

The Class, the Party and the Leadership

Why Was the Spanish Proletariat Defeated? [Questions of Marxist Theory]

Leon Trotsky

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Editorial Note: Among comrade Trotsky's archives were found a rough draft and fragmentary notes which we now publish in the form of an unfinished article.

The extent to which the working class movement has been thrown backward may be gauged not only by the condition of the mass organizations but by ideological groupings and those theoretical inquiries in which so many groups are engaged. In Paris there is published a periodical *Que Faire* (*What To Do*) which for some reason considers itself Marxist but in reality remains completely within the framework of the empiricism of the left bourgeois intellectuals and those isolated workers who have assimilated all the vices of the intellectuals.

Like all groups lacking a scientific foundation, without a program and without any tradition this little periodical tried to hang on to the coat-tails of the POUM—which seemed to open the shortest avenue to the masses and to victory. But the result of these ties with the Spanish revolution seems at first entirely unexpected: The periodical did not advance but on the contrary retrogressed. As a matter of fact, this is wholly in the nature of things. The contradictions between the petty bourgeoisie, conservatism and the needs of the proletarian revolution have developed in the extreme. It is only natural that the defenders and interpreters of the policies of the POUM found themselves thrown far back both in political and theoretical fields.

The periodical *Que Faire* is in and of itself of no importance whatever. But it is of symptomatic interest. That is why we think it profitable to dwell upon this periodical's appraisal of the causes for the collapse of the Spanish revolution,

inasmuch as this appraisal discloses very graphically the fundamental features now prevailing in the left flank of pseudo-Marxism.

***Que Faire* Explains**

We begin with a verbatim quotation from a review of the pamphlet *Spain Betrayed* by comrade Casanova:

“Why was the revolution crushed? Because, replies the author (Casanova), the Communist Party conducted a false policy which was unfortunately followed by the revolutionary masses. But why, in the devil’s name, did the revolutionary masses who teft their former leaders rally to the banner of the Communist Party? ‘Because there was no genuinely revolutionary party.’ We are presented with a pure tautology. A false policy of the masses; an immature party either manifests a certain condition of social forces (immaturity of the working class, lack of independence of the peasantry) which must be explained by proceeding from facts, presented among others by Casanova himself; or it is the product of the actions of certain malicious individuals or groups of individuals, actions which do not correspond to the efforts of ‘sincere individuals’ alone capable of saving the revolution. After groping for the first and Marxist road, Casanova takes the second. We are ushered into the domain of pure demonology; the criminal responsible for the defeat is the chief Devil, Stalin, abetted by the anarchists and all the other little devils; the God of revolutionists unfortunately did not send a Lenin or a Trotsky to Spain as He did in Russia in 1917.”

The conclusion then follows: “This is what comes of seeking at any cost to force the ossified orthodoxy of a chapel upon facts.” This theoretical haughtiness is made all the more magnificent by the fact that it is hard to imagine how so great a number of banalities, vulgarisms and mistakes quite specifically of conservative philistine type could be compressed into so few lines.

The author of the above quotation avoids giving any explanation for the defeat of the Spanish revolution; he only indicates that profound explanations, like the “condition of social forces” are necessary. The evasion of any explanation is not accidental. These critics of Bolshevism are all theoretical cowards, for the simple reason that they have nothing solid under their feet. In order not to reveal their own bankruptcy they juggle facts and prowl around the opinions of others. They confine themselves to hints and half-thoughts as if they just haven’t the time to delineate their full wisdom. As a matter of fact they possess no wisdom at all. Their haughtiness is lined with intellectual charlatanism.

Let us analyze step by step the hints and half-thoughts of our author. According to him a false policy of the masses can be explained only as it “manifests a certain condition of social forces,” namely, the immaturity of the working class and the lack of independence of the peasantry. Anyone searching for tautologies couldn’t

find in general a flatter one. A “false policy of the masses” is explained by the “immaturity” of the masses. But what is “immaturity” of the masses? Obviously, their predisposition to false policies. Just what the false policy consisted of, and who were its initiators: the masses or the leaders—that is passed over in silence by our author. By means of a tautology he unloads the responsibility on the masses. This classical trick of all traitors, deserters and their attorneys is especially revolting in connection with the Spanish proletariat.

Sophistry of the Betrayers

In July 1936—not to refer to an earlier period—the Spanish workers repelled the assault of the officers who had prepared their conspiracy under the protection of the People’s Front. The masses improvised militias and created workers’ committees, the strongholds of their future dictatorship. The leading organizations of the proletariat on the other hand helped the bourgeoisie to destroy these committees, to liquidate the assaults of the workers on private property and to subordinate the workers’ militias to the command of the bourgeoisie, with the POUM moreover participating in the government and assuming direct responsibility for this work proletariat signify in this case? Self-evidently only this, that of the counter-revolution. What does “immaturity” of the...

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...despite the correct political line chosen by the masses, the latter were unable to smash the coalition of socialists, Stalinists, anarchists and the POUM with the bourgeoisie. This piece of sophistry takes as its starting point a concept of some absolute maturity, i.e. a perfect condition of the masses in which they do not require a correct leadership, and, more than that, are capable of conquering against their own leadership. There is not and there cannot be such maturity.

But why should workers who show such correct revolutionary instinct and such superior fighting qualities submit to treacherous leadership? object our sages. Our answer is: There wasn’t even a hint of mere subordination. The workers’ line of march at all times cut a certain angle to the line of the leadership. And at the most critical moments this angle became 180 degrees. The leadership then helped directly or indirectly to subdue the workers by armed force.

In May 1937 the workers of Catalonia rose not only without their own leadership but against it. The anarchist leaders—pathetic and contemptible bourgeois masquerading cheaply as revolutionists—have repeated hundreds of times in their press that had the CNT wanted to take power and set up their dictatorship in May, they could have done so without any difficulty. This time the anarchist leaders speak the unadulterated truth. The POUM leadership actually dragged at the tail of the CNT, only they covered up their policy with a different phraseology. It was thanks to this and this alone that the bourgeoisie succeeded in crushing the May uprising of the “immature” proletariat. One must understand exactly nothing in the sphere of the inter-relationships between the class and the party, between the masses and the leaders in order to repeat the hollow statement

that the Spanish masses merely followed their leaders. The only thing that can be said is that the masses who sought at all times to blast their way to the correct road found it beyond their strength to produce in the very fire of battle a new leadership corresponding to the demands of the revolution. Before us is a profoundly dynamic process, with the various stages of the revolution shifting swiftly, with the leadership or various sections of the leadership quickly deserting to the side of the class enemy, and our sages engage in a purely static discussion: Why did the working class as a whole follow a bad leadership?

The Dialectic Approach

There is an ancient, evolutionary-liberal epigram: Every people gets the government it deserves. History, however, shows that one and the same people may in the course of a comparatively brief epoch get very different governments (Russia, Italy, Germany, Spain, etc.) and furthermore that the order of these governments doesn't at all proceed in one and the same direction: from despotism—to freedom as was imagined by the evolutionists liberals. The secret is this, that a people is comprised of hostile classes, and the classes themselves are comprised of different and in part antagonistic layers which fall under different leadership; furthermore every people falls under the influence of other peoples who are likewise comprised of classes. Governments do not express the systematically growing "maturity" of a "people" but are the product of the struggle between different classes and the different layers within one and the same class, and, finally, the action of external forces—alliances, conflicts, wars and so on. To this should be added that a government, once it has established itself, may endure much longer than the relationship of forces which produced it. It is precisely out of this historical contradiction that revolutions, *coup d'états*, counterrevolutions, etc. arise.

The very same dialectic approach is necessary in dealing with the question of the leadership of a class. Imitating the liberals our sages tacitly accept the axiom that every class gets the leadership it deserves. In reality leadership is not at all a mere "reflection" of a class or the product of its own free creativeness. A leadership is shaped in the process of clashes between the different classes or the friction between the different layers within a given class. Having once arisen, the leadership invariably arises above its class and thereby becomes predisposed to the pressure and influence of other classes. The proletariat may "tolerate" for a long time a leadership that has already suffered a complete inner degeneration but has not as yet had the opportunity to express this degeneration amid great events. A great historic shock is necessary to reveal sharply the contradiction between the leadership and the class. The mightiest historical shocks are wars and revolutions. Precisely for this reason the working class is often caught unawares by war and revolution. But even in cases where the old leadership has revealed its internal corruption, the class cannot improvise immediately a new leadership, especially if it has not inherited from the previous period strong revolutionary cadres capable of utilizing the collapse of the old leading party. The Marxist, i.e. dialectic and not scholastic interpretation of the inter-relationship

between a class and its leadership does not leave a single stone unturned of our author's legalistic sophistry.

How the Russian Workers Matured

He conceives of the proletariat's maturity as something purely static. Yet during a revolution the consciousness of a class is the most dynamic process directly determining the course of the revolution. Was it possible in January 1917 or even in March, after the overthrow of Czarism, to give an answer to the question whether the Russian proletariat had sufficiently "matured" for the conquest of power in eight to nine months? The working class was at that time extremely heterogeneous socially and politically. During the years of the war it had been renewed by 30-40 percent from the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie, often reactionary, at the expense of backward peasants, at the expense of women and youth. The Bolshevik party in March 1917 was followed by an insignificant minority of the working class and furthermore there was discord within the party itself. The overwhelming majority of the workers supported the Mensheviks and the "Socialists-Revolutionists" i.e., conservative social-patriots. The situation was even less favorable with regard to the army and the peasantry. We must add to this: the general low level of culture in the country, the lack of political experience among the broadest layers of the proletariat, especially in the provinces, let alone the peasants and soldiers.

What was the "active"¹ of Bolshevism? A clear and thoroughly thought out revolutionary conception at the beginning of the revolution was held only by Lenin. The Russian cadres of the party were scattered and to a considerable degree bewildered. But the party had authority among the advanced workers. Lenin had great authority with the party cadres. Lenin's political conception corresponded to the actual development of the revolution and was reformed by each new event. These elements of the "active" worked wonders in a revolutionary situation, that is, in conditions of bitter class struggle. The party quickly aligned its policy to correspond with Lenin's conception, to correspond that is with the actual course of the revolution. Thanks to this it met with firm support among tens of thousands of advanced workers. Within a few months, by basing itself upon the development of the revolution the party was able to convince the majority of the workers of the correctness of its slogans. This majority organized into Soviets was able in its turn to attract the soldiers and peasants. How can this dynamic, dialectic process be exhausted by a formula of the maturity or immaturity of the proletariat? A colossal factor in the maturity of the Russian proletariat in February or March 1917 was Lenin. He did not fall from the skies. He personified the revolutionary tradition of the working class. For Lenin's slogans to find their way to the masses there had to exist cadres, even though numerically small at the beginning; there had to exist the confidence of the cadres in the leadership, a confidence based on the entire experience of the past. To cancel these elements from one's calculations is simply to ignore the

¹Untranslatable term, which means in part "liquid assets." — *Trans.*

living revolution, to substitute for it an abstraction, the “relationship of forces,” because the development of the revolution precisely consists of this, that the relationship of forces keeps incessantly and rapidly changing under the impact of the changes in the consciousness of the proletariat, the attraction of backward layers to the advanced, the growing assurance of the class in its own strength. The vital mainspring in this process is the party, just as the vital mainspring in the mechanism of the party is its leadership. The role and the responsibility of the leadership in a revolutionary epoch is colossal.

Relativity of “Maturity”

The October victory is a serious testimonial of the “maturity” of the proletariat. But this maturity is relative. A few years later the very same proletariat permitted the revolution to be strangled by a bureaucracy which rose from its ranks. Victory is not at all the ripe fruit of the proletariat’s “maturity.” Victory is a strategical task. It is necessary to utilize the favorable conditions of a revolutionary crisis in order to mobilize the masses; taking as a starting point the given level of their “maturity” it is necessary to propel them forward, teach them to understand that the enemy is by no means omnipotent, that it is torn asunder with contradictions, that behind the imposing facade panic prevails. Had the Bolshevik party failed to carry out this work, there couldn’t even be talk of the victory of the proletarian revolution. The Soviets would have been crushed by the counter-revolution and the little sages of all countries would have written articles and books on the keynote that only uprooted visionaries could dream in Russia of the dictatorship of the proletariat, so small numerically and so immature.

Auxiliary Role of Peasants

Equally abstract, pedantic and false is the reference to the “lack of independence” of the peasantry. When and where did our sage ever observe in capitalist society a peasantry with an independent revolutionary program or a capacity for independent revolutionary initiative? The peasantry can play a very great role in the revolution, but only an auxiliary role.

In many instances the Spanish peasants acted boldly and fought courageously. But to rouse the entire mass of the peasantry, the proletariat had to set an example of a decisive uprising against the bourgeoisie and inspire the peasants with faith in the possibility of victory. In the meantime the revolutionary initiative of the proletariat itself was paralyzed at every step by its own organizations.

The “immaturity” of the proletariat, the “lack of independence” of the peasantry are neither final nor basic factors in historical events. Underlying the consciousness of the classes are the classes themselves, their numerical strength, their role in economic life. Underlying the classes is a specific system of production which is determined in its turn by the level of the development of productive forces.

Why not then say that the defeat of the Spanish proletariat was determined by the low level of technology?

The Role of Personality

Our author substitutes mechanistic determinism for the dialectic conditioning of the historical process. Hence the cheap jibes about the role of individuals, good and bad. History is a process of the class struggle. But classes do not bring their full weight to bear automatically and simultaneously. In the process of struggle the classes create various organs which play an important and independent role and are subject to deformations. This also provides the basis for the role of personalities in history. There are naturally great objective causes which created the autocratic rule of Hitler but only dull-witted pedants of “determinism” could deny today the enormous historic role of Hitler. The arrival of Lenin in Petrograd on April 3, 1917 turned the Bolshevik party in time and enabled the party to lead the revolution to victory. Our sages might say that had Lenin died abroad at the beginning of 1917, the October revolution would have taken place “just the same.” But that is not so. Lenin represented one of the living elements of the historical process. He personified the experience and the perspicacity of the most active section of the proletariat. His timely appearance on the arena of the revolution was necessary in order to mobilize the vanguard and provide it with an opportunity to rally the working class and the peasant masses. Political leadership in the crucial moments of historical turns can become just as decisive a factor as is the role of the chief command during the critical moments of war. History is not an automatic process. Otherwise, why leaders? why parties? why programs? why theoretical struggles?

Stalinism in Spain

“But why, in the devil’s name,” asks the author as we have already heard, “did the revolutionary masses who left their former leaders, rally to the banner of the Communist Party?” The question is falsely posed. It is not true that the revolutionary masses left all of their former leaders. The workers who were previously connected with specific organizations continued to cling to them, while they observed and checked. Workers in general do not easily break with the party that awakens them to conscious life. Moreover the existence of mutual protection within the People’s Front lulled them: Since everybody agreed, everything must be all right. The new and fresh masses naturally turned to the Comintern as the party which had accomplished the only victorious proletarian revolution and which, it was hoped, was capable of assuring arms to Spain. Furthermore the Comintern was the most zealous champion of the idea of the People’s Front; this inspired confidence among the inexperienced layers of workers. Within the People’s Front the Comintern was the most zealous champion of the bourgeois character of the revolution; this inspired the confidence of the petty and in part the middle bourgeoisie. That is why the masses “rallied to the banner of the Communist Party.”

Our author depicts the matter as if the proletariat were in a well-stocked shoe store, selecting a new pair of boots. Even this simple operation, as is well known, does not always prove successful. As regards new leadership, the choice is very limited. Only gradually, only on the basis of their own experience through several stages can the broad layers of the masses become convinced that a new leadership is firmer, more reliable, more loyal than the old. To be sure, during a revolution, i.e., when events move swiftly, a weak party can quickly grow into a mighty one provided it lucidly understands the course of the revolution and possesses staunch cadres that do not become intoxicated with phrases and are not terrorized by persecution. But such a party must be available prior to the revolution inasmuch as the process of educating the cadres requires a considerable period of time and the revolution does not afford this time.

Treachery of the POUM

To the left of all the other parties in Spain stood the POUM, which undoubtedly embraced revolutionary proletarian elements not previously firmly tied to anarchism. But it was precisely this party that played a fatal role in the development of the Spanish revolution. It could not become a mass party because in order to do so it was first necessary to overthrow the old parties and it was possible to overthrow them only by an irreconcilable struggle, by a merciless exposure of their bourgeois character. Yet the POUM while criticizing the old parties subordinated itself to them on all fundamental questions. It participated in the “People’s” election bloc; entered the government which liquidated workers’ committees; engaged in a struggle to reconstitute this governmental coalition; capitulated time and again to the anarchist leadership; conducted, in connection with this, a false trade union policy; took a vacillating and non-revolutionary attitude toward the May 1937 uprising. From the standpoint of determinism in general it is possible of course to recognize that the policy of the POUM was not accidental. Everything in this world has its cause. However, the series of causes engendering the Centrism of the POUM are by no means a mere reflection of condition of the Spanish or Catalanian proletariat. Two causalities moved toward each other at an angle and at a certain moment they came into hostile conflict. It is possible by taking into account previous international experience, Moscow’s influence, the influence of a number of defeats, etc. to explain politically and psychologically why the POUM unfolded as a centrist party. But this does not alter its centrist character, nor does it alter the fact that a centrist party invariably acts as a brake upon the revolution, must each time smash its own head, and may bring about the collapse of the revolution. It does not alter the fact that the Catalanian masses were far more revolutionary than the POUM, which in turn was more revolutionary than its leadership. In these conditions to unload the responsibility for false policies on the “immaturity” of the masses is to engage in sheer charlatanism frequently resorted to by political bankrupts.

Responsibility of Leadership

The historical falsification consists in this, that the responsibility for the defeat of the Spanish masses is unloaded on the working masses and not those parties which paralyzed or simply crushed the revolutionary movement of the masses. The attorneys of the POUM simply deny the responsibility of the leaders, in order thus to escape shouldering their own responsibility. This impotent philosophy, which seeks to reconcile defeats as a necessary link in the chain of cosmic developments, is completely incapable of posing and refuses to pose the question of such concrete factors as programs, parties, personalities that were the organizers of defeat. This philosophy of fatalism and prostration is diametrically opposed to Marxism as the theory of revolutionary action.

Civil war is a process wherein political tasks are solved by military means. Were the outcome of this war determined by the “condition of class forces,” the war itself would not be necessary. War has its own organization, its own policies, its own methods, its own leadership by which its fate is directly determined. Naturally, the “condition of class forces” supplies the foundation for all other political factors; but just as the foundation of a building does not reduce the importance of walls, windows, doors, roofs, so the “condition of classes” does not invalidate the importance of parties, their strategy, their leadership. By dissolving the concrete in the abstract, our sages really halted midway. The most “profound” solution of the problem would have been to declare the defeat of the Spanish proletariat as due to the inadequate development of productive forces. Such a key is accessible to any fool.

By reducing to zero the significance of the party and of the leadership these sages deny in general the possibility of revolutionary victory. Because there are not the least grounds for expecting conditions more favorable. Capitalism has ceased to advance, the proletariat does not grow numerically, on the contrary it is the army of unemployed that grows, which does not increase but reduces the fighting force of the proletariat and has a negative effect also upon its consciousness. There are similarly no grounds for believing that under the regime of capitalism the peasantry is capable of attaining a higher revolutionary consciousness. The conclusion from the analysis of our author is thus complete pessimism, a sliding away from revolutionary perspectives. It must be said—to do them justice—that they do not themselves understand what they say.

As a matter of fact, the demands they make upon the •consciousness of the masses are utterly fantastic. The Spanish workers, as well as the Spanish peasants gave the maximum of what these classes are able to give in a revolutionary situation. We have in mind precisely the class of millions and tens of millions.

Que Faire represents merely one of these little schools, or churches or chapels who frightened by the course of the class struggle and the onset of reaction publish their little journals and their theoretical etudes in a corner, on the sidelines away from the actual developments of revolutionary thought, let alone the movement of the masses.

Repression of Spanish Revolution

The Spanish proletariat fell the victim of a coalition composed of imperialists, Spanish republicans, socialists, anarchists, Stalinists, and on the left flank, the POUM. They all paralyzed the socialist revolution which the Spanish proletariat had actually begun to realize. It is not easy to dispose of the socialist revolution. No one has yet devised other methods than ruthless repressions, massacre of the vanguard, execution of the leaders, etc. The POUM of course did not want this. It wanted on the one hand to participate in the Republican government and to enter as a loyal peace-loving opposition into the general bloc of ruling parties; and on the other hand to achieve peaceful comradely relations at a time when it was a question of implacable civil war. For this very reason the POUM fell victim to the contradictions of its own policy. The most consistent policy in the ruling bloc was pursued by the Stalinists. They were the fighting vanguard of the bourgeois-republican counter-revolution. They wanted to eliminate the need of Fascism by proving to the Spanish and world bourgeoisie that they were themselves capable of strangling the proletarian revolution under the banner of "democracy." This was the gist of their policies. The bankrupts of the Spanish People's Front are today trying to unload the blame on the GPU. I trust that we cannot be suspected of leniency toward the crimes of the GPU. But we see clearly and we tell the workers that the GPU acted in this instance only as the most resolute detachment in the service of the People's Front. Therein was the strength of the GPU, therein was the historic role of Stalin. Only ignorant philistines can wave this aside with stupid little jokes about the Chief Devil.

These gentlemen do not even bother with the question of the social character of the revolution. Moscow's lackeys, for the benefit of England and France, proclaimed the Spanish revolution as bourgeois. Upon this fraud were erected the perfidious policies of the People's Front, policies which would have been completely false even if the Spanish revolution had really been bourgeois. But from the very beginning the revolution expressed much more graphically the proletarian character than did the revolution of 1917 in Russia. In the leadership of the POUM gentlemen sit today who consider that the policy of Andres Nin was too "leftist," that the really correct thing was to have remained the left flank of the People's Front. The real misfortune was that Nin, covering himself with the authority of Lenin and the October revolution, could not make up his mind to break with the People's Front. Victor Serge who is in a hurry to compromise himself by a frivolous attitude toward serious questions writes that Nin did not wish to submit to commands from Oslo or Coyoacan. Can a serious man really be capable of reducing to petty gossip the problem of the class content of a revolution? The sages of *Que Faire* have no answer whatever to this question. They do not understand the question itself. Of what significance indeed is the fact that the "immature" proletariat founded its own organs of power, seized enterprises, sought to regulate production while the POUM tried with all its might to keep from breaking with bourgeois anarchists who in an alliance with the bourgeois republicans and the no less bourgeois socialists and

Stalinists assaulted and strangled the proletarian revolution! Such “trifles” are obviously of interest only to representatives of “ossified orthodoxy.” The sages of *Que Faire* possess instead a special apparatus which measures the maturity of the proletariat and the relationship of forces independently of all questions of revolutionary class strategy...