

Leninism Trotskified

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WORLD REVOLUTION, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International,
by C. L. R. James. *Secker & Warburg*: 12s. 6d.

‘The Stalinists seek to kill Leninism. It cannot be done, for it draws its strength, not from the memories of the October Revolution, but from the economic, social and political chaos of the modern world.’ In these valedictory words, Mr. C. L. R. James sums up the lesson of 420 pages of denunciation. One obvious conclusion might be that Mr. James is the champion of Leninism. We have the additional weight of evidence by Messrs. Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., who tell us on the wrapper of ‘this important work, written from a Leninist viewpoint.’

Yet there is a curious feature of this particular brand of ‘Leninism.’ It declares that, on all essential questions of Socialist theory and practice where Lenin came into conflict with Trotsky, Lenin was wrong and Trotsky was right.

We learn that in 1905, after the Bolsheviks first split with the Mensheviks, Lenin’s ‘perspective was a great development of Russian Capitalism under a democratic Russia.’¹ Whereas Trotsky waged ‘irreconcilable polemic’ against this idea, and for the idea of ‘permanent revolution’ (p. 59) which later on ‘embodied the whole theoretical basis of the Soviet Union and the Communist International.’ (P. 151.) Mr. James leaves us no room for doubt as to who was right—especially as in January 1917 Lenin was still opposing the idea that the Russian Revolution would have a Socialist content ‘as one of Trotsky’s heresies.’ (P. 75.)

The root of Lenin’s mistake at that time was his attitude to the peasants. He thought that ‘though the proletariat was to lead, the driving force of the revolution was to come from the peasants, and the proletariat would have to share the political power with a party representing the peasantry.’ (P. 58.) Whereas Trotsky knew better. ‘The peasantry would support the revolution until the confiscation of the land. But after that, every Socialistic step that the proletariat would be compelled to take would send the richer peasantry into the arms of the reaction, so that these allies of the proletariat to-day would be its enemies of to-morrow.’ (P. 60.) Mr. James, by cleverly slipping back and forth from ‘the peasantry’ to ‘the richer peasantry’ and ‘these allies,’ does his best to suggest the future Soviet struggle with the kulaks, and thus that Trotsky was right, not Lenin.²

When the revolution actually did take place—according to Trotsky’s recipe—Lenin made a really ‘great error’: he took too lightly the ‘filching of their power from the people in the Soviets.’ (P. 130.) On the eve of his disappearance from active life (1922) he made another ‘serious error’: he ‘gave his authority to the idea of fusing the party with the State apparatus.’ (P. 139.) Lenin was wrong to do this,

¹ Incidentally, Mr. James has merely fathered the Menshevik theory on Lenin. Lenin wrote in 1905: ‘From the democratic revolution we shall immediately begin to pass—and begin to the extent of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organised proletariat—to a Socialist revolution.’ (*Works*, Vol. VI, p. 449.)

² In point of fact, it was Lenin who foresaw the proletarian conflict with the ‘peasant bourgeoisie,’ but pointed to the possibility of an alliance with the poor peasantry, and ‘neutralising’ the great mass of medium peasantry (*Two Tactics*, 1905). Whereas Trotsky accused Lenin of wanting ‘the moujik as collaborator,’ as a guarantee against Socialism, and prophesied conflict with ‘broad masses of the peasantry’ (*Our Revolution*, 1906), not merely the richer peasants.

because he himself had already formed the conclusion that the Soviet regime was ‘bad, that there was a thin surface of democracy above, but that below it was the same old Tsarist bureaucracy over again.’ (P. 129.)

How Mr. James reconciles this with Lenin’s deathbed article which started from the frequently-repeated premise that ‘State power is in the hands of the working class’ (*On Co-operation*, 1923), is as great a mystery as Mr. James’ reconciliation of the statement at the beginning of his book that the Soviet Union makes concrete ‘the hitherto theoretical conception of a Workers’ State’ (p. 9), and the series of attacks on the social and political régime in the U.S.S.R. at the end of the book—best typified in the remarks that the Soviet worker ‘lives under a political tyranny without parallel in Europe’ (p. 411), and that ‘the Russian proletariat, after its Herculean efforts, seems to have exchanged one set of masters for another.’ (P. 415.)

But the biggest error of all was Lenin’s views on the organisation of the Bolshevik Party. Mr. James leaves no doubt about that. As is well known, the Bolsheviks split with the Mensheviks on this question of principles of organisation. Trotsky sided with the Mensheviks. ‘He has since admitted that he was wrong; too generously,’ says Mr. James (p. 49). Trotsky declared, in exactly the same language that he uses to-day against Stalin, that ‘during the last 3 or 4 years of intense party friction, the life of very many committees has consisted of a series of *coups d’etat* in the spirit of our court revolutions of the eighteenth century,’ that the Party leadership starts a new discussion every month—‘the apparatus supplies the topic for it, feeds it by false materials, draws its summary, dispenses justice, postpones Congress for a year, and is now preparing a congress from among its own apparatus workers previously appointed’—and that Lenin’s policy of democratic centralism in Party organisation means that ‘the organisation of the Party substitutes itself for the Party, the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation, and finally the dictator substitutes himself for the Central Committee.’ These charges ‘must have had solid foundation,’ says Mr. James, freely confessing that Trotsky fought Lenin for fourteen years on this question, and that since Lenin’s final illness—another fourteen years—Trotsky has fought the leaders of the C.P.S.U. and the Communist International on the same issue (pp. 50-51)

After these revelations, it is no blow to learn that Lenin ‘was more than once the prisoner of the conceptions he had so rigidly instilled’ (p. 52), that Rosa Luxemburg’s opposition to ‘the harshness of his democratic centralism’ has been justified ‘only too well’ (p. 96), that ‘too great a concentration of power in the summits of the party’ was another of Lenin’s errors (p. 161), and so forth.^{3*}

So that Lenin was wrong about the prospects of the Russian Revolution, wrong about its motive forces, and wrong about the weapon with which to carry it out. We beg our readers to write and tell us the answer to the conundrum: ‘Why did the workers of Russia, in that case, swell the ranks of the Bolshevik Party from 12,000 to 240,000 between February and October 1917, although it had been proved so abundantly wrong, while the few hundreds who supported Trotsky’s own private little party—the Mejravontsy—had nearly all deserted it to join the Bolsheviks, when Trotsky at last came over, struggling every inch of the way, in July 1917?’ No prize is offered, for reasons only too obvious.

Mr. James, like his hero, has strange ideas generally on the nature of a political party. Whenever he mentions Lenin, he quite often adds, ‘and the Bolshevik Party.’ The second half of his book, dealing with the diverse wicked ways in which Stalin ‘stabbed’ the Communist International, also refers a good deal to Communist Parties abroad. But nowhere in his 420 pages does he give the slightest hint of how

³ It is edifying to learn, by the way, that in 1904 Trotsky denounced Lenin’s *coups d’etat*, carried out under ‘a flag with the inscription “orthodoxy, centralism, political struggle”’ (p. 51), and that in 1937 Mr. James follows Trotsky in denouncing Stalin for having ‘stabbed and stabbed again’ the International ‘in the name of discipline, orthodoxy, centralism.’ (P. 308.)

the actual Party he deals with lived and worked, what was its daily appearance, so to speak, in the eyes of broad masses of the people. Perhaps there is method in this, too. But perhaps, it gives a clue to the origin of Mr. James' remarkable habit of speaking of a political party as though it were the private appanage and particular property of an individual—Marx (yes, he is in trouble too) 'sent instructions' to the German proletariat, and 'ordered a drastic change of tactics' in 1850 (p. 35); so did Lenin in 1907 (p. 66); in 1912, and again in 1915, Lenin asked Trotsky to write for 'his paper' (pp. 67, 74); in 1917, Lenin 'had his party ready' (p. 84); in 1921, 'Lenin had to forbid factions or organised groups in the party'⁴ (p. 135); the Bolsheviks made a poor show when, with Lenin's death, 'their master left them' (p. 142), and if Trotsky never 'used the army' against Stalin, it was only because he thought of it too late (p. 160).

It may be owing to this naive conception of what a Communist Party is that Mr. James ultimately (p. 395) delivers himself of the following profound observation on one of the two or three principal functions of a political party: 'Agitation,' says Trotsky, 'is always a dialogue with the masses. The party gives the slogans, and according to the response of the masses, knows how far it can go.' This idea, of course, is quite in keeping with the 'great man' theory of revolutionary history which Mr. James applies at prodigious length to the subjects of Marxism, the Forerunners of the Third International, the War, and the Russian Revolution, and so on up to the death of Lenin. (Chapters 1-5 of his book.) The 'great man' hears no responsibility; he only issues 'orders' and 'slogans,' and the worse for the masses if they don't obey. But it is not at all in keeping with the conception known to have been held by Lenin—that the party is the responsible 'vanguard' of its class, which means that it takes the *leading share* (both words are important) in the daily troubles and struggles of its class, and does not therefore need to indulge in Mr. James's fantastic 'dialogue.'

At, all events, Mr. James would find it interesting to hear the masses' 'responses' in the 'dialogue' which Trotsky has been conducting with them since 1923. Even in Catalonia, where the dialogue was obligingly favoured, not only with exceptional facility of expression by the authorities (printing plant and premises, requisitioned motors, a daily paper, etc.), but also with a tremendous sounding-board in the shape of the Anarcho-Syndicalists who took Trotsky's spokesmen under their wing, the results have not been happy—for Trotsky. Disgusted workers, peasants in revolt against compulsory 'collectivisation,' soldiers of the P.O.U.M. brigade outraged by their own press; and the Trotskyists themselves, despairing of any mass 'response' to their 'dialogue,' resorting to banditry, assassination, espionage and 'putsch' tactics—oh yes, Mr. James would know by now how far he can go, if he listened to the 'responses' of the masses.

This is a review of the principal trends of thought concealed behind mountains of 'revolutionary' verbiage in Mr. James's book, and not, unfortunately, a detailed answer to the incredible mass of self-delusion, sleight-of-hand, half-truths and muddled thought which it contains. For that, a reply volume would be necessary. Just as one blackguard with a revolver can kill a workers' leader, though millions are on the side of the leader, so one Trotskyist, armed with a pen, ink and the too long-suffering element of paper, can write enough nonsense in a chapter to make something twice the length necessary, if he is to be answered point by point, with the necessary evidence and argument.

Otherwise it would be particularly tempting to deal with Mr. James's complete, fundamental and abysmal ignorance of what the problem of *allies* in the Socialist revolution means for the working class. For when he jeers at the Italian Communists' appeal to the millions of workmen, peasants and employees holding a Fascist party card (whom he dismisses as 'their "brothers" the Fascists') to fight for bread and peace (p. 13); when he hides the plain, historical fact that Marx advised the German Socialist workmen, in

⁴ The 'forbidding' was done by the Tenth Party Congress, after a whole week's discussion, in which the prime responsibility for letting loose faction struggle in the Party was laid by Lenin on Trotsky! There is method in Mr. James's madness here, too.

a socially and economically backward country, to join forces with the town middle-class for a democratic revolution against monarchical and feudal privilege (p. 34); when—triumph of aberration—he sees (p. 42) ‘nothing more’ in the People’s Front than ‘collaboration with the democratic and progressive bourgeoisie,’ as though the town middle class and the peasantry don’t count; when he describes the Bolshevik peasant policy as ‘confiscation of land FOR the peasants’ (p. 57); and fathers Trotsky’s view of the mass of the peasantry as the inevitable enemies of the working class upon Lenin, who believed and wrote all his life to the exactly opposite effect (even the truncated quotations given by Mr. James prove it); when Mr. James declares in black and white that the dictatorship of the proletariat, as he understands it, means in Russia ‘the political domination of a minority’, (p. 125)—later on made more precise as ‘the Communist Party which controls the State-power and, in close association with s the representatives of the international proletariat, governs the country in the interests of international Socialism’⁵ (p. 134)—Mr. James is peculiarly eloquent, not so much about the errors of Lenin or the wickedness of Stalin, as about the political incompetence, ignorance, irresponsibility, imbecility and criminal disruption which distinguishes the dupes of Trotsky.

But we must push on. We have still to learn of the decline and fall of the Communist International. Mr. James proves his case by devoting one or more chapters to each outstanding country—Great Britain, China, Germany, France, the U.S.S.R.—and showing to his own satisfaction how Stalin ruined everything he put his hand to. Wherever possible he uses the time—honoured method employed against the U.S.S.R. by the capitalist press—of drawing upon the ruthless self-criticism applied by Communists, particularly at moments of failure and defeat, divorcing the examples from the lessons drawn at the time, and generalising upon that basis. Had the Bolsheviks enjoyed a legal press, in the long, long years before 1917, of ceaseless war against Tsarism, capitalism, Menshevism and Trotsky, when ‘iron discipline,’ ‘rigid centralism,’ and the other qualities on which Mr. James to-day bestows alternate praise and blame, were not the only content of day-to-day party work, we can rest assured that Trotsky, too, would have been able to dance with glee in public over the crushing of the December 1905 insurrection in Moscow, over the countless broken strikes and ‘foolhardy’ demonstrations of the years of reaction. But as the Communist International has a fully legal existence and press in the U.S.S.R., at any rate, as its sections can enjoy the freedom of debating one another’s problems unhindered, and recording the debates in full, and as its sections, during eighteen years of struggle, have also had plenty of defeats and failures to discuss—happening, the chief of them, to emerge from the chrysalis of pre-war Social-Democratic parties, in conditions which Lenin again and again emphasised were vastly more difficult than those of Russia—why, Mr. James is in clover. The more because, when there is a dearth of facts normally available, Mr. James can always fall back on the startling revelations of Trotsky or fellow-Trotskyists.

And so we learn about Great Britain that, by promoting the Anglo-Russian Committee of 1925-26, pledged to co-operate against wage attacks and war, the Soviet trade unions ‘transformed the General Council into a very bulwark against capitalism’ (p. 219)—when anyone who studies the documents of the time can see that the obligations assumed by the General Council towards the Soviet trade unions were part and parcel of the obligations *forced* upon them by the militant rank-and-file—after the great rebuff to the first employers’ offensive on Red Friday, 1925: obligations which led to a Conference of Trade Union Executives (the same bureaucrats) on May 1, 1926, resolving on the General Strike.

⁵ Lenin gave the following, somewhat different, description of the dictatorship of the proletariat as *he* understood it: ‘A special form of class alliance between the proletariat, the vanguard of the toilers, and the innumerable non-proletarian strata of the toilers (petty bourgeoisie, small owners, peasants, intellectuals, etc.) or their majority: an alliance for the purpose of the complete overthrow of capital, the complete crushing of the resistance of the bourgeoisie and attempts at restoration on their part: *an alliance for the purpose of finally creating and consolidating Socialism.*’ (*Works*, Vol. XVI, p. 241.)

We are informed that for a Whole year before the General Strike the British Communists ‘popularised the dangerous slogan, “All Power to the General Council” ’ (p. 223)—an utter and absolute fabrication. Its only foundation is a phrase used once or twice in connection with the demand of the forward moving trade union rank and file, that planned and methodical preparation be made for the struggle obviously coming in May 1926.

We are given what purports to be a quotation from a speech by Stalin in July 1926, and which creates the impression that Stalin really believed that an agreement with the British trade unions merely meant a *bloc* with the General Council, and that the latter would stand by the U.S.S.R. in the event of war—replacing by convenient dots Stalin’s statement that the *first* object was that ‘our trade unions should penetrate into the Western trade union movement and revolutionise it,’ and omitting altogether important passages in which Stalin emphasised that such agreements were needed ‘in order to receive access to the mass of workers, to enlighten those masses about the reactionary character of their political and industrial leaders,’ providing always that freedom of criticism was ensured and that the conditions for breaking masses away from reactionary leaders were there.

We are also informed that the British Communist Party after 1929 gave way to ‘reckless talk of insurrection’ (p. 312), and that it is now only asking for affiliation to the Labour Party ‘to agitate for an alliance of the Soviet Union with Britain and France.’ (P. 325.)

The only things we are not told are why, after all these follies and betrayals, the Communist Party has been able to double its membership in twelve months, to organise a daily paper with a mass basis and a rising circulation, to wield influence and display initiative (e.g. in the fight against Mosley and in the fight for Spain) which have moved millions.

So also with China. The Chinese Communists made a ‘criminal error’ in entering the nationalist Kuomintang, owing to the ‘ingrained opportunism’ of Stalin and Co. (p. 236)—when the decision that they should enter was taken in 1922, while Lenin was actively working. They should have worked in the Kuomintang only ‘for a certain period of time’ (how conveniently precise), not for four years, and then (p. 237) ‘left demonstratively,’ which does not prevent Mr. James rejoicing in the millions of workmen and tens of millions of peasants they were able to organise, thanks to this membership (p. 255). Mr. James jeers at Stalin because the Communist International in 1926 urged the Chinese peasants ‘to make a revolution in order “to reduce rents to the minimum” ’—and then you turn over a page, and you find Mr. James, as bold as brass, praising the Bolsheviks for urging the Russian workmen to make a revolution for the eight-hour day (pp. 253, 255)! Needless to say, Mr. James entirely suppresses the elaborate warnings and constructive advice given by the Comintern to the Chinese Communists during the six months preceding the time when the Kuomintang leaders turned against them—although the messages are in print, in English, in a sixpenny pamphlet.

But that would all have been the ruin of a startling chapter-heading: ‘Stalin Ruins the Chinese Revolution.’ The same applies to the chapter on Germany, where Mr. James carefully eliminates any details of the systematic wage cuts, bludgeoning and massacres’ perpetrated by the Social-Democratic leaders on the one hand, and reduces dozens of offers of a united front on practical, everyday issues, made by the German Communists (including an eight months’ campaign in 1932-33 for a General Strike against the Hitler menace), to ‘one hysterical effort.’ (P. 378.) He does his best thereby to create the impression that the workers of Germany were led, with blind imbecility, into the Fascist slaughterhouse.

So also with France. There is the now famous Stalin-Laval *communiqué*, which meant ‘the end of the Communist struggle against capitalism’ (p. 383), and ‘strengthening the French Army’ (p. 13)—which is no doubt the reason why the daily outcry in the French capitalist press is against growing Communist influence for struggle in the trade unions, and why the *Humanite* is the one daily paper which

the Government will not allow into barracks. There is a perfectly fantastic account of the great anti-Fascist battles of February 1934 (pp. 378-381), which suggests that on February 6th the Communists sprang a surprise demand on the workers to demonstrate, and that their one slogan was to demonstrate with the Fascists, not against them. Could anyone suspect from this that for days past the *Humanité* had been warning the workers to prepare for mass action against the Fascists (Andre Marty on February 3rd and 5th, Vaillant-Couturier on February 4th), and that on February 6th the main slogans, repeated all over the front page, were ‘Arrest Chiappe! (the pro-Fascist chief of police), Dissolve the Fascist Leagues!’?

For some reason unexplained by Mr. James, however, the French workers, ‘believing in the Communist Party tradition of action’ (p. 389), raised its membership from 30,000 in 1934 to 150,000 in the middle of 1936. But this only gave the French ‘Stalinists’ an extra chance to break the great strikes of July last year (p. 396), to threaten to break the People’s Front ‘if Blum and Daladier’ so much as sat down to discuss with Schacht.’ (P. 398.) Mr. James’s indignation at the threat is as comic, coming from him, as his implied censure of the reason given is suggestive—and generally to ‘abandon the revolutionary struggle.’ (P. 399). ‘It was becoming clear to more and more workers what were the real motives behind their policy,’ however, and, in righteous indignation, the workers raised the French Communist Party’s membership to 315,000 in the next nine months. Mr. James has unfortunately forgotten to mention this.

Altogether, it is astonishing how the capitalist class in its rage, and the revolutionary workers in their ‘trust and confidence’ in the Communists (p. 398), pay no heed to Mr. James and Trotsky when they warn them against ‘the Stalinist school of mendacious propaganda,’ and ‘the cesspool of corruption which the International is.’ (P. 400.) Can it be that they have some intuitive knowledge of a famous letter, sent to the Menshevik leader Chkheidze in April 1913, in which Leninism, too, was declared to be ‘built up on lies and distortions,’ flourishing magnificently ‘on the dung of factional differences,’ and containing within itself ‘the poisonous seed of its own decay’? No page reference, unfortunately, can be given in Mr. James’s book, even though the letter was written by Trotsky.

Here our pleasant studies with Mr. James must come to an end. It would be insulting the reader’s intelligence, and the numerous testimonies as to conditions in the U.S.S.R., to deal with the grotesque picture he draws of life and conditions there—a picture which one would have to go to the *Daily Mail* to parallel. ‘Starving’ Soviet workmen, contact between the Red Army and the people ‘abolished,’ the Young Communist League ‘forbidden to take part in politics,’ the ‘restoration of private property’ in the countryside (this refers to the fact that, in the average collective farm of 1,000 acres, each of the 50-100 households have an acre or two at their disposal on which to keep a cow, pigs and chickens)—they are all there, all the old friends and phantoms, seeking to justify the Trotskyist policy of counter-revolution and apologising for its agents.