the first victim of its own crimes—but because there is a Left Opposition. Whoever does not understand this, understands nothing.

But what we are considering now is not how and by what paths the Opposition can fulfill its basic task: to help the proletarian vanguard bar the counter-revolution from the socialist development. Hypothetically, we will make our point of departure the assumption that we did not succeed in this, so as to picture to ourselves more concretely the historical consequences of such failure.

The smashing of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as we have already said, could mean nothing but the restoration of capitalism. But the political forms in which this restoration would take place, how these forms would alternate and how they would combine—that is an independent and complicated question.

It is clear that only sightless persons could think that the rebirth of comprador capitalism is compatible with "democracy". To anyone who can see, it is clear that a democratic counter-revolution is excluded. But the concrete question of the possible political forms of the counter-revolution admits only of a conditional answer.

Thermidor: in France and Russia

When the Opposition spoke of the Thermidorian danger, it had in mind primarily the very important and considerable process within the party: the growth of the stratum of Bolsheviks who have separated themselves from the mass, who feel secure, who have connected themselves with non-proletarian circles and are satisfied with their social condition, analogous to the stratum of bloated Jacobins who became, in part, the supports, and primarily the executive apparatus of the Thermidorian overturn in 1794, paving the road in this way for Bonapartism. Analyzing the processes of the Thermidorian degeneration in the party, the Opposition was far from saying that the counter-revolutionary overturn, were it to occur, would necessarily have to assume the form of a Thermidor, that is, of a more or less lasting domination of the bourgeoisified Bolsheviks, with the formal retention of the Soviet system—similar to the retention of the Convention by the Thermidorians. History never repeats itself, particularly when there is such a profound difference in class basis.

The French Thermidor had its foundation in the contradictions of the Jacobin régime. But these very contradictions were also the foundation of Bonapartism, that is, the régime of the military-bureaucratic dictatorship, which the bourgeoisie tolerated over itself so that, under cover of it, it could all the more securely take over the domination of society. In the Jacobin dictatorship, there were already included all the elements of Bonapartism even though they are found there in an undeveloped form, particularly the struggle with the sans-culotte elements of the régime. The Thermidor became a necessary preparatory stage toward Bonapartism and that is all. It is not accidental that Bonaparte created the bureaucracy of the Empire out of the Jacobin bureaucracy.

Revealing in the present Stalinist régime the elements of Thermidor and the elements of Bonapartism, we are far from falling into a contradiction, as is thought by those to whom Thermidorianism and Bonapartism represent abstractions and not living tendencies, one growing over into the other.

What state form would be assumed by a counter-revolutionary overthrow in Russia were it to succeed (and that is far from being so simple) depends upon the combination of a number of concrete factors, in the first place on the degree of acuteness reached by the economic contradictions at the moment, on the correlation of the capitalist and socialist elements in economy; further, on the correlation of the proletarian Bolsheviks and the bourgeois "Bolsheviks", on the groupings of forces within the army; finally, on the specific gravity and character of the foreign intervention. At any rate, it would be the sheerest absurdity to think that a counter-revolutionary régime must necessarily go through the stages of the Directorate, the Consulate and the Empire in order to be capped by a restoration of czarism. But no matter what the counter-revolutionary régime might be, the Thermidorian and Bonapartist elements, at any rate, would find their place in it, a bigger or smaller rôle would be played by the Bolshevik-Soviet bureaucracy, civil and military and at the same time the régime itself would be the dictatorship of the sword over society in the interests of the bourgeoisie and against the people. This is why it is so important at present to follow how

these elements and tendencies are being formed in the womb of the official party, which, under all conditions, remains the laboratory of the future; that is, under the condition of an uninterrupted socialist development as well as under the condition of a counter-revolutionary break.

Does what was said above mean that we identify the Stalinist régime with the régime of Robespierre? No, we are as far from vulgar analogies in relation to the present as we are in relation to the possible or probable future. From the standpoint of the question that interests us, the essence of Robespierre's policy consisted of an ever greater accentuation of the struggle on two fronts: against the sans-culottes, that is, the propertyless, as well as against the rotten "degenerates", that is, the Jacobin bourgeoisie. Robespierre conducted a policy of a petty bourgeois, attempting to elevate himself to the absolute ruler. Hence the struggle against the Left and against the Right. A proletarian revolutionist may also be compelled to conduct a struggle on two fronts, but only episodically. His basic struggle is the one against the bourgeoisie: class against class. But petty bourgeois revolutionists, even in the epoch of their historical apogee, have always and unalterably been compelled to conduct a struggle on two fronts. This is what brought about the gradual strangulation of the Jacobin party, the mortification of the Jacobin clubs, the bureaucratization of the revolutionary terror, that is, to the self-isolation of Robespierre which made it possible for the bloc of his Right and Left enemies to remove him so easily.

Differences and Similarities

The features of similarity with the Stalinist régime are very conspicuous here. But the differences are profounder than the similarities. Robespierre's historic service consisted of his merciless purging of society of the feudal rubbish; but in the face of the future society, Robespierre was powerless. The proletariat as a class was non-existent, socialism could have had only a utopian character. The only real perspective could be the perspective of bourgeois development. The fall of the Jacobin régime was unavoidable.

The Lefts of those days, basing themselves on the sans-culottes, the propertyless plebeians—a very insecure prop!—could not have their independent road. By this, the bloc with the Rights was predetermined, just as in the end the supporters of Robespierre, in the vast majority, supported the Rights in the future. This was the politi-

Exit Weisbord. . . .

As our readers know, Albert Weisbord, who was expelled from the party about a year ago, made certain approaches in recent months to the Left Opposition, and at times even represented himself as a supporter of our principled standpoint. Those who have read his statements and our replies which we published in the *Militant* for the information of our readers, already know that on a number of the most important questions he was separated from us by a wide gulf. We pointed this out in our comments on his declaration of last fall and again on his proposals for an unemployment program.

As his various statements showed, his political line in general represented an attempt to substitute for the principle line of the Left Opposition, on nearly all the main questions, a melange of opportunism and confusion borrowed in part from the Right wing and in part from the Centrists. It was this conflict in principle between his line and ours which obliged the National Committee of the League to reject his application for membership. Upon his failure to gain admission into the Communist League, Weisbord then made an alternative proposal to collaborate with us in certain phases of our activity until such time as political accord would make his membership possible.

He represented himself as sympathetic to our movement and anxious to work in our direction. Taking his representations in good faith, the National Committee decided to accept his offer of collaboration and assigned him to conduct a class in Marxist economics in our school. In this capacity, Weisbord was not long in demonstrating that he had by no means freed himself of the Pepperistic conception of politics in which he had received his party training. He undertook to organize a secret factional grouping in the Communist League on the opportunistic platform of a bloc between the Left Opposition and the Lovestone Right wing against the official party. After some weeks of these unprincipled maneuvers of Weisbord—reminiscent of the contemptible methods of petty bourgeois politicianism, with which the Pepper-Lovestone leaders poisoned the party life for so many years—

cal expression of the vic development over the petty bourgeois and the revolutionary spurts of the plebeians.

It is needless to say that Stalin has no basis for claims to Robespierre's services; the purging of Russia from feudal rubbish and the crushing of the restorationist attempts were quite completed in the Leninist period. Stalinism grew out of a break with Leninism. But this break was never complete, nor is it now. Stalin carries on not an episodic, but a permanent, systematic, organic struggle on two fronts. This is an innate feature of a petty bourgeois policy. At the Right of Stalin—the unconscious and conscious capitalist restorationists in different stages. To the Left—the proletarian Opposition. This diagnosis has been tested in the fire of world events. Strangulation of the party by the apparatus is called forth not by the necessity of a struggle against the bourgeois restoration—on the contrary, this struggle demands the greatest activity and alertness on the part of the party—but by a struggle against the Left; to put it more precisely, by the necessity for the apparatus to liberate itself for constant maneuvering between the Rights and the Lefts. Here we have a similarity with Robespierre. Here are the roots upon which were nourished the Bonapartist features of his ruin. But Robespierre had no choice. His zig-zags denoted the convulsions of the Jacobin régime.

Is a consistent revolutionary policy in the Soviet Union conceivable or inconceivable at present—on a proletarian basis which Robespierre did not have? And if it is conceivable, can it be calculated that this policy will be supported early enough by a revolution in other countries? Upon the reply to these two questions depends the evaluation of the perspective of the struggle of the antagonistic tendencies in the economy as well as in the politics of the Soviet Union. To both of these questions, we Bolshevik-Leninists reply in the affirmative and will continue to reply in the affirmative—so long as history does not show the contrary by facts and events, that is, by a merciless life and death struggle.

In this and only this way can the problem arise for revolutionists who feel themselves to be the live forces in the process, in distinction from doctrinaires who observe the processes from the sidelines and dismember it into lifeless categories.

We expect to return to this question in another connection in the coming number. Here we only wished to sweep away the grossest and most dangerous misunderstandings. The Left Opposition, at any rate, has no reason for revising its basis so long as this revision is not placed on the order of the day by great historical events.

the National Committee decided to bring the whole question into the open through a principled discussion.

Accordingly, a meeting of the New York branch was devoted to a thorough consideration of the principle basis of the three factions in the Comintern and the fundamental line of the International Left Opposition, which excludes the possibility of any bloc with the Right wing. In this connection, the question of our perspectives and tasks as the Marxist wing of the movement were fully set forth. In order to give the members of the New York branch the full opportunity of contrasting the opportunist and the revolutionary points of view, the national committee took the responsibility for inviting Weisbord to attend the meeting and expound his standpoint. As a result of this discussion, the unprincipled faction maneuvers of Weisbord collapsed like a house of cards. A few of the younger comrades who had been temporarily influenced by Weisbord's prescription for a "simple" and "quick" road to a mass movement, were thereby enabled to arrive at a clearer judgment. In the end, Weisbord's opportunistic platform as well as his behind-the-scenes maneuvers to disrupt the Opposition, were repudiated.

The branch showed its complete solidarity with the line of the National Committee and declared itself in favor of a severance of all relations with Weisbord. This decision was formally made by the National Committee at its last meeting.

The Weisbord incident, insignificant enough in itself, is of value in affording a contrast between the Pepperistic method of unprincipled faction fighting and the methods of the International Left Opposition. The latter welcomes all Communists who are attempting to break the unwholesome régime in the party and the Comintern and to seek their way to platform. We stand ready to assist them in every comradely way. But we will have nothing to do with those who try to smuggle into the Opposition the contraband platform of opportunism and the petty bourgeois methods that always accompany it. The exit of Weisbord serves to give point to this principle of conduct.