

The role of revolutionary Marxism in the collapse of the Soviet Union: Never again!

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*The brief article below was written for the Cuban journal **La Comuna** at the end of last year, as that journal was making preparations for an issue devoted to the analysis of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. However, the events that occurred as a result of the action of the artists that gathered within the San Isidoro movement convinced the Editorial Board of **La Comuna** to dwell on those events and postpone the publication of the dossier on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite this **La Comuna** chose to publish the piece below as the only foreign contribution in the issue with the changed theme. This is what the Editorial Board of **La Comuna** said in its introduction to the issue:*

Finally, we have included a contribution that we received from Turkey when the crisis was just beginning, one made with the express intention of publication in what would have been number 4 of *La Comuna* (which is now postponed until the next issue). That issue was going to be dedicated to the role of the Party and the fall of the USSR, but was interrupted by the events that suddenly precipitated. Although it does not seem to be related directly to the events discussed in this is-

sue, the article by Armağan Tulunay and Sungur Savran, members of the editorial board of the journal *Revolutionary Marxism*, introduces us with a question that has run through this crisis: the defense of the revolution against capitalist restoration.

*The article was of course written and published in Spanish. We present below the English translation for the readers of **Revolutionary Marxism**. This is also an occasion to commemorate, with hard feelings of bitterness, the 30th anniversary of the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the product of the Great October Socialist Revolution and the first workers' state in history that survived the fire and fury of revolution and remained alive for three quarters of a century.*

The most abominable secret of our times is the historic event that attributes the 21st century its specificity compared with the previous one. From 1917 to 1991, during what historian Eric Hobsbawm named the short 20th century, the world economic, political and ideological situation was determined by the irreducible reality of the existence of a new kind of state, the Soviet Union, that simply repressed the capital relation, thus making impossible the exploitation of the labour of humans by other humans. This aspect of the 20th century was further consolidated in the wake of World War II, when other states emerged wielding this fundamental characteristic, from East Germany in the west all the way to China and Korea (North) in the east.

In 1991, however, upon the heels of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of all the central and east European workers' states, came the dissolution of the Soviet state, still the most advanced and representative of the family. This was followed by the more gradual and controlled restoration of capitalism in the Asian giants of China and Vietnam. Thus the experience of socialist construction of the 20th century, which set the tone for the entire world scene, collapsed like a house of cards.

Not a single credible explanation has been provided for this world-historic event by the spokespeople and the theoreticians of the official "communist" parties that ruled these countries nor by those forces, organisational or intellectual, of the rest of the world that to the very last day declared out loud that one or other of these states (the Soviet Union, China, or Albania) was the "guiding force" or the "leadership" of revolution around the world. We have a saying in Turkish for such situations: with the crow your guide, your nose will never smell anything but excrement, to put it in milder terms than the image that the original saying depicts.

This is a murderous act, an abominable conspiracy of silence, a betrayal of the socialist or communist cause, to use the two terms interchangeably, at the international level. If these states had been defeated at the hands of the imperialist enemy or succumbed in the face of a domestic counter-revolution instigated by the forces of a nascent bourgeoisie, then the question would be simpler. But at least in the largest and most influential instances, the Soviet Union and China, it was the very same parties that had been acclaimed as the "guiding forces of international revolution" that laid the path to capitalist restoration. Without a serious explanation of the trajectory of 20th century experience of socialist construction that brings out the true

culprits and the renegades of communism or socialism, no serious preparation for the future is possible.

So, it is a felicitous choice made by *La Comuna* to open the collapse of the Soviet Union to discussion among Marxists in 2021, the 30th anniversary of the event. Every effort to lift the lid of the conspiracy of silence on this question is extremely valuable.

We have analysed the question in detail in our literature in our native Turkish. Here is not the place to discuss at great length all the different aspects of the question. We will in fact focus on a single aspect at the expense of many others for a very specific reason as will be seen shortly. It may appear strange to see that a Marxist analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union should accord priority to a discussion of what may be termed the subjective factor. That is because it is the subjective factor that gives us the clue to what should be done if and when a similar prospect of dissolution of the workers' state and the subsequent restoration of capitalism should arise in the near future, this time in Cuba. What is to be done in such a situation is really the question we wish to shed light upon and that is why we prioritise the subjective factor.

Let us then proceed to, first, define the objective material contradictions that are the root cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union without examining the unfolding of the process at great length, to then turn to the response of the international socialist and communist movement to the impending collapse in the second half of the 1980s. The clarification, if only in summary form, of these two issues will provide us with a sound basis on which to determine our policy for the future should a similar danger arise for Cuba.

The contradictions of the world revolution

Let us first make a very clear distinction: While the historical character of a socio-economic formation is defined by the relations between the classes in that formation and the nature of the state rising above that socio-economic formation is determined by the class ruling in society, the character of the ruling forces in control of the state or, in other words, of the regime and the government may display a wide range of varieties and depends on much more concrete factors. This is true for capitalism, where the socio-economic formation based on the relationship between capital and wage-labour gives rise to a bourgeois state that protects and promotes the interests of the bourgeoisie, but the regime may vary from a pure representative democracy all the way to fascism, containing in between such different forms as Caesarism, Bonapartism, military dictatorship etc. There can be no wholesale judgment on the Soviet Union or similar societies regarding these three different spheres of socio-economic formation, of state and of regime and government. In fact, precisely because these were societies in transition from capitalism to socialism, the relations between the different spheres were in any case much more prone to a web of contradictions than societies in which capitalism was a well-established mode of

production. However, the specific trajectory of world revolution throughout the 20th century acted to burden these societies, first and foremost the Soviet Union, with additional contradictions.

“World revolution”, we said. To this day, the ideological representatives of the now defunct workers’ states still ostracise this concept as an idiosyncratic aberration of Leon Trotsky and his followers. Many of them belonging to the younger generations do not probably even realise that this is a pure lie that in truth buries the thinking of Lenin and his contemporaries under the rubble of the so-called programme of “socialism in a single country”. The programme of Marxism was, from the origin, one that conceived of socialism as the work of at least all the advanced countries of the time.

In a wonderfully ironic twist, Engels, whose 200th anniversary we are celebrating this year, wrote the following in “The Principles of Communism”, a text preparatory for *The Communist Manifesto*, written in question and answer format. Question 19 asks: “Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?” The answer is at first a curt “No”! Engels has almost anticipated the Stalinist distortion of three quarters of a century later. He then explains why: “By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.” He therefore concludes in a clear and concise formula: “It is a universal revolution and will, accordingly, have a universal range.” The *Manifesto* itself takes up this idea in full. As for Lenin, “world revolution” is one of the most frequent key concepts of his Marxism, so frequent that we even need not adduce any evidence to prove that this simply is the case.

The fundamental development that engendered the entire process whereby the ground was objectively prepared for the collapse of socialist construction around the world was embedded in the contradiction between this necessity of world revolution and the isolation of the first successful proletarian revolution of the 20th century. The isolation was at first the result of the betrayal of social democracy, especially in Germany, where two of the greatest revolutionary leaders of the 20th century, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were murdered by far right squads under the benevolent gaze of the social democratic government in power in January 1919. Slowly but surely, however, after the end of the civil war and the death of Lenin, a part of the Soviet leadership itself became, more and more, the real brake on world revolution, evidenced most clearly in the second Chinese revolution of 1925-1927 and the revolution in Spain between 1936-1939. Why was this the case? Why did a section of the leadership that had accomplished the October revolution abandon the programme of world revolution that was enshrined in the 1919 programme of the Communist Party of Russia (Bolshevik) and all the documents of the Communist International (Comintern) adopted during the first four congresses in Lenin’s lifetime?

The answer to this question was provided by that most important book of the 20th century, *The Revolution Betrayed* of 1936, written by none other than Leon Trotsky,

the second-in-command of the October revolution after Lenin, the commander of the Red Army that made possible the survival of the revolution in the face of a concerted attack by Russian counter-revolutionaries and fully fourteen imperialist countries, and one of the two honorary presidents of the Comintern (the other was, of course, Lenin). Inspecting the bases of the Marxist theory of socialism and the state, Trotsky reached the extremely important theoretical conclusion that, under certain specific historical circumstances, the society in transition from capitalism to socialism can face the threat of the rise of a bureaucracy that has interests of its own that clash with those of the labouring population at large and can consolidate its power over the nationalised economy and block further advance towards socialism, creating a situation where the dialectic of transition is frozen at a certain stage and can only be reignited thanks to a political revolution (not a social one) that returns political power directly to the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry. The programme of “socialism in a single country” simply amounted to the abandoning of the pursuit of world revolution for the sake of the privileges of the bureaucracy within a workers' state, i.e. one that made the repossession of capital of the means of production impossible.

Thus the state was still a workers' state but the ruling forces were led by this new stratum, the bureaucracy, that nested in the cells of the new nationalised economy. It was a bureaucratically degenerated workers' state in the sense that, as we have already explained, the forward move of society was heavily conditioned on the overthrow of this bureaucratic stratum by the workers.

The advent of other proletarian revolutions, as well as the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence westwards in the wake of World War II, did not imply the end of “socialism in a single country”. For this meant not that there was only one country, but that each country was to undertake the socialist construction process on its own within the frontiers of a single country. So new socialist revolutions simply meant “*socialisms* in a single country”!

The rest of the story follows logically from the two premises of isolation and bureaucratisation. In a world where, in Engels' words, “big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others”, to try to go it alone naturally implies that one cannot catch up with the increasingly integrated capitalist world economy. Socialism can only assure its “final victory”, in Lenin's terms, by conquering the world economy. Marked by concrete developments peculiar to each country, the process of capitalist restoration thus had this basic material factor as its root cause.

The horrible (ir)responsibility of the revolutionary Marxist movement

No economic situation necessarily implies one single outcome. If such were

the case, the practice, programme and strategy of Marxist parties would prove to be useless in trying to influence and, in the final instance, determine the course of history. Trotsky himself surely thought that the prognosis for the bureaucratically degenerated workers' state could only be formulated in the form of two alternative outcomes: either the proletariat will bring down the bureaucracy through a political revolution or the bureaucracy will move to ground its privileges in the form of private property, thus opting, when conditions are propitious, to restore capitalism. Both of these alternatives obviously open up space for the intervention of Marxist parties. For Marxists and, *a fortiori*, for Leninists, no successful revolution is possible, whatever the role the masses will play, without a revolutionary leadership so that political leadership is part of the equation concerning the political revolution. On the other hand, the return to capitalism is predicated upon the dismantlement of the workers' state, which still provides guarantees against capitalist exploitation despite the aberrations of bureaucratisation. So in both cases political intervention by Marxists, in particular the revolutionary Marxists that Trotskyists by definition are, will make a difference.

Trotsky's priorities are clear, especially in the collection of articles he wrote in 1939-1940, shortly before his death, later collected under the title of *In Defence of Marxism*. For him the defence of the workers' state is a priority when compared to the overthrow of the bureaucracy. He even envisages situations where, for instance in case of imperialist war waged on the Soviet Union, revolutionary Marxists will make common front with the bureaucracy itself.

How did, then, the Trotskyist movement act when confronted with the most crucial juncture of the prospect of the dissolution and collapse of the workers' states, in particular the Soviet Union, in the late 1980s, half a century after the Fourth International was founded with the explicit purpose of defending the first workers' state, even from the clutches of the bureaucracy itself? It acted shamefully!

There were two distinct tendencies but a single outcome. A majority of Trotskyists, perhaps with good intentions, supported capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union, in eastern Europe, in Yugoslavia, and in China! As the rightly famous saying goes, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions"! One tendency found a critic of bureaucracy, even an apostle of democracy in Gorbachev (and at least partially in Deng Xiao Ping). To those who pointed out that Gorbachev was dismantling in piecemeal fashion and Deng in brazen manner the bases of the planned economy, the answer was given: "This is but a mini-NEP"! To compare a retreat under the revolutionary leadership of Lenin and Trotsky to the operations of bureaucratic counter-revolutionaries that represent the vested interests of the bureaucratic stratum was an intellectual feat of appalling dimensions!

The other tendency was extremely suspicious (and rightly so) of Gorbachev and Deng and the like. But they were magnetised by the liberal opposition that was, at least partially, effective in bringing down the workers' state in several countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and, in quite a different manner, Romania.

Finally, a majority of Trotskyists supported the disintegration of Yugoslavia through a vicious war waged under the egoistic direction of the bureaucracy of each former republic and the active instigation of Western imperialist powers, including the Roman Catholic Pope, whose long arm also reached out to Catholic Poland.

The common thread that tied the two tendencies was to support capitalist restoration in the name of democracy, whether in the form of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, Vaclav Havel's liberalism, or the so-called democratic right to self-determination for Muslim Bosniacs under the leadership of the semi-Islamist leadership of Izzet Aliabegovich trying to break from what was a happily united multinational Bosnia-Herzegovina for four long decades.

¡Nunca jamás! ¡Rechazamos una repetición del mismo en Cuba!

No imperialist power, no ruling class or stratum, no political leadership tries to push their agenda without seemingly positive measures being inserted in their programme, precisely to hide the retrograde nature of that same programme. There is always a set of "bribes" so to speak to different sections of the population, measures that seem to cater to certain needs or set right certain cases of wrongdoing that have not been heeded for sometimes long decades: a few rights to alleviate the oppression of women, certain measures to lighten the challenges faced by gay people, an opening, albeit limited, concerning the freedom of the press, the possibility of travel to more advanced countries that are regarded as the promised land by the youth, or certain steps that promise a broader democratic space for the population at large.

Each of these opportunities must be assessed not singly, not in isolation, not divorced from the overall package in which the powers that be have placed them, but as the pawns of a chess board on which is being played out a game that may, in the end, lead to the dismantlement of all the gains of the workers and the labourers of the country.

Democracy and human rights have never been and will never be good or bad in the abstract. Only grounded in the material reality of class relations can they be assessed as assets for the people or traps set up to take away from the people what they have valued for so long and what they have been jealously guarding for long decades through thick and thin.

The real crux of the matter of defending socialism lies not in scattered rights for this or that section of the population. It lies in extending the socialist revolution to other countries and continents. Che Guevara was important not only because he was for a well-defined socialist economy with the market and private property being pushed back on an increasing scale. He was also important because he was a proletarian internationalist who struggled and died in order to achieve world revolution. That is the *only* way to defend the Cuban revolution as well.

The duty of all revolutionary Marxists today is to defend Cuba not only against

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imperialist embargo and possible military aggression. It is incumbent on all who deserve the appellation Marxist to stand up against a creeping restoration of capitalism on the island that may, as previous examples have shown, sap gradually and imperceptibly the bases of socialism and, quantity turning to quality, one day leave the Cuban worker vulnerable in the face of a new host of capitalists, foreign as well as local. In order to defend Cuba against both, an international campaign in the spirit of a united front needs to be formed all over the world.