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TROTSKY, THE RISE OF NAZISM AND STALIN'S ROLE

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Between 1930 and 1933, Germany's political development was the axis of political debate in Europe, and in the Communist International (CI). On the eve of Hitler's Nazi uprising, Trotsky criticised CI's refusal to propose a single Workers Front of Socialist and Communist parties against Nazism. In 1920, Nazism was still referred to as "German Fascism" by the global left-wing media. Amidst the social conditions created by the global economic crisis born in 1929 which determined a new role for the state for the stability of the capitalist order, Nazism however took over, with unique and unquestionable characteristics, including a movement of extreme political reaction, even if it was originally inspired by Mussolini's "corporate state".

Undoubtedly there was a link between the global economic crisis and the rise of fascism in Europe. If, between 1918 and 1933, Germany was the critical point of political and economic stability in Europe, it as well, undoubtedly became the centre of the anti-Bolshevik counter-revolutionary trend of World War II since the last-mentioned year. The political world re-aligned according to Nazism. The NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei -National-Socialist German Workers' Party, or simply the Nazi Party) was founded in Munich in January 1919. Its seventh member, Adolf Hitler, a painter of Austrian origin, was imbued with anti-Semitic and racist nationalism, and hatred for communism. The NSDAP soon acquired a peculiar physiognomy within the nationalist factions due to its insistence on "social" subjects, and the personality of its leaders, Obviously Hitler, but more so Goebbels, were masters of propaganda. Soon it received support through Ludendorff from the business world and the army, to gain national stature after the events of 1923 (military coup attempt in Bavaria).

The doctrine was simple and had its axis in the opposition between Germany and its "internal and external enemies", which were:

- 1) The German people were Aryan, hardworking and generous, but they were "betrayed" during the war.
- 2) The Jewish people, who inspired the Marxist ideologies and democratic and universal relations, destroyed the State from within.
- 3) It is necessary to restore the eternal Germany, the *Lebensraum* (living space), regenerate its people to make them "the superior race" of the world.
- 4) Focus on issues like "national community", "pure blood", "purity of race", "order", virtues of warriors, the crushing of enemies, territorial expansion at the expense of Bolshevik USSR and decadent France.

The NSDAP was driven by mediocre ex-soldiers and officers of the German Army who felt "betrayed" in the national defeat of 1918, and the petit-bourgeois amazed by "social equality". They were: Ernest Röhm, the instigator who had ties with the army and helped form a private militia of the Nazis, known as "brown shirts";

Hermann Goering, aviation hero, brutal and ambitious, Chief of the SA (*Sturmableitungen*, assault troops); Rudolf Hess (Hitler's Secretary); Heinrich Himmler; Martin Bormann; unscrupulous men; the Baltic German Alfred Rosenberg, amateur philosopher, theoretician of ignorant and pretentious "race"; anti-Semitic demagogues like Julius Streicher and Gregor Strasser ... Controlled by the Führer, they made a real gang at the beginning.

After a short-lived "prosperity", Germany's crisis of 1929 enhanced the effects of 1923's hyper-inflation. Within the bourgeoisie, only the big industrialists and bankers survived. The small and petit-bourgeoisie were ruined by alternating inflation and deflation and turned into the subproletariat. Farmers, less affected by the crisis, were a minority in the industrialised country. The industrial workers suffered an enormous misery with mass unemployment. Finding a job in that scenario seemed an endless search. The youth lacked any prospect of work, or "normal" living. Millions of young people become "nomads", many flooded the "field work". Phenomena of social decomposition developed on a large scale (drugs, alcoholism, prostitution ...). The despair and anger turned against the government, often occupied by the Socialists (SPD). All hope, all "scapegoats" were accepted. Nazism as well as Italian fascism, on a larger scale, were able to mobilise the desperate petit-bourgeoisie (exploiting their fear of "proletarianisation"), this social group that the outspoken Gramsci has termed "the monkey people" ...

Born on the fringes of the army, the NSDAP was loosely funded at the beginning, by bourgeois sectors: Bruckham the publisher, the manufacturer of Bechstein pianos. With the crisis of 1929, the Nazi treasury received the support of the "*Konzern*" (Kirdorf, coal; Vorgler and Thyssen, steel; IG Farben; the banker Schroeder, etc.). The possibilities of their agitation and propaganda, their self-confidence and particularly, their ability to bribe public officials (police, judges, military) then grew in geometric proportions. The middle classes were desperate and the Nazis proposed remedies against distress: xenophobia, racism, exacerbated nationalism, accompanied by an anti-capitalist demagoguery that pointed to the Jews (since the nineteenth century they had been known as the "incarnation of capital" and August Bebel, the founder of the Social - Democrat Party had already termed anti-Semitism as "socialism of the imbeciles"). "Imperialism" (the diktat of Versailles) and the *bonzos* (the Social Democrats leaders of the worker's unions, accused of collaborating with the Jews) were also denounced. The Nazis came to support the "wild strikes", carried out independently of the unions. Above all, the NSDAP used violence and terror against its "enemies" to demonstrate to its "people" their determination to achieve their goals.

The Nazi symbols (the swastika cross, taken from the Germanic people of the Middle Ages, and also the enormous military parades) expressed their principles with a unity. The *racket* ("protective" blackmail) was used extensively to fill the NSDAP's treasury. Above all, Nazism offered an immediate opening for the unemployed youth: employment in army ranks, as uniformed officers, in the armed militia of the SA (assault troops), then the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, posting of the guard, also as elite private guards for Hitler, called the "black shirts"). Employment, wages and the uniform restored to the young people what they believed to be an existence that society denied them. The Nazi militancy rose, from 176,000 at the end of 1928 to 800,000 at the end of 1931 (and it counted more than a million members in the following year). But the number of communists and socialists also increased: in the general elections of 1928, the two left-wing parties together obtained 12,418,000 votes. In 1930, 13,160,000 (the Nazis only 6.4 million). In July 1932, the party workers obtained 13,300,000 votes (but the Nazis had already obtained 13,779,000). In November of that year, SPD (Socialists) and KPD (Communist Party of Germany) together obtained 13,230,000 votes, the NSDAP, 11,737,000. *When the Nazi forces went on a decline in the political scenario, the President Hindenburg (elected in 1925 with support from the Socialist Party, SPD) called (in January 1933) the Nazi leader Hitler to occupy the chancellery of the Reich.*

However, the decisive factor was the refusal of the Left parties to form a single front against the Nazis. The SPD had a million members, 5 million union members, hundreds of thousands of organised membership in Reichsbanner: in September 1930, it had also earned 8.5 million votes (143 members) against NSDAP's 6.4 million (107 members). But the SPD sought a "middle path" between the Nazis and "Bolshevism": its policy were "the defence of the Republic (of Weimar)", to introduce repressive laws against Nazism, the action of the police and courts. Finally, it supported Chancellor Brüning's pro-deflation policy (which caused misery), the suspension of the Reichstag, the government by decree-law. It issued a call to vote Marshal Hindenburg (who ceded to Hitler) to the Presidency of the Republic. SPD's votes fell to 7.96 million in July 1932, and to 7.25 million in November of that year. The proponents of the "Workers United Front" in the SPD had been excluded: they were the SAP (Socialist Workers Party), with tens of thousands of members. This was the

party that in 1933 (after Hitler's rise) signed, together with Trotsky's supporters (International Communist League) and two parties of the Dutch left-wing, RSP and PSO, the Fourth International's "Declaration of Four".

The KPD (Communist Party) also advanced: 3.27 million votes in 1928, 4.59 million in 1930, 5.37 million in July 1932, 5.98 million in November of that year. Like the SPD it had all the chances of spreading Nazism, but its divisive politics (denunciation of the SPD as "social-fascist") led the historian R. T. Clark to reflect: "It is impossible to read communist literature of the time without having chills before the disaster that led a group of intelligent men to refuse using their intelligence independently." The KPD insisted on looking for common themes with the Nazis (against Versailles, for national independence, against the preachers) to use a similar terminology ("popular revolution"). It affirmed that *before* fighting "fascism" it was necessary to combat "social-fascism" (the SPD), then propose a "united front from below" to the social democrat workers. Overall, the policy was defined by the Communist International leader, Manuilski: "Nazism will be the last stage of capitalism before a social revolution" ...

Still, some people insist, such as Heinz Brahm, that "Trotsky distanced himself from the KPD chiefs, who even during the times of the Hermann Müller government (SPD, 1928-1930) declared that fascism ruled in Germany. Trotsky discovered, like no one else did, the dangers of National Socialism. He foresaw that the NSDAP professed the Constitution only to come to power. He seems to have warned that Hitler, who prepared for the coup d'état within the Constitution's framework, did not act very differently from him when in 1917 he used Soviet legality to advantage, for the revolution in Petrograd. Since September 1930 he tirelessly invited the SPD and KPD to form a united front, but after Hitler's seize of power he even rejected a pact of non-aggression between both parties. The fact that Trotsky foresaw the catastrophe of Hitler's dictatorship speaks in his honour. However, it is not correct to hold Stalin and the Komintern exclusively responsible for Hitler's triumph."

In April 1931 the KPD issued a joint call with the NSDAP to vote against the SPD to overthrow Prussia's socialist government, the "red referendum" (which the Nazis called the "black referendum"). In November 1932, the Nazis formed an alliance against the *bonzos* Social Democrats in a transport strike in Berlin. Political crises developed as a result from these situations and in turn they brought down the centrist government of Brüning, Von Papen's cabinet in November 1932, and then the government of General von Schleicher, until Hitler was finally summoned to become chancellor on 30th January, 1933.

Hitler came to power without any resistance from the working-class and with the support of the bourgeoisie, mediated by the former finance minister of the centrist government of Stressemann, Hjalmar Schacht. He reached an agreement with the NSDAP with the mediation of banker Schroeder.[1] The new power-holders fast began to organise a new regimen, not without first mounting a challenge against the KPD by setting the German parliament *Reichstag* on fire (27th February, 1933).[2] With 3,000,000 DM provided for the big capital and with more SA terror, the Nazis got more votes in the 1933 elections, growing from 33% to 44%. On 23rd March, the *Reichstag* voted Hitler to plenary powers, against the votes of the SPD bench, but with the support of the Catholic *Zentrum*. On 2nd May, the unions were dissolved and their assets confiscated. On 14th July (anniversary of the French Revolution) political parties were disbanded and the NSDAP was proclaimed the "only party".[3]

With President Hindenburg's death, Hitler began to strengthen these powers along with the functions of the chancellery. The plenary powers, which permitted the Constitution's violation, were renovated in 1934 and 1937: the oath of allegiance to the Führer became mandatory for all public officials, including ministers. Then the *Landstag* (Assemblies) and *Reichrat* (councils of the Reich) were suppressed: the Gleichhaltung law combined the laws of the states with the Reich. *Staatshalter* replaced the governments of the *Länder* (states), mayors were appointed by the executive power, the same rule applied to the city mayor. The NSDAP as a party, also had a centralised organisation: 32 *Gaule*n (districts), headed by a *Gauleiter*, divided into circles, groups, cells and blocks. Parallel organisations developed, such as *Hitlerjugend* (pro-Hitler youth), the corporations of students, teachers, lawyers. The SA was almost destroyed after the "night of long daggers" (June 1934), when Hitler was murdering his own leaders, including the leader Ernst Röhm. In exchange he sanctioned privileges to the SS which was headed by Himmler, initially just a bodyguard of Hitler: 200,000 men in 1936, with units "of internal mission" (in concentration camps) and elite military units

of the *Waffen* SS. The SS was a special police corps (SD), headed by Heydrich, who looked after the Reich's own police.[4]

The police was reorganised: the counter-intelligence (*Abwehr*) with Canari, security, criminal police, the state's secret police (the *Gestapo*). The concentration camps were born and grew rapidly: they were "only" 50 under the control of SA, but increased to 100 in the hands of the SS in 1939, celebrated with three camps since that time: Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. They had a million prisoners (originally political opponents, but soon also Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals ...) under the orders of Kapos. Gross fact: the camps provided a huge free labour-force for a large private industry (Krupp, Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen, Thyssen). One man's work cost 70 cents a day, and it produced the equivalent of 6 marks (the average rate of profit and capital accumulation then increased geometrically) ...

Justice lost all autonomy, partly replaced by the "people's courts". The minister of propaganda (Goebbels) controlled the media, publishing of books, radio, cinema, sectors that dealt with mass "cleansing". The "creators" and journalists received precise instructions: the libraries suffered *razzias* (20,000 volumes were burnt just on 10th May, 1933.) There was also a Dantesque "purge" in education: racism, revision of school texts and manuals, guidelines for students and teachers in corporations. Youth organisations began to include children from eight years of age, soon the law started to authorise the sterilisation of certain individuals or groups.

The property of the unions went to the "Labour Front", directed by Robert Ley: the affiliation to the "Front" was mandatory for the trade unions. In January 1934 the "law on the national organisation of work" was issued. The "Front" was divided into 22 groups. Trade unions had to be the instruments of the regime's social policy. The workplaces had to elect "delegates" from a list submitted by the director. Strikes were prohibited: the "labour tribunals" started to make sanctions and introduced "Labour Service" for a year, for both sexes. Leisure was also organised by the KDF (a "Strength through Joy"....)[5]

Hjalmar Schacht, the man of big capital, was again appointed minister of finance (1934-37: a decade before it had been the economic responsibility of the Weimar Republic), then minister without portfolio until 1943. He supported the resumption of production with the blocking of foreign capital, "the import substitution", and a short term credit policy. He also developed a policy of large-scale public works, which absorbed a huge amount of unemployed people. Wages, however, were blocked. The concentration of capital showed massive favoritism, with the State assuming the unprofitable sectors of the base, especially for the arms industry: steel, metal (the *Hermann Goering Werke*). There was also a rural exodus due to incentives for agricultural production, as well as restoration of fines and corporal punishment in the camps, the wages in kind, and the supply of work-force (Labour Service).

Production rapidly increased from an index of 100 in 1932 to 225 in 1939 (doubling in less than 7 years) with a "controlled inflation". To control it, the growing demand of arms production was fulfilled (prelude, in fact, to the war of conquest). The monopolies, then, were strengthened: the profits grew by 250%, but prices only increased by 25%. Real wages had to decline: youth, no longer unemployed, was forced into obligatory work. The original "anti-capitalist" programme surrendered to the expropriation of the capitalists ... Jews (to encourage other capitalists, "Aryans") and the nationalisation of loss-incurring industries, essential for Germany's re-armament.[6]

Trotsky's contemporaries admired his analysis of the rise of Nazism, and it was widely disseminated [7] due to its extraordinary lucidity, but few realise that it fell within a general theoretical corpus on the historical era in question, the "era of permanent revolution". Any theory of revolution is also a theory of counter-revolution. Trotsky described just the consequences, for human society and civilisation, of the new imperialist stage of capitalism, defined by Lenin in 1916, when the First World War was in full bloom, as an "epoch of wars and revolutions", an "era of reaction across the line". Trotsky's synthesis: "...war broke out with a train of convulsions, crises, catastrophes, epidemics, and bestiality. The economic life of mankind landed in an impasse. The class antagonisms became sharp and naked. The safety valves of democracy began to explode one after the other. The elementary moral precepts seemed even more fragile than the democratic institutions and reformist illusions. Mendacity, slander, bribery, venality, coercion, murder grew to unprecedented dimensions. To a stunned simpleton all these vexations seem a temporary result of war. Actually they are manifestations of imperialist decline. The decay of capitalism denotes the decay of

contemporary society with its right and its morals". [8]

The transformation of the "relatively reactionary regime" of open competition to an "absolutely reactionary regime" of monopoly, deprived capital's global expansion of any trace of progressive history, with disastrous consequences for countries lagging behind: "While destroying democracy in the old mother countries of capital, imperialism at the same time hinders the rise of democracy in the backward countries. The fact that in the new epoch not a single one of the colonies or semi-colonies has consummated its democratic revolution - above all in the field of agrarian relations - is entirely due to imperialism, which has become the chief brake on economic and political progress. Plundering the natural wealth of the backward countries and deliberately restraining their independent industrial development, the monopolistic magnates and their governments simultaneously grant financial, political and military support to the most reactionary, parasitic, semi-feudal groups of native exploiters. Artificially preserved agrarian barbarism is today the most sinister plague of contemporary world economy. The fight of the colonial peoples for their liberation, passing over the intervening stages, transforms itself of necessity into a fight against imperialism, and thus aligns itself with the struggle of the proletariat in the mother countries. Colonial uprisings and wars in their turn rock the foundations of capitalist world more than ever and render the miracle of its regeneration less than ever possible." [9]

To analyse the political consequences of the new era, marked by world war and the general crisis of capitalism in 1929, Trotsky had to further develop the theory of the uneven development of capitalism, and like the first time he elaborated "permanent revolution" he again confronted Marx who, according to Trotsky, "pictured far too unilaterally the process of liquidation of the intermediate classes, as a wholesale proletarianisation of crafts, petty trades, and peasantry." The capitalist crisis, the monopoly era, however had unforeseen consequences: "Capitalism has ruined the petty bourgeoisie at a much faster rate than it has proletarianised it. Furthermore, the bourgeois state has long directed its conscious policy toward the artificial maintenance of petty-bourgeois strata." The political consequences of this process of contemporary counter-revolution were enormous: "If the proletariat, for one reason or another, proves incapable of overthrowing with an audacious blow the outlived bourgeois order, then finance capital in the struggle to maintain its unstable rule can do nothing but turn the petty bourgeoisie ruined and demoralized by it into the pogrom army of fascism. The bourgeois degeneration of the Social Democracy and the fascist degeneration of the petty bourgeoisie are interlinked as cause and effect." [10]

However, "cause and effect" does not mean that Social Democracy and Nazism were "twins", an idea that served the Communist International as a basis for the theory of "social-fascism", negating all possibility of proletarian unity and victory against Nazi-fascism. While the "Stalinised" Communist parties considered a Nazi victory as a "lesser evil", Trotsky had already warned about the horrendous originality of the new kind of counter-revolution in 1932: Fascism "raises to their feet those classes that are immediately above the proletariat and that are ever in dread of being forced down into its ranks; it organises and militarises them at the expense of finance capital, under the cover of the official government (...). Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force, and of police terror. Fascism is a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society." [11]

His basic revolutionary nature would have led Trotsky, in any case, to oppose the Stalinist policy before the Nazi uprising, but it was not limited to that, thanks to his theoretical understanding focused on the phenomenon. This made Perry Anderson admiringly say: "Isolated on a Turkish island, he wrote, at a certain distance from the events, a sequence of texts on the rise of Nazism in Germany, as studies of a specific politics. They have a quality unequalled in the entire range of historical materialism. Lenin himself never produced any work of comparable depth and complexity in this field. Indeed, Trotsky's writings on German fascism are the first real Marxist analyses of a 20th Century capitalist state- the establishment of Nazi dictatorship." [12]

Trotsky did not have any confusion, let alone any fascination with the tawdry machine of symbols and ceremonies surrounding the myth of the Führer: "At the start of his political career, Hitler stood out only because of his big temperament a voice much louder than others, and an intellectual mediocrity much more self-assured. He did not bring into the movement any ready-made program, if one disregards the insulted soldier's thirst for vengeance. (...) There were in the country plenty of ruined and drowning people with scars and fresh bruises. They all wanted to thump with their fists on the table. This Hitler could do better than

others. True, he knew not how to cure the evil. But his harangues resounded, now like commands and now like prayers addressed to inexorable fate. Doomed classes, like those fatally ill, never tire of making variations on their complaints nor of listening to consolations. Hitler's speeches were all attuned to this pitch. Sentimental formlessness, absence of disciplined thought ignorance along with gaudy erudition - all these minuses turned into pluses.. (...) Fascism opened the internals of society to this politics. Fascism has opened up the depths of society for politics. Today, not only in peasant homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth. [13]

Ultimately, the capitalist counter-revolution and the counterrevolution of the "Workers' State" (the Stalinist USSR) responded to the same totalitarian pattern typical of the defence needs of global capital in its period of decay: "The 'synthesis' of imperialist turpitude is fascism directly begotten of the bankruptcy of bourgeois democracy before the problems of the imperialist epoch. Remnants of democracy continue still to exist only in the rich capitalist aristocracies: for each 'democrat' in England, France, Holland, Belgium there is a certain number of colonial slaves; '60 Families' dominate the democracy of the United States, and so forth. Moreover, shoots of fascism grow rapidly in all democracies. Stalinism in its turn is the product of imperialist pressure upon a backward and isolated workers' state, a symmetrical complement in its own genre to fascism." [14]

Much before the "semiology" was born, Trotsky warned: "If the road to heaven is paved with good intentions, then the avenues of the Third Reich are paved with symbols", because "not every exasperated petty bourgeois could have become Hitler, but a particle of Hitler is lodged in every exasperated petty bourgeois." [15] Trotsky not only foresaw Nazism, in its essential features and its worst consequences, but also demystified it in the same analysis. By doing this, Trotsky not only helped to save the complete bankruptcy of the Marxist theory in the "dark times", as mentioned by Perry Anderson, but perhaps also simply to save the social thought process, vis-à-vis the barbarism consummated in the cradles of Western civilisation.

The evolution of the USSR in the 1930s, in turn, appeared to be symmetrically complementing the trend for the totalitarian state that characterised the capitalist world immersed in the global economic crisis, with the growing "Keynesian" state interventionism as its main consequence. It has been said that it would have been possible to imagine another story of the USSR in the 1930s, if the capitalist world had not been in crisis. They could then devote time to harass the Soviet regime, but it was not possible due to their own problems in that period. Similarly, it is not difficult to imagine the fate of capitalism in crisis, with its unemployed and hungry masses, if the USSR had been a revolutionary force and an international example, not by propaganda, but the reality of their economic and social development. In fact, in the 1930s, the USSR and the capitalist world were neutralising balance due to their internal difficulties: one more proof of the organic unity and interdependence of all sectors of the contemporary world, as well as the real tendency for the unification of its historical rhythm.

It is precisely for these reasons, and against the background of the international victory of fascism (i.e the defeat of the proletarian revolution in Europe), that Trotsky appreciated the attitude of the workers before the Soviet bureaucracy during this period: "One need not doubt that the overwhelming majority of Soviet workers are dissatisfied with the bureaucracy and that a considerable section, by no means the worst, hates it. However, it is not simply due to repression that this dissatisfaction does not assume violent mass forms; the workers fear that they will clear the field for the class enemy if they overthrow the bureaucracy. The interrelations between the bureaucracy and the working class are really much more complex than they appear to be to the frothy 'democrats'. The Soviet workers would have settled accounts with the despotism of the apparatus had other perspectives opened before them, had the Western horizon flamed not with the brown color of fascism but with the red of revolution. So long as this does not happen, the proletariat with clenched teeth bears ('tolerates') the bureaucracy and, in this sense, recognises it as the bearer of the proletarian dictatorship. In a heart to heart conversation, no Soviet worker would be sparing of strong words addressed to the Stalinist bureaucracy. But not a single one of them would admit that the counterrevolution has already taken place." [16]

Stalin's USSR became an industrial country not only with heavy industries, but also where the industry of consumer goods began to be neglected. The main consequences would be: rapid pace of urbanisation, growth of bureaucracy, differential wage in the name of "socialist emulation", severity of discipline in work.

These completely weakened the "socialist" system, at least in historical significance which that term had already acquired.

Internationally, the ultra-leftist politics of Stalinism began with a failed uprising in Guangzhou, China, in 1927. Then the policy of the German KPD (denunciation of "social-fascism", or opposition to a United Front of workers' parties against fascism) was carried out in all countries: it created "red unions" which organised sectors directly influenced by the communist parties, it proclaimed itself as heralding the "imminent collapse of capitalism", and it sped up adventures in all forms. The result was dramatic: the popular organisations controlled by the Communist parties sank : CGTU in France, the Trade Union Unity League (*TUUL*) in the USA, the National Minority Movement (NMM) in England. In the Balkans, the youth-wings of the Communist parties were almost exterminated. In Western Europe, they became a kind of sect: this was seen in Belgium, England, Spain (where several other communist organisations were stronger than the CP), France (where the PCF had 25,000 members in 1933, a quarter of its strength in the second half of the 1920s decade).

In the "peripheral" countries nationalism and pro-democracy movements (e.g. the Peruvian APRA or the Argentine UCR) were classified as "fascist", which isolated and weakened the "colonial" communist parties. The Communist International was reduced to 600,000 members, excluding the CPUS: their parties became "monolithic", as Stalin wanted, with "unconditional" leaders accepting all that came "from above", including the explanations for the most incredible defeats. "Monolithic", but unable to articulate a revolutionary answer, on the whole, to the crisis of capitalism in the 30s. It was clear that the leaders of the USSR feared revolutionary movements abroad, which could destabilise them. Therefore, the contemporary "left-wing" emerging in Western social democracy and nationalism in the "peripheral" were hardly influenced by the communist parties (despite the global "anti-imperialist" congresses, such as the one celebrated in Frankfurt and presided over by William Münzenberg, or the "against fascism" ones).

In contrast, global capitalism seemed to have momentarily given up its direct intervention in the USSR (an intervention initiated after the Anglo-Russian diplomatic rupture of 1927) at least until the consolidation of Nazi Germany. Since 1933, Trotsky had been describing Hitler as the "super-Wrangel" (the name of the Russian general, chief of the "white" camp of the civil war of 1918-1921) and as "spearheading global imperialism". The Stalinist leaders then described Trotsky as "social-fascist", "warmonger", visibly anxious to get a *status quo* with Germany's "new regime".

At the same time, a series of "palace revolutions" in USSR failed, indicating however the increasing fragility of Stalin's position in the USSR: in 1931, the "cases" of Syrtsov and Lominadzé, accused of forming an "anti-party bloc" (the two leaders accused the party leaders of "treating workers and peasants like the *Barins*"). They were expelled from the CC). In 1932, the "Ryutin affair" happened, and it refers to the leader who called for decollectivisation, reinstatement of the expelled party members, and Stalin's removal (when this was discovered, Ryutin was expelled from the party, like Zinoviev and Kamenev. Numerous people were also arrested, but the Political Bureau refused to execute them as per Stalin's wish). In 1933, the less known "Smirnov affair" happened. Intellectuals were massively purged, and Stalin's wife committed suicide... The "resistance" to Stalin's brutality in the Central Committee of CPSU itself had elevated Serge Kirov's status. He held the role of "conciliator". These reactions in the party and the State apparatus showed that bureaucracy itself was aware and it feared the "opponent spirit" prevailing in large sections of the population. This was particularly evident in the youth, who rejected *Stakhanovism*, which resulted in a kind of working system for some, or a minimum production, in the name of "emulation". However, the bureaucrats opposing Stalin also were frightened of destroying it: some of them had surely thought that this would encourage the right-wing and lead to a counter-revolution.

In early 1934, the XXVIIth Congress of CPSU established the spirit of the majority: a self-criticism of relatively "worthy" former opponents (Zinoviev, Bukharin, Lominadzé) was accepted, a legal status was granted to *Kolkhozians*, the persecuted Kulaks were pardoned, the GPU was reorganised (it transformed into NKVD) under the control a "Commissariat (Ministry) of Internal Affairs". However, it was a lull before the storm, that is to say, the great conflict, which has been brewing in the Congress itself. The regional secretaries asked Kirov to apply for the Secretary-General's post (Kirov refused). 270 delegates voted against Stalin who was elected to the CC in the last position, according to Roy Medvedev. They encircled Kirov, who thought that it was necessary to implement Lenin's wish (of removing Stalin from the post of Secretary General and his leadership position). Roy Medvedev also confirms that a meeting of regional

secretaries of the CPSU, dedicated to the cause of replacing Stalin, took place during the Congress. Some of them- including Anastas Mikoyan, the Georgian Ordjonikidzé, Petrovsky, Orachenlanchvili- were instructed to put pressure on Kirov to apply to the Secretary-General's post. For the first and only time in the "Stalinist era", a semi-consensus was formed on the readmission of Stalin's opponents in the party, with the exception of Trotsky, or Trotskyists, as well as Ivar Smirnov and his friends of the "opposition bloc".

Kirov's murder in December 1934 should be assessed in the light of this situation, as well the Moscow Trials, where Trotsky was the principal accused. Stalin, amidst all the difficulties of the 1934 CPSU Congress, was yet to nominate his "men" (Kaganovitch, Ekhev and the young Malenkov) in key positions. Kirov was clearly designated as "number 2", promoted to the post of "Party Secretary": this was the "compromise" of 1934. Eleven months later, on 1st December 1934, Kirov was assassinated by a young communist, Nikolaiev. A rapid and spectacular mass crackdown was unleashed, with partisan laws. Thousands of people were deported to Siberia (transported in so-called "Kirov trains"), all "suspected" of a conspiracy to murder ... Kirov. Nikolaiev, tried behind closed doors, was executed. The mass repression ended with the "society of old Bolsheviks". The Trotskyists came to be called "murderers". [\[17\]](#)

At that time, Trotsky indicated that Kirov's murder was "facilitated", if not organised, by the NKVD. He was the pretext for the "Trials" that finished off the entire Bolshevik old guard. However, besides the public trials (which were only the tip of the iceberg) were the "behind closed doors" proceedings, which were undoubtedly due to the inability to extract confessions from the accused. In June 1937, the conviction and execution of the Red Army bosses took place, as we shall see below, killing their chiefs, Marshal Tukhachevski and General Piotr Iakir, in July 1937; the trial, sentencing and execution of the leaders of the Communist Party of Georgia (Mdivani and Okudjava) in December 1937, the continuation of the same, with Erukidzé's conviction and execution. In 1938, with the mass executions of left-wing opponents at firing-squads in Siberia, the Stalinist *Ekhovtchina* (name of the NKVD chief, Ekhev) was complete. With the massacres of the 1930s, Stalin overcame the immediately preceding political crisis: [\[18\]](#) 270 delegates voted against Stalin in the XVIIth CPSU Congress (elected to the CC in the last position among the elect) trying to replace him, which was the immediate political motive for the Moscow Trials. In the great purge, apart from the remaining Bolshevik old guard, 98 out of 117 members of the Central Committee elected in 1934, 1108 delegates of the 1966 delegates to the 17th Congress, 4 members of the Political Bureau, and 3 out of 5 members of the Organising Bureau were executed.

The massacre included all former opponents and their families, 90% of senior officers of the Red Army, all the leaders of the political police preceding Ekhev, the majority of the communist foreign refugees in the USSR (there were 4 to 5 million arrests in all, one Soviet was arrested for every 17 detained, and one was executed for 85) [\[19\]](#). Parallely, the bureaucratic tendency of destroying the achievements of October, anticipated by Trotsky, were visible in measures such as the termination the rights of abortion and free higher education. The Red Army's "beheading" had an immediate importance for the fate of the USSR: in June 1937, Marshal Tukhachevsky, Vice Minister of Defence, was sent for a secret trial, sentenced to death and executed forty-eight hours later, with seven other generals who formed the cream of the Red Army. A few days ago, General Gamalrik, Commissioner General of the Army, had "committed suicide". The generals were accused of espionage in favour of Nazi Germany and to plot with Hitler for promoting a Soviet defeat. The accused were all civil war heroes: Iakir, commander of Leningrad; Uborevich, the commander of the Western front; Kork, commander of the Military Academy; and Primakov, the head of the cavalry. A few days later Voroshilov, the Stalinist Marshal and Defence Minister accused them of colluding with Trotsky. "The Red Army was decapitated", said Trotsky, commenting on the executions. They were trained with him during the civil wars, and without having any particular political affinity with them he found them to be the best examples in the Red Army and by far the most popular and capable.

The trial of the generals was, however, only the visible part of a stunning purge that disintegrated the Soviet Armed Forces. In August 1937, according to Leopold Trepper (creator of the Soviet intelligence network during the Second World War, known as *Red Orchestra*), "Stalin met the Army's political leaders to prepare the purge of the 'enemies of the people' that could possibly exist in the military. That was the signal to start the massacres: 13 out of 19 Army commanders, 110 out of 130 division commanders and brigade commanders, the heads of half the regiment, and most of the political commissioners, were executed. Thus disintegrated, the Red Army was out of the battle scene for a few years". More than 35,000 officers have been estimated to have been killed. The four marshalls endorsing the charges against Tukhachevsky were also liquidated soon. The "purge" also infiltrated the Communist International: leaders of various Communist

parties were cleaned out. Trepper (who was of Polish origin) states that when he was a student of the University for foreigners in Moscow, 90% of communist militants of foreign origin living in Moscow died.

A clash among Stalin, the GPU (NKVD) and the Red Army was inevitable in the situation created by the "trials". In 1937, the Red Army commanders were trained by officers who fought in the civil war, most of them under the command of Trotsky, founder of the Red Army. Even if it was not an opposition, the crisis remained as latent. The Army chiefs had relative autonomy and they were not under Stalin. Their popularity was massive, particularly for Tukhachevsky, globally recognised as one who modernised the Red Army and placed it at a very high technical and strategic level (mechanisation, para-trooping etc.). Tukhachevsky and other Red Army commanders anxiously noticed the developments in Nazi Germany and sensed an inevitable military conflict with it. Though Tukhachevsky and Kirov were not exactly comparable to Trotsky and Zinoviev as political leaders, the former had power over the Army, the latter had over bureaucracy. These made them potentially dangerous rivals to Stalin.

As an irony of fate, the Red Army chiefs, those who criticised Stalin for inadequately preparing the USSR vis-à-vis an inevitable war with Nazi Germany, were convicted as German spies, by means of false documents prepared by the Nazis themselves. The forgeries were brought to light by Trepper, who was arrested by the Gestapo during the war as the Red Orchestra network's chief. His captor, Hermann Goering, told him that he had forged papers for falsely accusing Heydrich, the SS commander. For that, he had the support of a former White Russian Army General, Skoblin (who at the time, worked for GPU-NKVD) who complained that Tukhachevsky was hatching a plot. False evidence was quickly put together and the material was brought to Stalin through the Czech Popular Front government, headed by Benès. After this "affair", Hitler proclaimed: "We have neutralised Russia for ten years". From that point, the conquest of Czechoslovakia and the war on its western front could be prepared for.

The executions decisively weakened the Red Army, and led to the conditions for the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. When Hitler finally invaded Russia in 1941, initially the Red Army suffered terrible defeats and took many months to recover from it, at the cost of millions of dead and imprisoned. The new commanders promoted after the purge, were visibly subservient to the great leader (then called *generalissimo*). The massacre of the Red Army chiefs was a factor not only weakening but also rather apposite, that put at stake the very existence of a state that had emerged from a revolution.

In 1939, after the negotiations among USSR / France-England failed, Stalin signed a pact with Hitler, declaring his support to a German counter-revolutionary regime: "It was not only a non-aggression pact, but a delimitation of spheres of influence, of an agreement to divide Eastern Europe. Stalin recognised that the war between Germany and the West was inevitable" [20](#). Moreover, the Hitler-Stalin Pact (or, Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in the names of the foreign ministers who signed) was not only political: Soviet imports in Germany increased (in terms of the two years' pact, 1939-1940) from 56.4 to 419.1 (million rubles), and exports from 61.6 to 736.5. [21](#)

At the same time, Trotsky denounced the Stalinist illusion of a lasting neutralisation of Germany by means of the pact, establishing the inevitability of an invasion of the USSR by Hitler's Nazism. This was reaffirmed in his last published document during his lifetime, called the Manifesto of the Emergency Conference of the Fourth International (May 1940, which anticipated the inevitability and imminence of the German invasion). While the analysts announced the successful convergence of the "fascist and communist totalitarianism", Trotsky had not lost sight of the diverse nature of the class base of both states, the social contradictions and the national policies involved. Those who describe Stalin's victory over Trotsky as a product of his superior realpolitik undoubtedly forget this: the Nazi aggression of July 1941 took the "realistic" Stalin by surprise. He did not believe that it was imminent, despite the reports from the Soviet espionage network. [22](#)

To summarise the period, almost all "professional revolutionaries" of the pre-revolutionary and civil war eras, mostly Lenin's compatriots, were murdered. As for the Party, it was usurped by men who had joined in the Stalinist period. This set off the "careers" of Brezhnev, Kossyguin, Gromyko, who joined with "Stalin's men". (Beria, Malenkov, Postrebychev). A major part of the social achievements of the revolution was destroyed and there was an unprecedented strengthening in the discipline of work. Stalin's "personality cult" developed

against this background. Trotsky concluded that, although based on different and opposing social systems, Nazism and Stalinism are symmetrically complemented, as both developed on the historical ground of global counter-revolution, in the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s.

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