

PSA Annual Conference, March 30-
April 1, 2015, Sheffield.

Marxism 1 Panel: Reflections on
Norman Geras.

Mark Cowling, Teesside University,
Geras and Trotskyism.

In this paper Geras's attitude to Trotskyism will be discussed. The obvious starting place is his specific discussions of Trotsky and Trotskyist themes. The discussion will involve revisiting the acrimonious debate between Trotsky and Stalin.

Then and now.

One of the pleasures of discussing Marxism following the fall of the Soviet Union is that the antagonism between people taking a broadly Stalinist or post-Stalinist approach, notably members of the British Communist Party, and those taking a Trotskyist approach, be they members of the International Marxist Group or members of the International Socialists (now the Socialist Workers Party) is basically at an end. The British Communist Party dissolved itself. Supporters of violent revolution have become much less enthusiastic. What is the point, it is widely thought, although not necessarily spelt out, of achieving a revolution in the course of which people are inevitably killed and injured, there is widespread deprivation, very likely intervention from the capitalist states, leading to further loss of life and devastation, when the eventual consequence is a badly managed reversion to capitalism, as in the Soviet Union, or a communist government presiding over a highly dynamic capitalist economy as in China? Exactly what conclusions

Marxists should draw from these stories has obviously been much debated, but straightforward enthusiasm for a revolution with the post-revolutionary state presided over by Trotskyists, Maoists or Stalinists has much diminished. As a consequence relations between previously hostile Marxists of various persuasions have become much more friendly, given that Marxists tend to be regarded as harmless eccentrics. The role of a major threat to the Western way of life has largely been taken over by varieties of Islamic terrorist.

The review of Geras's writings on Trotsky and Trotskyism, which follows, will be one of the more critical sections of the book. It needs to be borne in mind that the world of the early 1970s, from which some of these writings date, was very different from that of 2014, so that we have the benefit of a considerable amount of hindsight.

The Britain of the 1970s experienced persistent problems in which the trade unions were in a position to successfully demand inflationary pay increases, which were damaging to the economy, resulting in balance of payments problems as British exports became less competitive. The Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath attempted to legally regulate industrial relations, but climbed down when faced with the prospect of imprisoning trade unionists. Subsequently he was confronted by a highly successful miners strike which resulted in serious power cuts and a three-day working week. He called a general election in February 1974 on the theme of "Who Rules Britain?", and his electoral defeat by a narrow margin suggested that the trade unions did, and he didn't. In Northern Ireland, the Provisional IRA was mounting a bitter and effective armed struggle, which also spilled over onto the British mainland. Some sections of the left gave the IRA conditional or unconditional support on the basis that they were Marxists, or that they were conducting an anti-imperialist struggle.

Globally, Communism was approaching its historical peak of success. The expansion of Soviet communism into Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War, combined with the Russian development of nuclear weapons gave Stalin's successors a much expanded and apparently stable community of communist nations. They had been joined by China in 1949 and Cuba in 1957. There had nearly been a revolution in France in May 1968. The Vietnam war was won by the North Vietnamese and their allies in the south, defeating the world's most powerful nation. The Portuguese revolution against the Salazar regime nearly turned into a communist revolution; former Portuguese and Spanish colonies in Africa - Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau - turned Communist, as did Ethiopia. Whilst there was much to criticise in particular communist states, and there was a lurking problem of stagnation in the Soviet Union, the overall picture suggested that communism might well advance further. Trotskyists could obviously hope for some sort of further transformation in communist countries and expansion elsewhere.

The standard Trotskyist view, held, for example, by the International Marxist Group, was that the Soviet Union was a degenerated workers' state. The International Socialists adopted the view proposed by Tony Cliff that the Soviet Union was state capitalist, so that the ruling bureaucracy had become an exploiting class, and a revolution would be needed to convert it into a socialist state. The degree to which it fitted either of these descriptions is, of course, a matter for extensive debate.

We are plainly living in a very different world. In Britain the triumph of Mrs Thatcher weakened trade unions significantly and they have as yet to recover. Along with the collapse of the Soviet Union other formerly communist states have reverted to

capitalism, with the notable exceptions of Cuba and North Korea, which are best seen as anomalies rather than harbingers of a glorious future. The process of globalisation has devastated industry in many first world countries. To the extent that it survives in Britain it is mainly technologically advanced niche production rather than a mass employer. Pay for working people has tended to stagnate, and inequality has greatly increased. The process is only tolerable because of the combined effect of computerisation and cheap labour in places such as Mexico and much of Asia has greatly cheapened a wide range of products. The prospects for socialist advance do not currently look particularly good.

To reiterate, we are approaching Geras's ideas about Trotskyism from the early 1970s with the benefit of a considerable degree of hindsight.

Geras on Trotsky.

The time has now come to summarise what Geras has to say about Trotsky. So far we have his assertion that Lenin came to agree with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in 1917, and that Rosa Luxemburg also came to agree with it by the time of her imprisonment.

In a brief overall assessment of Trotsky, he praises him for three things: 'one of the best examples of the creative application of Marxism... between the time of Lenin's death and his own'. Second, a standard of literary excellence rarely achieved by Marxists since the days of Marx himself. And thirdly, that he rejected both the gradualism of West European socialism and the authoritarian Stalinism, and instead favoured

combining ‘proletarian revolution and workers democracy’ (Geras, 1986, p. 147).

In an essay from 1970 on political participation Geras quotes Trotsky’s famous critique of what he saw as Lenin’s over-emphasis on the role of the party subsequent to the Second Congress of the Russian Social, Labour and Democratic Party (RSDLP): ‘the party organisation... at first substitutes itself for the party as a whole; and finally, a single “dictator” substitutes himself for the Central Committee’. (Trotsky, quoted in Geras, 1986, p. 158). He then says that this critique of Lenin is ‘strikingly similar’ to Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin, but that both of them could accept a role for the party in leading the revolution. He then goes on to say that it is ‘more than doubtful’ that this was an ‘organic part’ of Trotsky’s political thought in subsequent years (Geras, 1986, p. 158). This leaves the question of substitutionism rather up in the air. In his writings up to 1917 Trotsky seems to have felt that it was not a worry because he thought that in any subsequent revolutionary outbreak the masses would at least initially sweep the party along in a revolutionary upsurge. For this reason he stood above the constant bickering between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, and sought for party unity. His theory of permanent revolution, which will be discussed more thoroughly below, led him to believe that because of the Russian revolution would bring the proletariat to power it would be impelled forward to take socialist measures. This distinguished him from both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, because both believed that the revolution could only be a bourgeois revolution - again, this needs further discussion, which may be found below (Geras, 1986, p. 159).

A little later, Geras states that with the reorientation of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 to Lenin's position in his *April Theses*, its political approach was now 'in all essential respects, identical to Trotsky's own perspective of permanent revolution'. However, of course, Trotsky's earlier idea that a revolutionary crisis would bring the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks closer together was shown to be definitely and conclusively false (Geras, 1986, p. 162).

Trotsky's commitment to democracy wavered in 1921, says Geras, when he attacked the Workers' Opposition for demanding the right to elect representatives, claiming that the party had a right to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship 'temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy' (Geras, 1986, p. 164, referring to Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, pp. 508-9). Geras comments that Trotsky was making a virtue of necessity, and thus playing his part in erecting Stalin's eventual dictatorship, a point also made by Rosa Luxemburg (Geras, 1986, p. 164).

Geras moves on to discuss Trotsky's writings from 1929 to 1933 on the rise of the Nazis. He rightly castigates the policy of class against class put forward by Stalin in the Third Period of the Comintern. The idea of this was that there was no essential difference between fascism and Social Democracy, combined with the view that it did not particularly matter if Hitler came to power. In contrast, Trotsky argued that a Nazi victory would lead to the destruction of all workers' organisations, and that it was vital to form a united front between the communists and Social Democrats (Geras, 1986, p. 167). Whilst Trotsky's position was definitely much better at this point than Stalin's, a variety of other things that Trotsky said at the same time greatly reduced its value, as will be seen below.

At about this time, Geras points out, Trotsky became increasingly concerned with the point that Social Democratic parties need a degree of stability and therefore produce their own organisational conservatism (Geras, 1986, p. 168).

Geras gave a brief but interesting talk on Lenin, Trotsky and the revolutionary party at a symposium organised by the International Marxist Group in 1977. He was concerned with Lenin's formula that socialist consciousness is brought to the working class from outside. Geras objects to Lenin's adoption of the idea, originally derived from Kautsky, that socialist consciousness is introduced to the working class by bourgeois intellectuals. Geras's criticism is that this is too vague - one needs to know which intelligentsia we are dealing with and under what conditions (Geras, 1986, p. 182). The central proposition in Lenin's theory of the party, says Geras, is that the party is a necessary instrument of political centralisation (Geras, 1986, p. 183). Trotsky and Luxemburg accused Lenin of wanting to replace the self-emancipation of the working class by the actions of an elite. In this, Geras argues, they were wrong because a revolution cannot be made without a proletarian vanguard (Geras, 1986, p. 184). On the other hand, Trotsky and Luxemburg realised, unlike Lenin, that there is a danger of an organisational apparatus developing its own interests and conservatism (Geras, 1986, p. 185). They saw, sooner than Lenin, that a successful revolution depends not just on a vanguard but on the upsurge of the masses, which at least in the first instance is spontaneous (Geras, 1986, p. 186).

Geras then proceeds to discuss stick bending. It is possible to see his overall intention, which is to stress the importance of internal democracy in a working-class party, but the detail is

unsatisfactory. He says that it was not justified for Lenin in *What is to be Done?* to say that an emphasis on professional revolutionaries - strict selection of members, dedication, confidence in each other is better than 'democratism'. He says that this is an unjustified example of stick bending because it led to a reluctance in 1905 to open up the party to masses of workers, and was also used by Stalin to justify 'crimes and horrors'. This is quite clear, but he then goes on to say 'I am *not* saying, in any form or shape, that there is a germ of Stalinism in the work of Lenin' (Geras, 1986, pp. 188-9). There will be much more to be said about this below, but if Lenin was engaging in unjustified stick bending then he was surely ipso facto using arguments which could subsequently be used by Stalin with a view to restricting internal democracy in the Communist Party. Linked to this, he says that the older Trotsky came to recognise that it was mistaken in 1921 to ban factions in the Bolshevik Party and to ban the legal Soviet opposition (Geras, 1986, p. 190). Geras then goes on to assert that vigorous internal debate was essential to any party worthy of the name, and to quote Lenin to this effect (Geras, 1986, p. 191).

Geras concludes by criticising statements made by three socialists about party organisation and democracy. He defends what he describes as the Leninist model of party organisation against Ralph Miliband, Louis Althusser, and a booklet put out by the Communist University of London, all of which gesture towards going beyond the Leninist model organisation, but without providing clear organisational ideas (Geras, 1986, p. 197). This again needs further discussion, but it is pretty clear that these different figures had in mind a model of Leninist party organisation more like the centralised and specifically undemocratic model which Lenin talked about in *What is to*

be Done?, and which Geras is questioning. So, in their doubtless unsatisfactory ways, each of these figures display a certain amount of agreement with Geras - what is in dispute is exactly what is the internal organisation of a Leninist party. More will be said about this below.

In a further essay: *Classical Marxism and Proletarian Representation*, Geras argues that Trotsky in *Our Political Tasks* takes a position very similar to those of Luxemburg. They are both critical of what in an earlier report Trotsky had described as Lenin's 'sterile formalism'. They both say that opportunism is something which arises naturally from the labour movement in the difficult conditions of czarist Russia, and that Lenin was wrong to eliminate opportunism from the Party by means of manipulating its constitution. The failure of many Bolsheviks was that they were unable to link the day-to-day and trade union interests felt by many working-class people with revolutionary politics (Geras, 1986, pp. 201-202). Trotsky argued that, while Lenin was, of course right to value Marxist doctrine, he was over-reliant on it - it did not fully and permanently prevent political error (Geras, 1986, p. 203).

Geras moves on in the essay to extrapolate from Trotsky and Luxemburg a pluralist principle which is well defended in moral and political philosophy. He says that actual Communist societies speak 'eloquently enough on its behalf as a negative example', and asks what institutional proposals Trotsky and Luxemburg have for implementing it. To start with, he argues, they say that what Geras calls 'Social-Democratic centralism' - is there any reason for him using this term rather than the more usual 'democratic centralism'? - it is founded on the 'will and initiative' of the party's rank and file, and not just on 'dictates' from the centre. (Geras, 1986, p. 206).

The Trotsky of *Our Political Tasks* extends this to the work of post-revolutionary socialist construction: there are bound to be debates thrown up by new problems for which there are no ready-made solutions. Rosa Luxemburg expresses essentially the same idea in criticising what she described as the Lenin-Trotsky dictatorship (Geras, 1986, p. 207).

However, both Trotsky and Luxemburg assume that there is a single party representing the working class. Geras comments that, while there is nothing in classical Marxism which entirely rules out the notion of a single party state, there is also a general assumption that there will be just one party which properly represents the interests of the working class. He makes it plain that this is not an acceptable assumption today. He argues for pluralism on the basis not just of Trotsky and Luxemburg in the texts he discusses, but also of the work of John Stuart Mill (Geras, 1986, pp. 208-212).

The direction in which this argument is heading should be clear: 'the norms of socialist democracy must allow, in unambiguous terms, for organisational pluralism'. Under socialism 'there must be room for any organisation that will respect a properly constituted socialist legality' (Geras, 1986, p. 215).

Geras's final major essay on Trotsky, *Literature of Revolution*, discusses, as the title implies, the relationship between literary excellence and political substance. It contains many examples of extremely striking descriptions from Trotsky's pen. A particular strength which Geras pinpoints in the essay is the way in which Trotsky links major historical events such as the development of the Soviets in 1905 and speeches or actions of ordinary individuals: the woman who passionately argues for the continuation of a strike; the sailor

who shoots an officer, refuses to say it is an accident, and has to be released because of the feelings expressed by his comrades (Geras, 1986, pp. 216-267).

Assessment of Geras on Trotsky.

The first point to make under this heading is that the Geras of the 1970s is definitely on the side of the angels given his commitment to multi-party democracy in post-revolutionary socialist states.

The accuracy and comprehensiveness of his account of Trotsky is, however, open to dispute. The comments which follow will be divided into four sections. The first will comprise an account and assessment of the theory of permanent revolution. The argument will be that we are dealing not so much with a developed theory but with a set of possible examples to which Trotsky adds speculation. Geras does not seriously consider the case for socialism in one country. He disparages Stalin and Stalinism without a single reference to anything that Stalin wrote or to a biography of Stalin. Second comes the question of politics. It will be argued that Trotsky was not actually politically very effective. The third will be a discussion of Trotsky the democrat. Geras picks out the more attractively democratic aspects of Trotsky. The argument will be that Trotsky's commitment to democracy as Geras would understand it is questionable. Moreover, both Lenin and Trotsky approved of the use of terror in such a way as to make the flourishing of democracy difficult. Fourth and finally there is the question of Trotsky and the rise of fascism, as already mentioned above.

Permanent revolution.

The starting point must be an exposition of the theory of permanent revolution. Because, once he had developed it, Trotsky adhered to this theory for the rest of his life, this can be taken from a variety of sources. The theory essentially has three strands. A revolution in Russia, but probably also a revolution anywhere else, would not be able to stop at the bourgeois phase. The bourgeoisie in Russia, but also elsewhere, have become too threatened by the prospect of socialist revolution to feel at all happy about overthrowing Czarism. Therefore any revolution would have to be led by the proletariat, which would mean that it would take the leading role in introducing democratic reform. Any problems in post-revolutionary society between the owners of the means of production and the workers would lead to the necessity of adopting socialist measures, and thus ultimately introducing a socialist economy. The second strand would then come into play. A socialist revolution in Russia would be unable to survive on its own, and would therefore have to strive, using propaganda, and perhaps even military assistance, to bring about revolutions in the leading capitalist societies. The third strand is that the onward development of post-revolutionary society would involve continuing major changes. In *The Permanent Revolution*, (Trotsky, 1929) he summarises the above ideas as follows:

The theory of the permanent revolution, which originated in 1905, declared war upon these ideas and moods. It pointed out that the democratic tasks of the backward bourgeois nations lead directly, in our epoch, to the dictatorship of the proletariat and that the dictatorship of the proletariat puts socialist tasks on the order of the day. Therein lay the central idea of the theory. While the traditional view was that the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat led through a long period of democracy, the theory of the permanent revolution established the fact that for backward countries the road to democracy passed through the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus democracy is not a regime that remains self-sufficient for decades, but is only a direct prelude to the socialist revolution. Each is bound to the other by an unbroken chain. Thus there is established between the democratic revolution and the socialist reconstruction of society a permanent state of revolutionary development.

The second aspect of the 'permanent' theory has to do with the socialist revolution as such. For an indefinitely long time and in constant internal struggle, all social relations undergo

transformation. Society keeps on changing its skin. Each stage of transformation stems directly from the preceding. This process necessarily retains a political character, that is, it develops through collisions between various groups in the society which is in transformation. Outbreaks of civil war and foreign wars alternate with periods of 'peaceful' reform. Revolutions in economy, technique, science, the family, morals and everyday life develop in complex reciprocal action and do not allow society to achieve equilibrium. Therein lies the permanent character of the socialist revolution as such.

The international character of the socialist revolution, which constitutes the third aspect of the theory of the permanent revolution, flows from the present state of economy and the social structure of humanity. Internationalism is no abstract principle but a theoretical and political reflection of the character of world economy, of the world development of productive forces and the world scale of the class struggle. The socialist revolution begins on national foundations - but it cannot be completed within these foundations. The maintenance of the proletarian revolution within a national framework can only be a provisional state of affairs, even though, as the experience of the Soviet Union shows, one of long duration. In an isolated proletarian dictatorship, the internal and external contradictions grow inevitably along with the successes achieved. If it remains isolated, the proletarian state must finally fall victim to these contradictions. The way out for it lies only in the victory of the proletariat of the advanced countries. Viewed from this standpoint, a national revolution is not a self-contained whole; it is only a link in the international chain. The international revolution constitutes a permanent process, despite temporary declines and ebbs. (Trotsky, 1929, Introduction to the First Russian Edition - the source used for this is: www.Marxists.org, where there are no page numbers)

The sources which will be used in the following exposition are *Results and Prospects*, which Trotsky wrote in 1907, and *The Permanent Revolution*, (Trotsky, 1931) which he wrote in 1928. He starts by stressing that capitalism in Russia was introduced by the state much more than growing up autonomously. Thanks to its geographical situation, the economic development of Russia was behind that in Western Europe, but the Russian state was potentially threatened by other European states. For this reason it built up its military capacity. In order to pay for this capacity it was impelled, from the end of the 17th century onwards, to accelerate Russia's economic development (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 232). The absolutist system developed a colossal army and railways which would enable it to move its forces rapidly from one end of the country to another, and a telegraph system to facilitate communication and command (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 260). Trotsky notes that the development of towns occurred rapidly

in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the urban population numbering just over 16 million or about 13% by 1897 (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 311). Manufacturing developed rapidly, but was largely a government-facilitated import from the West. The bourgeoisie was therefore more closely aligned with the czarist government than the Western bourgeoisie had been with pre-capitalist regimes. Moreover, the czarist government was very dependent on Western money markets, which meant that the Western capitalists were also supporters of the czarist regime in order to make sure that they received their interest (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 370). (The exposition in all of the above account of Russian development is very similar to that in Trotsky, 1973, pp. 1-26).

The proletariat became concentrated in enormous masses, while, as we have seen, the bourgeoisie was numerically small and isolated from the people (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 394). In Western Europe revolution had historically very much been bound up with the petty-bourgeoisie, but in Russia this class was numerically small and tending to be wiped out by the development of light industry. The role of the revolutionary class was taken instead by the urban proletariat (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 565).

Capitalist industry was relatively small in Russia compared to, for example, the United States. In Russia about 5 million persons were involved in capitalist industry, some 16% of the employed population, as against 6 million, or 22% of the working population of the United States. However, the overall population of Russia was twice that of the United States (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 616). Nonetheless, Trotsky emphasises that the towns have a strategic importance greater than one would imagine from the above because of the concentration of

industry and commerce in the towns and the way that they are linked to the provinces by railways (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 1095). Trotsky emphasises a point made by Kautsky that thanks to the above the Russian industrial proletariat is the only class which is really effective against absolutism; 'the peasants may render considerable support but cannot play a leading role' (Trotsky, 1907, doc 645).

In Russia 'the proletariat, on taking power, must, by the very logic of its position, inevitably be urged toward the introduction of state management of industry' (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 661). The proletariat would not be well advised to participate in a bourgeois democratic government, hedged in as it would be by a treacherous capitalist bourgeoisie and the wavering of the urban petty bourgeoisie, the diverse and primitive peasantry, and the variegated intelligentsia (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 694). However a post-revolutionary government is described, the hegemony must belong to the working class (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 704). The proletariat will 'stand before the peasants as the class which has emancipated it' (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 723). 'Historical experience shows that the peasantry are absolutely incapable of taking up an independent political role' (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 733). A 'proletarian and peasant dictatorship' is 'unrealisable - at least in the direct immediate sense' (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 752). He says that as the workers' government defines itself so 'the antagonism between the component sections [of the peasantry] will grow' (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 791). He sees the proletarian government gaining some support from the poor peasants, but appears to envisage a situation in which the government becomes opposed by the bulk of the peasantry 'the more definite and determined the policy of the proletariat in power becomes, the narrower and more shaky does the ground beneath its feet become' (Trotsky, 1907, loc. 806).

Later, he modifies this somewhat: he envisages the socialisation of production on expropriated large estates, followed, once it is properly established, by the prohibition of hired labour. Small capitalist farming would be impossible, but there would still be room for subsistence holdings, which would not be forcibly expropriated (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 1256). Nonetheless, he was obviously expecting considerable resistance. In particular, collectivism and internationalism will meet with opposition (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 812). While Marxists generally assumed that socialist revolution in one country would lead to a series of such revolutions elsewhere, Trotsky's view that the peasantry would in the main not support moves to socialism commits him to this view particularly strongly.

In 1905 and again in 1917 the Mensheviks and, initially in 1917 most of the Bolshevik leadership, assumed that the revolution would essentially stop at the bourgeois stage, with the abolition of the czarist monarchy, the introduction of a constitution, and with socialists remaining as a party of opposition to the bourgeois government. Trotsky disagreed strongly with this:

'But do you really believe,' the Stalins, Rykovs and all the other Molotovs objected dozens of times between 1905 and 1917, 'that Russia is ripe for the socialist revolution?' To that I always answered: No, I do not. But world economy as a whole, and European economy in the first place, is fully ripe for the socialist revolution. Whether the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia leads to socialism or not, and at what tempo and through what stages, will depend upon the fate of European and world capitalism. (Trotsky, 1929)

The above passage has an obvious immediate application: for a proletarian revolution to succeed in Russia in introducing socialism, revolution elsewhere is necessary. But further than this it seems to me quite vague: people in, say, the Belgian Congo were linked to the world economy in the sense that some of what they produced ended up traded in Europe and

the United States, but it hardly means the Congo itself was ready to become a socialist utopia. And the idea of the USA becoming a socialist society does not look plausible in either those years or subsequently. A socialist Germany would be more plausible, but exactly what relationship it would have with Russia is not immediately apparent. What quantities of free technology would become available? (See Thatcher, 2003, p. 135). And would a German revolution in turn be dependent upon revolutions in France and Britain - and could Spain, Italy and Holland be regarded as more marginal and inessential? A line of thinking typical of Trotsky follows from this: if the revolution was not going well in any one particular country the explanation was most likely the failure of revolution to develop somewhere else, and the most obvious explanation of such failures would be the revolutionary leadership given by established communist states.

By the late 1920s, when Trotsky was writing *The Permanent Revolution*, the Soviet Union was plainly not going to be immediately joined by other socialist states. Stalin's response to this was to proclaim the construction of socialism in one country. Trotsky argues at some length that 'National Socialism' as he calls it, will not work in complete isolation from the capitalist world. He argues that what should be done is:

A realistic program for an isolated workers' state cannot set itself the goal of achieving 'independence' from world economy, much less of constructing a national socialist society 'in the shortest time.' The task is not to attain the abstract maximum tempo, but the optimum tempo, that is, the best, that which follows from both internal and world economic conditions, strengthens the position of the proletariat, prepares the national elements of the future international socialist society, and at the same time, and above all, systematically improves the living standards of the proletariat and strengthens its alliance with the non-exploiting masses of the countryside. This prospect must remain in force for the whole preparatory period, that is, until the victorious revolution in the advanced countries liberates the Soviet Union from its present isolated position (Trotsky, 1929).

While this formula sounds sensible, it doesn't really have much by way of concrete content. For example, would it be possible to collectivise just some of the peasantry? What if the peasantry were not in a mood to supply the towns with agricultural produce?

There was some truth in the Stalinist criticism of Trotsky, but which would also apply to Luxemburg, that of the neglect of the peasantry. From Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* onwards, Lenin took the view that the bourgeois revolution in Russia would be achieved by the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, and that a subsequent socialist revolution would be achieved by the poor peasantry in alliance with the proletariat. The peasantry are thus very important in Lenin's thinking on revolution, and remained so subsequently. Their numerical preponderance in the population has already been noted above. The famous slogan of the Bolsheviks in 1917 'Bread, Peace and Land', reflects the view that land should be immediately redistributed in the countryside. The obvious socialist aspiration would be for some form of collective farming, but Lenin supported immediate land redistribution doubtless for practical reasons, but also because he wanted to indicate that the Bolsheviks were offering the peasants a genuine partnership by adopting the central policy of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. For this reason, insisting on the thorough subordination of the peasantry to the leadership of the proletariat, as argued by Trotsky, was potentially damaging to the development of the revolution.

What actually happened in the Soviet Union did not entirely vindicate either Trotsky or Lenin. Land was redistributed in the immediate aftermath of the October

Revolution, so that peasant holdings became much more equal than they had been. This equality was reinforced by the policy of War Communism, in which committees of small peasants were formed in the villages with a view to removing grain from kulaks who were allegedly hoarding it. With the introduction in 1921 of the New Economic Policy the Bolsheviki tacitly encouraged the differentiation of the peasantry. However, this had not advanced very much by the time of collectivisation at the end of the 1920s. The peasantry as a whole were reluctant to be collectivised. Peasants who resisted tended to be described as kulaks and shot, sent to labour camps, or packed into adapted cattle trucks and transported to Siberia, where they were expected to engage in farming despite a lack of proper implements or accommodation. This somewhat fits in with Trotsky's theory that the peasantry would resist a proletarian government as a whole, but the corollary on which he insisted, namely that the proletarian government would require support from abroad, was not pursued. Nonetheless, the Soviet government survived, and the rapid development of industry in the five year plans enabled the Soviet Union to field what was essentially a properly-equipped modern army against the German invasion.

Trotsky continues his 1907 exposition of the theory of permanent revolution with a series of thought experiments. The first of these is the issue of the eight-hour day, which was part of the minimum programme of social democracy. However, he says, in 'a period of intensified class passion' the capitalists would resist, for example, through lockouts and the closing down of factories (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 828). This would lead on to the expropriation of the closed factories (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 837). The next example he considers is the question of unemployment - a proletarian government

would take energetic measures to solve this question (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 847). This would again lead to capitalist resistance and the introduction of communal production (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 857). So, problems with the peasantry, the issue of the eight hour day, and unemployment, all lead in the direction of the implementation of a maximum programme and the introduction collective forms of production:

For this reason there can be no talk of any sort of special form of proletarian dictatorship in the bourgeois revolution, of democratic proletarian dictatorship (or dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry). The working class cannot preserve the democratic character of its dictatorship without refraining from overstepping the limits of its democratic programme (Trotsky, 1907, Loc. 866). [There seems to be a problem with the translation of this passage - the last sentence says the opposite of what Trotsky plainly means.]

Was it the case, as argued by Trotsky, that revolution in Russia would either fail or would go beyond the achievement of bourgeois freedoms, and would move on to socialist revolution, which in turn would become international? Given what actually happened under the New Economic Policy from 1921 up to the late 1920s, another possibility would be for a proletarian government to do some kind of a deal with the capitalists. It was not forced to proceed immediately to the implementation of its maximum programme. Did Lenin it simply come to agree with Trotsky about this in 1917, or was this some sort of temporary agreement, more apparent than real?

Given that Lenin could quite frequently be scathing about Trotsky this degree of happy harmony would seem to be exaggerated. There had been quite a lot of bad blood between them in the years before the Revolution. It will be recalled that Trotsky denounced Lenin's "substitutionism" following the Second Congress in 1902. Trotsky then stood outside the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions, attempting to bring them together. In 1910 Lenin commented that Trotsky had joined

forces with the liquidationists: “we agree with Plekhanov that it is impossible to do anything with Trotsky” (Thatcher, 2003, p. 52). Geras’s picture of a fair degree of harmony between Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg is rather undermined by the letter she sent to Karl Kautsky’s wife in which she comments that Trotsky was accusing the Bolsheviks of being splitters, but saying nothing about Martov’s pamphlet against Lenin, which was worse than anything Lenin had written about him, and obviously aimed at splitting the party. “The good Trotsky is more and more exposed as a rotten fellow” (Thatcher, 2003, p. 56). Trotsky and the Bolsheviks fell out over attempts to unite the anti-War left, leading Trotsky to describe Lenin as “a terribly egocentric person” and Trotsky’s thought to be described by the Bolsheviks as the most “vacuous and unprincipled ever to have existed in Russian Social Democracy” (Thatcher, 2003, p. 75).

It is worth unpicking this a bit further. There is a view that Lenin engaged in a piece of revolutionary opportunism (as opposed to the sort of opportunism which Lenin deplored) in 1917, and that the logic of his position prior to that point was that what was possible in Russia was a bourgeois democratic revolution, which would be followed by a period of capitalist development presided over by a government which represented “the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, with a subsequent socialist revolution based on the poor peasantry and working class. He reverted to a view on these lines in 1921 with the introduction of the New Economic Policy, in capitalist development would be encouraged both in the towns and countryside with a view to developing the forces of production sufficiently to make a socialist revolution possible. This is distinct from the happy harmony between Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, in which they all came to believe in something on the lines of the theory of permanent

revolution by 1917. In particular, prior to 1917, all Marxists including Marx and Engels had taken the view that a revolution in one country would be followed by of revolutions in the leading capitalist countries. In point of fact the only successful socialist revolution up to the Second World War was that in Mongolia, which was by no stretch of the imagination a leading capitalist country.

The Soviet Union, as it became, emerged in the course of the bitter Civil War in which the Bolsheviks fought off counter-revolutionary Whites, who were aided by forces sent by a variety of capitalist countries. There was certainly instability in several capitalist countries, such as Germany in 1921 and 1923, a temporary socialist government in Hungary, the General Strike in Britain, etc., but not the hoped-for series of revolutions. This in turn led to the issue of what the Russian leadership should do. Trotsky took the view that the Stalinist leadership had become bureaucratized, and was no longer seriously interested in revolution elsewhere. Whenever there was something that looked like a revolutionary opportunity abroad, Trotsky argued that it was not developed properly because of the failure of the Stalinist leadership. The extent to which this was true has been much debated. Several of these “opportunities” are not particularly plausible. The one with which British people are obviously most familiar is the General Strike, but the idea that this was a genuine revolutionary opportunity is not very plausible.

Ian Thatcher makes several judicious comments on this theme of over-optimism: “Trotsky does not seem to have been a particularly sagacious commentator on the likely spread of proletarian revolution. His prognoses were consistently over-optimistic”. Thatcher mentions Trotsky’s belief that the murder of Rosa Luxemburg showed that Germany’s October

was soon at hand, and his idea that Bolshevism could be readily exported to India in 1919 (Thatcher, 2003, p. 111).

If it is accepted that there were not serious revolutionary opportunities, the question obviously arises as to what the Soviet leadership should do. They would plainly be a need for stabilising relationships with the Western capitalist countries. This might not mean permanent stabilisation in either direction, but something sufficient to allow a modicum of trade, and for both sides to feel that there was no immediate danger of war to spread the revolution, or, on the Soviet side, invasion or major destabilisation. The other very important activity was to build up the forces of production in the Soviet Union, notably, of course, through industrialisation.

At this point it is appropriate to take a closer look at *The Permanent Revolution*. One would think that, given Stalin's increasing dominance in the late 1920s, and obvious text to go through and carefully critique would be Stalin's *Problems of Leninism*. However, Trotsky basically insults this text and then moves on to spend a great deal of time discussing work by Radek:

Stalin's *Problems of Leninism* constitutes a codification of this ideological garbage, an official manual of narrow-mindedness, an anthology of enumerated banalities (I am doing my best to find the most moderate designations possible) (Trotsky, 1931 - see www.Marxists.org - there are no page references).

He is keen, of course, to emphasise the degree to which he and Lenin were in agreement, and it is obviously particularly proud of the following:

Still more noteworthy in this respect is Lenin's speech at the November 1 (14), 1917, session of the Petrograd Committee. [8] There the question was discussed, whether to make an

agreement with the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries. The supporters of a coalition endeavoured even there - very timidly, to be sure - to hint at 'Trotskyism'. What did Lenin reply?

'Agreement? I cannot even speak seriously about that. Trotsky has long ago said that unity is impossible. Trotsky understood this - and since then there has been no better Bolshevik.' (Trotsky, 1931).

Obviously, following the death of Lenin, all the Soviet leaders were keen to emphasise the Leninist pedigree of the theories and their politics, and the above quotation is one of the strongest ones in Trotsky's favour. It needs to be borne in mind that Trotsky had a long history in the years leading up to the revolution of working in exile to try to unite the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions of the RSDLP, while others such as Stalin had been risking their lives and freedom working in the Bolshevik underground inside the Russian Empire. Lenin was happy to support Trotsky for his outstanding organisational abilities and his ability to inspire the masses.

Just because there was "no better Bolshevik" it does not follow that Lenin subsequently always agreed with Trotsky. Trotsky himself felt that every minor disagreement he had had with Lenin was being raked up by Stalin and others in order to discredit him. In the period which led up to the New Economic Policy, Trotsky had proposed the absorption of the trade unions into the apparatus of the Soviet state, once his earlier proposal for something on the lines of the NEP had been rejected. Lenin commented on Trotsky's pamphlet:

My principal material is Comrade Trotsky's pamphlet, *The Role and Tasks of the Trade Unions*. When I compare it with the theses he submitted to the Central Committee, and go over it very carefully, I am amazed at the number of theoretical mistakes and glaring blunders it contains. How could anyone starting a big Party discussion on this question produce such a sorry excuse for a carefully thought out statement? Let me go over the main points which, I think, contain the original fundamental theoretical errors (Lenin, 1920, *Collected Works*, Volume 32)

However, once Lenin had died, Trotsky came to be seen as possibly less reliable than other figures. All the Russian revolutionaries looked back to the great French Revolution of 1789 for precedents. In particular, the Bolsheviks were anxious about the possible emergence of a figure equivalent to Napoleon, a dictator who would encapsulate some of the original aims of the revolution, but would dramatically alter its character. Of the various leaders Trotsky looked to others to be the one most likely to fit the bill.

Trotsky expresses another point of agreement with Lenin, which he obviously felt was a trump card, as follows:

Lenin did not confine himself to hope for 'pressure' by the proletariat, but repeatedly asserted that without revolution in Germany we should certainly perish. This was correct in essence, although a greater period of time has intervened. Let there be no illusions; we have received an undated moratorium. We live, as before, under the conditions of a 'breathing-space' (Trotsky, 1931)

The above is a sample quotation - Trotsky refers to Lenin making this point repeatedly. Trotsky also expresses agreement with Lenin in counselling against coups d'état by supporters in the West which had little chance of success, but which were intended to give support to the Russian revolution. By the time Trotsky was writing in 1928 there had been a seven year breathing space since the defeat of the interventions in the Civil War. If revolution elsewhere was not an immediate prospect, what were the Russian Communists supposed to do? The obvious answer, as indicated above, would surely be to build up the forces of production, thus strengthening the USSR, and laying the foundations of socialism. Another way of putting this might be starting to build socialism in one country. This is what Stalin claimed to be doing, but he did not claim that it was possible to complete the building of socialism in one country. Also, a mission of this sort would give meaning to the

Bolshevik enterprise in a time when revolution elsewhere was not forthcoming. This in turn would suggest that Trotsky should have devoted most of his efforts to explaining why this idea of Stalin's was a bad one. Also, in the circumstances of the "breathing space" the issue of relationships between the proletariat and the peasantry would be particularly important.

Towards the end of *The Permanent Revolution* Trotsky warns that the only way to ensure against imperialist intervention is to encourage Western parties to apply themselves to the class struggle, rather than, as the Stalinists were doing, attempting to neutralise the Western bourgeoisie. If revolution was not really any immediate prospect in the West, there might surely not be very much significant difference between these two. Trotsky is much admired for his literary abilities, but it seems to me that sometimes literary flourishes take the place of argument, as in the following quotation: 'Everything that happens in the world happens for the purpose of war. War is now no longer an instrument of the bourgeois regime; the bourgeois regime is an instrument of war.' What could this really mean? Nations can be taken over by war fever, as in the run-up to the First World War, but unless Trotsky had something like that in mind the quotation does not make any sense - war is something that people, or, if you like, social classes make. Another example could be drawn from his analysis of German National Socialism. Having said a little about Nazi racism he continues:

Everything that should have been eliminated from the National organism in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism (Trotsky, 1975, p. 413).

We now return to the issue of the peasantry.

Problems of Leninism was part of Stalin's attempt to present himself as an orthodox follower of Lenin. It seems to me to present many of the central features of Lenin's ideas in a relatively pedestrian but very clear fashion. In particular, Stalin is keen to emphasise that the peasantry should be seen as the 'first reserves' of the proletariat, and he generally echoes Lenin's approach as outlined above.

In *The Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky quotes Lenin as follows:

In 1907, Lenin wrote:

'It is possible ... that the objective difficulties of a political unification of the petty bourgeoisie will check the formation of such a party and leave the peasant democracy for a long time in the present state of a spongy, shapeless, pulpy, Trudoviki-like [\[5\]](#) mass.' (VIII, 484 [\[6\]](#))

In 1909, Lenin expressed himself on the same theme in a different way:

'There is not the slightest doubt that a revolution which reaches ... so high a degree of development as the revolutionary dictatorship will create a more firmly-formed and more powerful revolutionary peasant party. To judge the matter otherwise would mean to assume that in a grown-up man, the size, form and degree of development of certain essential organs could remain in a childish state.' (XI, Part 1, 230 [\[7\]](#))

The obvious interpretation of the above is that Lenin is forecasting the increasingly better organisation of the Socialist Revolutionary Party as the representative of the peasants. Trotsky immediately states that the assumptions in the above quotation were not borne out. His point is that the Socialist Revolutionary Party became for a time the party of the overwhelming majority of the peasants, but then betrayed them by siding with the bourgeoisie against the peasantry in 1917.

Trotsky is able to find quotations from his own work which are more similar to the idea of Lenin, such as the following, but this seems to me to go against the general run of the theory of permanent revolution, which sees the proletariat in power forced to turn to socialist measures and to revolution overseas. Here is the quotation:

The proletariat will find itself compelled to carry the class struggle into the villages and in this manner destroy the community of interest which is undoubtedly to be found among all peasants, although within comparatively narrow limits. From the very first moment after its taking power, the proletariat will have to find support in the antagonisms between the village poor and the village rich, between the agricultural proletariat and the agricultural bourgeoisie.' (Our Revolution, 1906, p.255 [\[3\]](#)) (Trotsky, 1931).

Much of the discussion in *The Permanent Revolution* is taken up with the disaster which occurred in China in 1927. Trotsky attributes the disaster to Chinese adherence to Stalinist advice from Moscow aimed at encouraging a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, and thus the subordination of the Communist Party to the treachery of Chiang Kai-shek. There is no doubt that Stalin’s policies were disastrous. What is less clear is whether Trotsky’s would have worked any better, or whether Chiang was in such a powerful position that he could have purged communists however they were organised and whatever slogans they adopted. It is open to question to what extent any of the Russian leadership fully grasped Chinese realities. Part of Trotsky’s contribution reads as follows:

But in the words just quoted there was nevertheless a kernel of truth: there is almost no estate of landlords in China, the landowners are much more intimately bound up with the capitalists than in Tsarist Russia, and the specific weight of the agrarian question in China is therefore much lighter than in Tsarist Russia; but on the other hand, the question of national liberation bulks very large (Trotsky, 1931)

Based on what actually happened in 1949, the Chinese Revolution basically comprised a very effective peasant revolution led by a Communist Party dedicated to building industry and to national liberation. So, while the issue of national liberation was certainly very important, the idea that “the agrarian question China is... much lighter than in czarist Russia” seems very wide of the mark. The theory of permanent revolution does not seem to offer much of an advance on its Stalinist rival where China was concerned.

Trotsky and politics.

This brief section is a summary of some points which appear elsewhere in the paper. Following Lenin's death, the other Bolsheviks, following the analogy of the French revolution, became worried about who might become Napoleon, and Trotsky seemed the most likely candidate. Given his history of standing outside the Bolshevik party only to join in 1917 he should have realised his vulnerability, and spent more time reassuring others that he simply wanted to be part of a collective leadership. He also does not seem to have realised the importance of the internal organisation of the party, meaning, particularly, that Stalin was in a position to make sure that his supporters occupied important positions. His arrogance must also have been an issue - he was famous for getting out a French novel and reading it during what he deemed to be over-lengthy reports to meetings he was chairing. This must have conveyed the idea that he has a high sense of his own importance, and left whoever was giving the report feeling embittered and humiliated.

More generally, his subsequent political judgements did not stand him in good stead, be it wild over-optimism about the prospects of revolutions in an assortment of countries, or the possibilities of the opposition inside the Soviet Union following the complete triumph of Stalin, at a time when Trotsky's followers had been executed or were in labour camps.

Democracy and terror.

As we saw the above, Geras, following Rosa Luxemburg, was committed to the idea of multi-party democracy under socialism. The argument here will be that neither Trotsky nor Lenin was committed to this. Czarist Russia was not fertile

ground for the growth of democracy. There seems no real prospect of replacing the regime peacefully. Political parties tended to be made illegal. Thus virtually all political parties were in some sense revolutionary. There was general agreement in socialist circles with Lenin's judgement in *What is to be Done?* that an effective party would have to be centralised, and that straightforward open elections to party offices on Western model would simply be a gift to the secret police. This background was hardly conducive to the flowering of multi-party democracy after the October Revolution. There was no tradition of loyal opposition, of stable constitutional government, of freedom of the press, of free and open elections, or, in the case of the Bolshevik party, of what is normally understood as internal party democracy.

The crucial year where the issue of democracy is concerned is 1921. With the ending of the Civil War the peasantry, who had now got their land, had less reason to be loyal to the Bolshevik party, as the Whites generally wanted to re-appropriate landlord land, but they had now departed from the scene. The direct appropriation of peasant produce on the pattern of War Communism was increasingly seen as intolerable - why grow things only to have them taken away? The most class conscious parts of the working class tended to have disappeared, either by being killed during the Civil War or by becoming part of the new administrative apparatus. Thus there was a communist government lacking the strong working class base on which it had come to power, facing a mutinous peasantry. This was a very dangerous situation.

The danger was made particularly clear by the Kronstadt uprising of March 1921. The Kronstadt sailors had been a mainstay of the October Revolution, but now, sympathising with fairly similar demands put forward by workers in

Petrograd, they advanced a series of demands to the Soviet government:

(1) In view of the fact that the present Soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants, immediately to hold new elections by secret ballot, the pre-election campaign to have full freedom of agitation among the workers and peasants; (2) To establish freedom of speech and press for workers and peasants, for Anarchists and left Socialist parties; (3) To secure freedom of assembly for labour unions and peasant organisations; (4) To call a nonpartisan Conference of the workers, Red Army soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt, and of Petrograd Province, no later than March 10, 1921; (5) To liberate all political prisoners of Socialist parties, as well as all workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors imprisoned in connection with the labour and peasant movements; (6) To elect a Commission to review the cases of those held in prisons and concentration camps; (7) To abolish all politotdeli (political bureaus) because no party should be given special privileges in the propagation of its ideas or receive the financial support of the government for such purposes. Instead there should be established educational and cultural commissions, locally elected and financed by the government; (8) To abolish immediately all zagryaditelniye otryadi; (* Armed units organised by the Bolsheviks for the purpose of suppressing traffic and confiscating foodstuffs and other products. The irresponsibility and arbitrariness of their methods were proverbial throughout the country. The government abolished them in the Petrograd Province on the eve of its attack against Kronstadt – a bribe to the Petrograd proletariat. A. B.) (9) To equalise the rations of all who work, with the exception of those employed in trades detrimental to health; (10) To abolish the Communist fighting detachments in all branches of the Army, as well as the Communist guards kept on duty in mills and factories. Should such guards or military detachments be found necessary, they are to be appointed in the Army from the ranks, and in the factories according to the judgment of the workers; (11) To give the peasants full freedom of action in regard to their land, and also the right to keep cattle, on condition that the peasants manage with their own means; that is, without employing hired labour; (12) To request all branches of the Army, as well as our comrades the military kursanti, to concur in our resolutions; (13) To demand that the press give the fullest publicity to our resolutions; (14) To appoint a Travelling Commission of Control; (15) To permit free kustarnoye (individual small-scale) production by one's own efforts (Berkman, 2013, Locations 1667-1696)

Berkman, from whose *The Russian Tragedy* this quotation is taken, was an American anarchist who had served a lengthy prison sentence for a political assassination. He came to Russia as a sympathiser of the October revolution, but became disillusioned by the requisitioning of peasant produce by force, the imprisonment and execution of socialists and anarchists who sympathised with the revolution but disagreed with the Bolsheviks, the reintroduction of capitalism under the NEP, and the use of terror against the working class, the bolshevisation of the Soviets and trade unions, the use of

intimidation at election times et cetera. The Kronstadt sailors were expressing a set of demands which would have been generally pretty popular across Russia, particularly amongst the more politically conscious supporters of the revolution. Alarming for the Bolsheviks they talked in terms of a third revolution against the Bolshevik tyranny.

Lenin and Trotsky denounced the Kronstadt sailors as tools of former czarist generals and the Socialist Revolutionaries (Berkman, 2013, location 1754). Petrograd was “cleaned up” - strikes were prohibited, there were numerous arrests, and the families of Kronstadt sailors were taken into custody as hostages (Berkman, 2013, location 1810). According to Berkman Zinoviev was given the task of making a series of lying speeches in which he denounced the Kronstadt sailors in libellous and inaccurate terms (Berkman, 2013, location 2010). Trotsky and Kamenev issued a proclamation denouncing the Kronstadt sailors as counterrevolutionary mutineers and threatening them with military action. As Trotsky puts it “I’ll shoot you like pheasants” (Berkman, *ibid.*). The Communist forces attacked across the ice and with an artillery bombardment. When they were successful an extensive massacre of the Kronstadt population, including women and even children followed. Numerous sailors were imprisoned and systematically shot; the remainder were dispatched to particularly nasty labour camps.

The 10th party Congress was held against this background. Concessions were made to popular discontent in the form of the introduction of the New Economic Policy, involving a limited reversion to capitalism. There was a recognition within the party that it faced a very dangerous situation, and that internal divisions could lead to disaster. Trotsky supported Lenin in his call for a ban on factions. Groups were allowed -

however, one gets the impression that you are part of a faction whereas I am part of a group. Members of the Central Committee could be expelled for factionalism. Indeed, two thirds of the Central Committee could expel the other one third for factionalism. The first purge was instituted and just under a quarter of the party were expelled.

At the 11th party Congress, held in 1922, Lenin pursued the same theme that unity and discipline is particularly important in a situation of retreat, and had this to say about relationships with Mensheviks:

And the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, all of whom preach this sort of thing, are astonished when we declare that we shall shoot people for such things. They are amazed; but surely it is clear. When an army is in retreat a hundred times more discipline is required than when it is advancing, because during an advance everybody presses forward. If everybody started rushing back now, it would spell immediate and inevitable disaster.

The most important thing at such a moment is to retreat in good order, to fix the precise limits of the retreat, and not to give way to panic. And when a Menshevik says, "You are now retreating; I have been advocating retreat all the time, I agree with you, I am your man, let us retreat together," we say in reply, "For the public manifestations of Menshevism our revolutionary courts must pass the death sentence, otherwise they are not our courts, but God knows what."

They cannot understand this and exclaim: "What dictatorial manners these people have!" They still think we are persecuting the Mensheviks because they fought us in Geneva.^[4] But had we done that we should have been unable to hold power even for two months. Indeed, the sermons which Otto Bauer, the leaders of the Second and Two-and-a Half Internationals, the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries preach express their true nature—"The revolution has gone too far. What you are saying now we have been saying all the time, permit us to say it again." But we say in reply: "Permit us to put you before a firing squad for saying that. Either you refrain from expressing your views, or, if you insist on expressing your political views publicly in the present circumstances, when our position is far more difficult than it was when the whiteguards were directly attacking us, then you will have only yourselves to blame if we treat you as the worst and most pernicious whiteguard elements." (Lenin, 1922)

This is not exactly multi-party socialism. Another worry about the dangers of retreat was expressed as follows:

The deviations towards the bad side are the abuses committed by former government officials, landowners, bourgeois and other scum who play up to the Communists and who sometimes commit abominable outrages and acts of tyranny against the peasantry. This calls for a terrorist purge, summary trial and the firing squad (Lenin, 1921).

Lenin's concern with the dangers of retreat was also reflected in his views about the People's Commissariat for Justice:

But where is the noise about *model trials* of the scoundrels abusing the New Economic Policy? There is no such noise, because there are no such trials. The P.C.J. has "forgotten" that that is its business, that it is its duty to pull up, shake up and rouse the people's courts and teach them to be *ruthless and swift* in chastising—*with every means, including the firing squad*—for abuse of the New Economic Policy. *It* is responsible for this. There is no evidence of any vibrant activity in this sphere on the part of the P.C.J., because there is no such activity (Lenin, 1924)

Note the proposal is effectively show trials complete with the death penalty.

In 1922 the GPU was allowed to investigate party misconduct. Towards the end of his life Lenin arranged for the definition of treason in the penal code to include conduct which would objectively assist the enemies of the Soviet Union, and, of course, treason carried the death penalty. This provision is particularly alarming - criticising the government, making jokes about the leadership, slacking at work could all be seen as objectively assisting the enemies of the Soviet Union.

The other political parties had already been banned because they had been involved in coups or conspiracies against the Bolsheviks - thanks to the behaviour of the czars, Russia had not developed a tradition of loyal opposition.

This is hardly an atmosphere conducive to the sort of socialist democracy advocated by Geras or Rosa Luxemburg. Trotsky himself, when out of power around 1930 called for the election of party officials by the secret ballot and the convening of a genuine party conference (Thatcher, 2003, p 172). There is a major problem about this, which was to haunt the Soviet Union right down to the days of Gorbachev. Imagine, for a very implausible minute, a successful Communist revolution in

Britain and the installation of a single party state. If people were allowed to form groups or factions within the ruling party it would not be long before conservative, social democratic, Scottish Nationalist etc. groupings emerged, and something resembling multi-party democracy and started to re-form. If there is an insistence on ideological homogeneity, on the other hand, things point towards the emergence of a small ruling group at the centre. In the Soviet Union this dilemma was eventually resolved by the complete breakdown of the system. There is a further problem which is inherent in the Soviet version of a planned economy, that it might well be possible to set overall economic priorities within a democratic framework - to some extent this occurs in democratic elections within capitalist societies. However, the sort of detailed economic planning required to decide exactly what should be done in particular factories et cetera is hardly amenable to thorough discussion by an elected assembly (there is a brief discussion of the problems of democratic planning in Thatcher, 2003, pp. 174-5).

The above evidence on Lenin's restriction of democracy and willingness to use terror was available back in the 1970s when Geras was writing the material under discussion. It is reinforced by evidence from the recent biography by Robert Service, which benefits from the opening of archives following the demise of the USSR. Service details a series of issues and episodes which suggested Lenin's potential for ruthlessness. There was his hostility to the idea of famine relief in the Volga famine of 1891-2, on the grounds that peasant suffering was inevitable under capitalism and the czarist regime (Service, 2008, location 1880). There was the admiration for Tkachëv, who glorified mass terror in order to inaugurate a post-revolutionary state in *What is to be Done?* (Service, 2008,

location 2882). Among the slogans Lenin put forward at the Third Party Congress in 1905 was ‘mass terror’ in defence of the revolution (Service, 2008, location 3478). As early as October 27, 1917, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Lenin signed a decree allowing for the closure of newspapers which published anti-government material or significantly distorted facts (Service, 2008, location 6288). In December 1917 the secret police (Cheka) was created and given a very free hand. In January 1918 a decree on food procurement provided for the shooting of speculators on the spot, and the government set about eliminating Soviets which had been unwise enough to elect Mensheviks (Service, 2008, location 6878).

As part of the Red Army’s advance into Poland with a view to spreading the revolution westwards, Lenin put forward the following plan to Trotsky’s deputy:

A beautiful plan. Finish it off together with Dzierżyński. Disguised as “Greens” (we’ll heap the blame on them afterwards) we’ll advance 10–20 versts and hang the kulaks, priests, landed gentry. 100,000 rubles prize for each one of them that is hanged (Service, 2008, location 8022).

As Service points out, hanging priests was hardly likely to be popular with the Poles. We have seen above that Lenin placed considerable emphasis the need to preserve unity in the Bolshevik party at the time of the introduction of the NEP in 1921. At the same time he emphasised that it was necessary to maintain firm government. Reacting to a proposal from Kamenev that the justice system should become more open, he responded:

‘Bandits’ should be shot on the spot. ‘The speed and force of the repressions’ should be intensified. Any constitutional or legislative reforms should be formulated in such a fashion as to sanction the possibility of the death penalty being applied in cases involving ‘all aspects of activity by Mensheviks, S[ocialist]-R[evolutionaries], etc.’ [Service continues] He gave a warning that the regime should not be ‘caught napping by a second Kronstadt’. The Civil Code, he suggested, should enshrine ‘the essence and justification of terror’. The peasant rebels of

Tambov and elsewhere were still being attacked and quelled by the Red Army. In Georgia, the remnants of national resistance to the communists continued to be forcibly eliminated. Arrests of known officers of the White armies were still being carried out. Repression was conducted in abundance in the lands of 'Soviet power'. But Lenin wanted the scope widened. In the first months of 1922 he advocated the final eradication of all remaining threats, real or potential, to his state. For Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks he demanded the staging of show trials followed by exemplary severe punishment. For the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy, or for a substantial section of it, he demanded the same. (Service, 2008, location 8618).

He was successful in getting a show trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, but not of the Mensheviks, and a show trial of leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church at which the death penalty was imposed. In terms of terror, Lenin's legacy is the setting up of the fundamentals for something on the lines of a collective Stalinist terror.

The Geras view of Trotsky appears vindicated by the following quotation, written by Trotsky in the early 1930s:

In order to better understand the character of the present Soviet Union.. let us assume first that the Soviet bureaucracy is overthrown by a revolutionary party having all the attributes of the old Bolshevism, enriched for over by the world experience of the recent period. Such a party would begin with the restoration of democracy in the trade unions and the Soviets. It would be able to, and would have two, restore freedom of Soviet parties. Together with the masses, and at their head, it would carry out a ruthless purgation of the state apparatus.. It would give the youth free opportunity to think independently, learn, criticise and grow (Trotsky, 1967, p. 252)

Service points out that it is not clear how Trotsky would actually have implemented these aims in the very unlikely event of his recall to lead the Soviet Union. This is particularly unclear in the light of previous support for terror and restrictions of democracy, as will be seen from the examples that follow.

Trotsky's ruthlessness, in dealing with the Kronstadt revolt, where the sailors stood for values very similar to those in the previous quotation, has already been discussed.

Almost certainly, this is not a matter of Trotsky's creative genius alone, but he was an early proponent of the use of concentration camps:

As early as 4 June 1918, Trotsky called for a group of unruly Czech war prisoners to be pacified, disarmed, and placed in a *kontslager*: a concentration camp. Twelve days later, in a memorandum addressed to the Soviet government, Trotsky again spoke of concentration camps, outdoor prisons in which 'the city and village bourgeoisie ... shall be mobilized and organized into rear-service battalions to do menial work (cleaning barracks, camps, streets, digging trenches, etc) (Appelbaum, 2012, location 766).

As Commissar of War during the civil war, Trotsky's way of dealing with the problem of encouraging soldiers to fight was by ordering the shooting of every 10th man of units refusing to fight (Thatcher, 2003. p. 102). In another famous incident during the Civil War he was felt to have crossed a line by ordering the execution of a Bolshevik commissar. The incident concerned a:

certain Panteleev who was commissar of the 2nd Numerny Petrograd Regiment. When the battle around Sviyazhsk appeared to be going against the Reds, Panteleev and his men commandeered a steam-ship trying to escape upriver to Nizhni Novgorod. The vessel was boarded by other Red units and the fugitives were arrested. Trotsky ordered their summary execution (Service, 2010, location 4753).

Summarising Bolshevik ruthlessness during the civil war, Service comments:

They had shot innocent hostages. They had stripped large social groups of their civil rights. They had glorified terrorist ideas and gloried in their application. The Bolshevik party had treated even workers and peasants savagely whenever they had engaged in active opposition (Service, 2010, location 5656).

There are other examples of ruthlessness, however. Addressing the Kronstadt sailors in 1917 he said:

I tell you heads must roll, blood must flow . . . The strength of the French Revolution was in the machine that made the enemies of the people shorter by a head. This is a fine device. We must have it in every city (Service, 2010, location 3741).

Following the assassination attempt on Lenin fully approved the use of red terror involving the imprisonment of several thousand members of the middle and upper classes, some of whom were immediately shot and others were held as hostages (Service, 2010, location 4767). Trotsky went along with Lenin's call for a show trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1922 with a bloodthirsty speech (Service, 2010, location 6213).

Trotsky's ruthlessness must have stemmed in part from an unrealistically utopian belief in the socialist future:

Man will become incomparably stronger, more intelligent, more subtle. His body will be more harmonious, his movements more rhythmical, his voice more musical; the forms of daily existence will acquire a dynamic theatricality. The average human type will rise to the level of Aristotle, Goethe, Marx. It is above this ridge that new summits will rise (Service, 2010, location 6593).

It also stems from a view of morality which contrasts with views taken later by Geras:

Civilisation can only be saved by the socialist revolution. To accomplish the overturn, the proletariat needs all its strength, all its resolution, all its audacity, passion and ruthlessness. Above all it must be completely free from the fictions of religion, 'democracy' and transcendental morality - the spiritual chains forged by the enemy to tame it and enslave it. Only that which prepares the complete and final overthrow of imperialist bestiality is moral, and nothing else. The welfare of the revolution - that is the supreme law! (Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, quoted in Service, 2010, location 9798).

If Trotsky seriously meant exactly what he says in the above passage, then absolutely anything is acceptable, provided the outcome is the success of the revolution.

The rise of fascism.

Geras is not alone in praising Trotsky for his perspicuity in raising the alarm about the rise of fascism at a time when the Comintern policy was that of "class against class", meaning that

the social democrats and the fascists by just as bad as each other. In contrast to this, as is well known, Trotsky favoured a united front of communists and social democrats. He makes it clear, though, that this is to facilitate revolution:

Capitalist society, particularly in Germany, has been on the eve of collapse several times in the last decade and a half; but each time it emerged from the catastrophe (Trotsky, 1975, p. 69).

There had been a revolutionary situation in Germany in 1923, but Stalin and his followers had urged restraint (Trotsky, 1975, p. 75). Writing on Germany and the international situation in 1931 Trotsky described the situation in both Spain and Britain as pre-revolutionary (Trotsky, 1975, p. 79). Revolution in Germany would lead readily to revolution in France (Trotsky, 1975, p. 81). A revolutionary conflagration was likely in the United States and Japan (Trotsky, 1975, p. 83). Turning to Germany:

For us, the Communist Party is the subjective factor: the Social Democracy is an objective obstacle that must be swept away. Fascism would actually fall to pieces if the Communist Party were able to unite the working class (Trotsky, 1975, p. 86). Cf. The moment that the masses are separated from the reformist leadership, any agreement with the latter loses all meaning. To perpetuate the left front would be to misunderstand the dialectical revolutionary struggle... from the united front in the name of defence to the conquest of power under the banner of Communism (Trotsky, 1975, p. 234).

Would a Social Democrat find this prognosis of the outcome of a united front particularly attractive? His party is scheduled to be swept away as part of a wildly optimistic forecast of revolution all over the place. And, following successful revolution, he is promised a fate similar to that of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks in Russia (Trotsky, 1975, p. 108). Perhaps he would escape this fate because, like the majority of Social Democratic workers he will turn to revolution (Trotsky, 1975, p. 122). Without going into detail, he might also have reservations about Trotsky's very free use of

the term Bonapartism, with a variety of regimes being described as Bonapartist, semi-Bonapartist and so forth. Another theme in Trotsky, and certainly in subsequent Trotskyism, such as that of the Socialist Workers Party, is that the leadership of parties and trade unions is conservative, while the rank and file are willing to begin the struggle (see for example Trotsky, 1975, p. 361). There may well be some truth in this on occasion, but in organisations which are internally democratic the leadership may very well simply reflect the will of the membership.

Certainly, some of Trotsky's assessment of Germany looks prophetic - he forecasts that the coming to power of the National Socialists would involve 'the extermination of the flower of the German proletariat... the hellish work of Italian fascism would probably appear as a pale and almost humane experiment in comparison with the work of the German National Socialists'. He also thinks that a fascist Germany would attack the USSR (Trotsky, 1975, pp. 89-91).

Once Hitler was properly installed, the Comintern dropped the disastrous class against class policy and instead promoted a united front comprising anybody opposed to fascism. Of all the policies adopted this is arguably the one with the best prospect of success, although, manifestly, it was adopted far too late. Neither Trotsky nor Stalin seem to have realised the extent of support in Germany for Hitler, which included large numbers of workers as well as the petty bourgeoisie and the monopoly capitalists they rightly saw as important. Given that, it is debatable whether Trotsky's policy or either of those coming from Stalin would have stopped the rise of Hitler. A further comment about the disastrous Stalinist policy of regarding the fascists and social democrats as twins, and being foolishly unconcerned about the triumph of fascism. Fascism in Italy was certainly disastrous for the Italian left, but the

depths of the disaster were not nearly as serious and dramatic as those in Nazi Germany. More generally, fascist regimes apart from Nazi Germany have generally been extremely bad for the left, but not as drastic as Nazi Germany.

Stalin emerged as a dictator from around 1928 onwards. He undertook a variety of sometimes startling changes of policy. Some of these made it difficult for Trotsky to keep up with him. The policy of incorporating the peasants into collective farms had been advocated by Trotsky, but he severely underestimated the depths of peasant resistance, and it is an interesting question as to what Trotsky himself would have done faced with the crisis of the late 1920s. The brutal way in which resistance was crushed was a major source of the expansion of the Gulag. Trotsky's theory was that Stalin was a representative of the Soviet bureaucracy. However, for a representative of the bureaucracy he sent surprisingly many bureaucrats to prisons and labour camps. Rather than representing bureaucratic stability, with the development of the Five Year Plans starting in the early 1930s, he became involved in the dramatic and bloody collectivisation of the peasantry, and in the development of industry at what was arguably excessive speed. Trotsky was, of course, assassinated by a Stalinist agent well before the end of the Second World War, and therefore was not in a position to discuss the extension of communism to Eastern Europe. It is, of course, arguable as to whether the planned societies which emerged had any resemblance to socialism or communism as envisaged by Marx and Engels, but the idea that the Soviet leadership had lost all interest in the development of communism elsewhere was plainly false.

Conclusion on Trotsky.

Given Trotsky's very extensive writings, there is obviously a great deal more which could be said in this paper. To reiterate the main points: the theory of permanent revolution is based mainly on a series of conceptual experiments, and a variety of other possibilities are not considered. Trotsky's general conceptions of politics were poor. His democratic credentials are very much open to question. He does not seem to have recognised the strength of bourgeois democracy, respect for law, political pluralism et cetera - this is arguably a general weakness in Marxism historically, but it is perhaps particularly acute in Trotsky's case. Although aspects of his analysis of fascism are acute, his major alternative was revolution, but the idea that there was a pre-revolutionary situation in Germany in the early 1930s is very debatable.

Geras should have taken more cognizance of these matters back in the 1970s. A final comment on Trotskyism more generally. Whilst, as mentioned above, basically Stalinist regimes were installed in a variety of countries in the years from the end of the Second World War through to the 1970s, it is very debatable as to whether there has ever been a Trotskyist revolution anywhere. Assuming that Geras was a committed and practical Marxist, this particular point might have made more impact on his thinking.

References.

Applebaum, Anne (2012). *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

Berkman, Alexander (2013), *The Russian Tragedy*, Christie Books. Kindle Edition.

Geras, N. (1973), 'Marx and the Critique of Political Economy', in R. Blackburn, (ed.) *Ideology and Social Science*, London: Fontana, pp.284-305.

Geras, (1983 a), *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: New Left Books, 1976/Verso, 1983)

Geras, N. (1983 b), *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London: Verso.

Geras, N. (1986), *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* London: Verso.

Geras, N (1990 b), *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagances*, London: Verso.

Geras, N. (1992), 'Bringing Marx to Justice: an Addendum and Rejoinder' *New Left Review*, 195, September/October pp. 37-69.

Geras, N. (2011), *Crimes against Humanity*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Lenin, V. I. (1920), 'The Trade Unions, the Present Situation, and Trotsky's Mistakes', Moscow: *Collected Works*, Volume 32, Progress Publishers, 1965.

Lenin, V. I. (1921) 'The Tax in Kind', Moscow: *Collected Works*, Volume 32.

Lenin, V. I. (1922) 'Speech at the Opening of the 12th Party Congress', Moscow: *Collected Works*, Volume 33, Progress Publishers, 1965.

Lenin, V. I. (1924), 'On the Tasks of the People's Commissariat for Justice Under the New Economic Policy', Moscow: *Collected Works*, Volume 36, 1971.

Service, Robert, (2008) *Lenin*, Houndmills, Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

Service, Robert (2010). *Trotsky: A Biography*, Houndmills: Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

Thatcher, Ian (2003), *Trotsky*, London: Routledge.

Trotsky, L. () *Our Political Tasks*,

Trotsky, L. (1921) *Results and Prospects*,

Trotsky, L. (1973), *1905*, (Harmondsworth: Pelican).

Trotsky, L. (1967) *The Revolution Betrayed*, London: Park Publications.

Trotsky, L. (1975) *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.